

Mox Schults

A Library for Babel(ing): Books for Reading Aloud

"La pensée se fait dans la bouche" [Thought is made in the mouth], said Dada poet Tristan Tzara, and maybe not everyone gets excited about absurdist poetry, but he was right about the power of the spoken word. Some of the earliest literature emerged from an oral form, from the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* and *Epic of Gilgamesh*, to the Turkish *Book of Dede Korkut*, or the stories of the Persian *Shahnameh*, many of which originated from the tribes of pre-islamic Arabia, who sometimes settled differences with oral duels between their tribe poets. This power is the reason driving my project Mouth Thought—an ongoing fluid group of people who come together to read aloud and recite poetry (or prose or any text), with a focus on sharing literature from as many languages and cultures as possible. It is through the preparations for these events that I realized I had acquired a collection specifically set apart from the rest of my books: poetry, prose, and stories that call out to be read aloud.

I initiated the Mouth Thought project during my year abroad in St. Petersburg, 2012-2013, with weekly meetings at the Smolny institute. This is when my collection actively began, though I have owned several of the books my entire life—from 1990. I have since organized events at my hometown public library in Norwich, VT, as well as in Chicago at the Blackstone library and on campus. My preparation before each event is always the same—I turn to my collection, and begin sorting out which volumes I will bring to share. Each meeting has different needs based on location and time of year and who I expect will attend—how broad and varied a selection of literature can I provide, while at the same time engaging participants with something they can specifically relate to or find familiar? I always bring my *Poems for the Millenium Volume I* anthology, because as a single text, it embodies the entire concept behind Mouth Thought. An eight hundred and eleven page collection of 20th century avant-garde poetry in translation from all over the world, it both challenges the concept of poetry and presents unifying aspects of literature across human cultures.

Then, if I'm in Vermont I'll bring something familiar, like a Robert Frost collection, and something for fun, say, *Winter Poems*, illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. For the group in Russia I sometimes brought the bilingual French/Russian selection of Pasternak's poetry, and the book of Russian folk tales *Сказки Бытовые* (given to me by a friend from Kiev, it was his from childhood), or maybe the *Dictionary of Russian Obscenities*. One Halloween I brought Dante's *Inferno* and Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, and read an excerpt from the chapter "Satan's Grand Ball". We've had an overnight marathon read-aloud of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, heard a Chinese student of English read an excerpt of an Obama speech, and compared Shakespearian love sonnets to 14th century Persian Ghazals (in which the poet addresses an unattainable 'beloved' who may be either a woman or Allah).

My own books make up the core material from which people can choose to read, but for me it is also important, if we are in a library, to set out volumes from the the library's shelves as well. This augments my selections by placing them in the broader context of a collection which belongs to the community, and brings awareness to the library as a resource that we can share aloud with each other. The point of these gatherings is the communal/social experience of reading out loud--the giving and receiving of voice.

Reading aloud has always been a part of my life. On one early childhood road trip, my patient mother grudgingly read to me *Fantastic Mr. Fox* seven times in a row—before declaring

that the next time, I would be reading it myself. This same book has now been read at Mouth Thought events, along with other childhood favorites. I find that people jump at the chance to reread their favorite stories, particularly outloud with others. I'm hoping to expand this part of my collection to include more children's books in other languages.

Since beginning Mouth Thought, I have more consciously acquired new books. The project has four main intentions, and I want my collection to embody these:

- to share the poetic and linguistic heritages of many different cultures, from ancient to contemporary works
- to speak, to be heard, to listen
- to goof around with words
- to enjoy the physical sensation of language, of thought, emerging from the mouth

This past summer I was in San Francisco and had the chance to visit City Lights Bookstore (the former Beatnik gathering place, and publisher of works like Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*), where I gleefully purchased a marked down volume II of the *Poems for the Millennium* anthology series. I'm hoping to eventually acquire all four. I would also like to acquire a copy of a book that I found in the Regenstein and have pretended all year that I own: a slim postcard sized volume published in Russia, *Робайям*. It contains a selection of Omar Khayyam's rubaiats, each printed first in Persian, then in Russian, on facing pages, and accompanied by small delicate prints in black and red—like little image tokens, one per page. It's visually striking, with the letter symbols of each four-line poem centered on the page like a mirror image of the lines on the other—as if translation had simply been the act of putting down ink in Persian on the left, stamping the two pages together, and they would come apart with Russian printed on the right.

