

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia, sometimes called “echoism”, is used both in a narrow and in a broad sense:

(1) In the narrow, and the more common, sense “onomatopoeia” is applied to a word, or a combination of words, whose sound seems to resemble the sound it denotes: “hiss”, “buzz”, “rattle”, “bang”. There is no exact duplication, however, of nonverbal by verbal sounds; the seeming similarity is due as much to the meaning, and to the feel of uttering the words, as to their sounds. Two lines from Tennyson’s “Come Down, O Maid” are often cited as a skillful instance of onomatopoeia:

***The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.***

John Crowe Ransom has remarked that by making only two changes in the consonants of the last line, we lose the echoic effect because we drastically change the meaning: “And murdering of the innumerable beebes”.

The sounds seemingly mimicked by onomatopoeic words need not be pleasant ones. Browning liked squishy and scratchy effects, as in “Meeting at Night”:

***As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed I ‘the slushy sand.***

***A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match...***

(2) In the broad sense, “onomatopoeia” is applied to words or passages which seem to correspond to what they denote in any way whatever – in size, movement, or force, as well as sound. Alexander Pope recommends such extended verbal mimicry in his *Essay on Criticism* when he says “the sound should seem an echo of the sense”, and goes on to illustrate by mimicking two different kinds of motion by the words and metrical movement of his lines:

***When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow,
Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o’er th’undering corn, and skims along the main.***