Other more distant (or impossible) dreams include the addition of an original painted manuscript of the *Shahnameh*, and one the original copies of Blaise Cendrars' "La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France". This was a collaborative work with the artist Sonia Delaunay that ran down a single sheet of paper two meters long, the text integrated with Delaunay's abstract watercolor painting, and the whole thing folded accordian style into a pamphlet. It's unlikely that I will ever be able to both find copies of these for sale, and to afford them, but I think they would make extraordinary additions to my library for reading aloud—works like these should continue to be handled and shared, rather than framed and hung in a gallery.

My collection is, perhaps, unusual. Its organizing theme is not a genre or a time period or a specific writer or culture or topic. It is built on an idea, that to read literature aloud is a powerful social act, and so my books contain words that I consider worthy of oral activation and transmission. This can be beautiful complex prose, like that of Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* or *The English Patient*, or epics like the *Odyssey* or *The Secret History of the Mongols*, or it can simply be fun, like Shel Silverstein's book of spooniristic poetry for kids, *Runny Babbit*. But the crucial aspect of my collection is that it does not live on a bookshelf in isolation. It is meant to be shared, to facilitate human interaction and to generate community around words and ideas. Some selection of it always travels with me wherever I go, and has been the core material at Mouth Thought meetings from Russia to Vermont, to Chicago. I intend to cultivate this collection and to be carrying it with me the rest of my life, and to organize Mouth Thought events wherever I go—to engage people with words on the page, with different languages and cultures, and, above all, with each other.

Bibliography

Note: Many of these books have traveled a long ways with me in various sacks and suitcases, and have been handled by many people. I have indicated any that are in a particularly notable condition, whether brand new or completely deteriorating. While most are in perfectly acceptable condition for handling and reading, most also demonstrate signs of wear and use. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

POETRY

Rothenberg, Jerome, and Pierre Joris. eds. *Poems for the Millennium Volume One: From Fin-de-Siècle to Negritude*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

This one's out of alphabetical order, but I have to put it first. A monumental collection of the great and sometimes unknown innovative poets of the twentieth century (with a short section at the beginning for the work of crucial forerunners from the nineteenth century, like William Blake, Elias Lönnrot—who compiled the first authoritative written version of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*—Walt Whitman, and Baudelaire, among others), from around the world, translated into English. It is organized partly by a chronology of movements of poetic thought: Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, "Objectivists", Negritude, and partly by "Galleries", with an overall emphasis on the international and national movements that "have tried to change the direction of poetry and art as a necessary condition for changing the ways in which we think and act as human beings" (Rothenberg, 2). This first volume covers, more or less, through the first half of the twentieth century.

Purchased in 2011 for my first creative writing course at U of C, it quickly became more than required reading—it has been my introduction to modern poetry and has had massive influence on the development of my own writing. With its emphases on "an exploration of new forms of language", "a return to a concept of poetry as a performative genre", "a broadening of cultural terrains...a proliferation of movements stressing exploration and expansion of ethnic and gender as well as class identities", and "a sense of excitement and play", this book has been the number one volume in my collection inspiring and embodying the intentions of Mouth Thought; it invites sharing and reading aloud.

——— *Poems for the Millennium Volume Two: From Postwar to Millennium*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Acquired in San Francisco at City Lights Bookstore, summer 2013. This second volume focuses on the poets and poetry following World War II up through the cold war era. It is also a fantastic volume, with an even broader cultural scope than the first, and I look forward to slowly reading my aloud way through it.

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Trans. Michael Palma. New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2008.

Lao-tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1st ed. paperback 1991, reissued 2000.

A translation of one of the most famous works of ancient Chinese poetry, and an integral part of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. A gift from a good friend, summer 2013. She was doing a through-hike of the Appalachian Trail, and I joined her for a few days. She'd been carrying it since Georgia, but after a few days of intense conversation and catching up, decided it was time for me to have it. This is one of my favorite things about books—when a person knows both you and the book well enough to say—you should read this. The book becomes an active part of human to human interaction, and when you read it in the context of another person's understanding of you, the act of reading becomes a conversation between all three minds.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. 1st ed. New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2005.

Pasternak, Boris. *Poèmes*. Trans. Michel Aucouturier, Henri Abril et. al. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1982.

A bilingual edition with French and Russian on facing pages. A gift from the bookshelves of a friend in Kiev, summer 2012.

Pound, Ezra. *New Selected Poems and Translations*. 1st ed. New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 2010.

Racine, Jean. *Phèdre*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006. Reissue of a text from 1999.

Purchased in a bookshop in Paris for a summer course on French theater (2011). This course was my introduction to 'the French Shakespeare' (or perhaps Shakespeare is the 'English Racine'). We often read aloud in class, and the final project was to perform a recitation. I was enthralled with the rhythm and tight rhyme scheme, and continue to find great physical satisfaction from reading aloud excerpts of this play. I'm hoping at some point to acquire more of Racine's plays—I would have that summer in Paris, but both my budget and my suitcase space were limited.

Rees, William. Ed. & Trans, *The Penguin Book of French Poetry, 1820-1950, with prose translations*. 2nd printing. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Found in a Borders going out of business sale in 2011 when I was in process of planning a summer in France, first studying French literature in Paris, then working on a remote farm in the Mediterranean Alps. The poems are all in French, with discrete prose translations placed underneath. That summer I was working to memorize several poems from it, and brought it into the cheese cave with me for reference. I spent hours in this small cool space, making cheese (or tending made cheeses) and practicing my recitation in the echoing chamber.

Хлебников, Велимир. *Творения*. Moscow: Советский писатель, 1987.

A nearly complete collection of the works of the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, some of whose work was written specifically to be performed aloud. I first discovered his poetry in my Millennium anthology, and quickly became obsessed with his language play and reconstruction, even in English translation. During my year in St. Petersburg, I found an amazing second-hand bookshop near metro Staraya Derevnaya. About the size of a two car garage (which it may at some point have been), the space was crammed with boxes all over the floor and tables and bookshelves spilling over themselves down into the boxes. It was more or less (or less) 'organized' by genre, but you never knew what you'd find where. By the time I came in looking for Khlebnikov, I knew I was planning to write about his poetry for my thesis; I was also familiar with the owner. Though I could not find any works by him in the poetry section, she knew exactly where to find this volume, hidden on a shelf of autobiographies.

Черный, Саша. *Саша Черный*. Leningrad (St. Petersburg): Агентство "ЛИРА", 1990. 1st ed. А.Н.

When I visited my friends in Kiev in 2010, they took me to the book market—a huge sprawl of stacks and bins of books and magazines and postcards, over a mile long and nearly as wide—prose poetry, Russian, Arabic, English, French, Dutch, Japanese, biology text books, old maps, children's books, innumerable pounds of printed paper all in a jumble. There were stalls with some semblance of organization, and old women who'd spread a blanket on the ground, onto which they'd dumped the contents of attics and desk drawers of deceased husbands. From this chaos, Inga located a tiny hardback book, smaller than a deck of cards: Саша Черный. Sasha Chyorniy—a collection of satirical verse titled with the poet's name, and filled with tiny absurd printwork illustrations. "Тебе"—"it's for you"—she said.

PROSE

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. Trans. Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor. 1st ed. paperback. New York: Vintage International, 1996.

DeWitt, Helen. *The Last Samurai*. 1st ed. paperback. New York: Hyperion, 2000.

I first read this book summer 2013, and was enthralled with the narrator's philosophizing on the use of language in literature and film. She proposes that the traits of the languages themselves might suggest a novel or poem to be written, much the way a composer might work from the capabilities of an orchestra to produce a symphony, or how a sculptor might let the physical qualities of the materials dictate the form of the work of art:

"Perhaps a writer would think of the monosyllables and lack of grammatical inflection in Chinese, and of how this would sound next to lovely long Finnish words all double letters & long vowels in 14 cases or lovely Hungarian all prefixes and suffixes, & having first thought of that would then think of some story about Hungarians or Finns with Chinese...[you might have] the characters Hakkinen, Hintikka and Yu, set provisionally in Helsinki—against a background of snow with a mass of black firs, a black sky & brilliant stars a narrative or perhaps dialogue with nominative genitive partitive essive inessive adessive illative ablative allative & translative, people would come on saying Hyvää päivää for good day there might be a traffic accident so that the word tieliikenneonnettomuus could make an appearance, and then in the mind of Yu Chinese characters, as it might be, Black Fir White Snow, this was absolutely ravishing." (DeWitt, 64).

This idea, among others, DeWitt implements within the collaged narrative of her own story. The pages are saturated with other languages including Homeric Greek, Japanese, French, and Old Norse, and none of it feels forced—there arrives a moment in the narrative when it makes sense to use Old Norse, so she does. Or perhaps it is the other way around—first was the idea of Japanese followed by Old Norse, and so she found a story inspired by this transition.

Not only is it an extraordinary novel, but it is a repository for critical cultural information: a piece of the Iliad in the original, with annotations and translation; tables of Japanese Kana, excerpts from the Icelandic epic *Njal's Saga* with translation. It is a monumental work just itching for sections to be read aloud. My copy was a gift from a friend this past Christmas (2013).

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brother's Karamazov*. Trans. Constance Garnet. 1st ed. New York: Modern Library, 1929.

A gift from the attic of a family friend, it was his grandmother's. This is the only book I carried with me the entire six months I traveled after high school, in 2010. When I was living in a tiny village in Senegal and starving for a language I could fully understand, and struggling with questions about who I was and what I was doing there, I would burn the precious battery life on my headlamp, lying half-naked on my mat, half-smothered in the 110° heat of the Senegalese night, and revel in the cold Russian setting and Ivan's passionate tirades about life and existentialism:

"I have a longing for life, and I go on living in spite of logic. Though I may not believe in the order of the universe, yet I love the sticky little leaves as they open in spring. I love the blue sky, I love some people...I want to travel, Alyosha...and yet I know that I am only going to a graveyard, but it's a most precious graveyard, that's what it is! Precious are the dead that lie there, every stone over them speaks of such burning life in the past, of such passionate faith in their work, their truth, their struggle and their science, that I know I shall fall on the ground and kiss those stones and weep over them...And I shall not weep from despair, but simply because I shall be happy... I love the sticky leaves in spring, the blue sky—that's all it is. It's not a matter of intellect or logic, it's loving with one's inside, with one's stomach" (Chapter III).

I suppose now that I can read Russian it would make sense to acquire a version in the original, but when I want to share an excerpt from *The Brothers K*, I will always turn to this volume,

because it has been the places I have been, and the words in it feel as though they have become my own to share.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. New York: Ace Books. First published in 1969, this version is a reprint from 2000.

Ondaatje, Michael. *In the Skin of a Lion*. 1st ed. paperback. New York: Vintage International, 1997.

——— *The English Patient*. 1st ed. paperback. New York: Vintage International, 1993.
I hesitate to put these under prose, because Michael Ondaatje's writing is so completely poetic.

MYTH/EPIC/FOLKLORE

Afanas'ev, Aleksandr, collector and Norbert Guterman, transl. *Russian Fairy Tales*. New York: first published by Pantheon Books in 1945, renewed by Random House, 1973.

Found on my grandmother's bookshelves; when she saw how delighted I was with it, she offered it to me. Condition like new.

Christ, Henry I., ed. *Myths and Folklore*. 1st ed. paperback. New York: Amsco School Publications, 1989.

Myths and folklore from all over the world, although the main emphasis is Greek, Roman, and American/modern. I found this in the free box outside of Powells. Its cover is a bit wrinkled and torn around the edges.

Drummond, D.A. and G. Perkins, compilers. *Dictionary of Russian Obscenities*. 3rd, revised ed. Oakland: Scythian Books, 1987.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: first published by Doubleday & Company in 1961, this paperback issue released by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

I purchased this particular copy for a world literature course my first year at Uchicago, but my introduction to this epic was first grade. My elementary school had a combined first grade/fifth grade unit on the Odyssey, which kicked off with a week of storytelling performances—we encountered the epic for the first time in its original context: an oral performance sustained over a period of days. We sat in the dark assembly space, and the teller sat before us, in the midst of flickering candles, relating the next episode of the adventures of Odysseus. In first grade you illustrate the story and listen to fifth graders perform their own renditions. In fifth grade you explore its themes of guest/host/hospitality, you work with first graders, you retell it, you learn the opening lines in Greek, you find yourself knowing the entire story by heart. This experience is the root influence on how I approach literature on the page as an adult, and I have been enthralled with the power of the Odyssey ever since. I have read and heard many versions, and it is a story that I always want to share. As a book object, this particular volume is not my most prized, but I include it because the story itself is so important to me.

Foster, Benjamin R. ed. and trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. New York: Norton & Company, 2001.

Smith, John D. ed. and translator. *The Mahabharata* (abridged version). 1st ed. paperback. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

Тюрин, А. Г. ed. and И. Е. Щукин, artist. *Илья Муромец*. 1st ed. Moscow: Изобразительное искусство, 1985.

Acquired at the Kiev book market in 2010 (mentioned above), this is a set of 16 postcards, each depicting a scene from the life of Ilya Muromets, with excerpts from various texts retelling his

story. He is a folk hero, a traveling 'bogatyř' akin to one of King Arthur's knights of the round table, who spent his life wandering and accomplishing great deeds of heroic strength and behavior.

Урбаханов, В. Э., artist, author unknown. *Бурятские народные сказки*. Ulan Ude, Russia. Publisher unknown. Printing date unknown, although appeared fairly new when purchased in 2013.

A set of 12 postcards, each depicting a scene from a Buryat folk tale, with a retelling of the story on the back. The Buryat people are an ethnic group living in the south eastern part of Siberia. Their capital is Ulan Ude, on the east shore of Lake Baikal, they are thought to have migrated North out of Mongolia, and both their language and culture bear similarities to those of Mongolia. They are beautifully illustrated, with a focus on the transformations that the characters undergo—many are in a state of part animal, part human, with the stories explaining why certain animals (or people) appear or behave the way they do. Acquired in Ulan Ude during a month long trip along the transsiberian railway in early 2013.

Urgunge, Onon, trans. *The Secret History of the Mongols*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2001. PDF File.

This book is not actually part of my collection yet (as you see, I have only an electronic version). It is on my 'to acquire' list. I include it here because it has made appearances at Mouth Thought where we read it off a computer screen.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Dahl, Roald. *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1970.

The paper cover over the hard cover is quite worn, and torn in some places. Although originally a gift to my brother when he was born in 1987, since it has lived the past 15 years on my bookshelf he has officially relinquished it to me.

Hodges, Margaret. Ils. Trina Schart Hyman. *The Kitchen Knight*. New York: Holiday House, 1990.

I've had this book my entire life. It was given to me when I was born by the artist, a close friend of the family. A retelling of one of the King Arthur legends, about Sir Gareth, it is one of my favorite stories—I've had it read to me countless times, and have since read it, or simply recounted it, to dozens of others. The paper cover over the hard cover is a bit worn, but otherwise the book is in good condition.

Rogasky, Barbara, ed. Ils. Trina Schart Hyman. *Winter Poems*. New York: Scholastic, 1995.

Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. 1st ed. hardcover. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943.

A gift from my mother. It was her book in childhood.

Silverstein, Shel. *Runny Babbit, a Billy Sook*. 1st ed. hardcover. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

——— *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. 1st ed. hardcover. New York: Scholastic Inc. with HarperCollins, 1996.

Сказки Бытовые.

This book is in very poor condition, and the page with publication information is missing. However, most of the stories are still readable. It is a collection of Russian folk tales, given to me by a dear friend in Kiev—it was his book as a child, so the volume is at least 30 years old, and probably older.