SOUND IDEAS

Hearing and Speaking Poetry

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Introduction

Poetry—Listening and Speaking

Reading a poem on a page is a different process from listening to it, and speaking that poem is yet another kind of process. Reading engages the eyes and mind. Listening requires mind and ears and often sight, as we watch the speaker. When we pick up the poem to read it aloud, our eyes see the words, and our voices and bodies also become active, and the poem begins to take on further and further dimensions beyond its state on the page.

Our intent with this book is to show ways that we can move a poem off the page, which is where we usually address a poem, and listen to it, speak it. The rationale is our belief that reading a poem for its intellectual content alone leaves much of the poem still untouched, undiscovered. Western poetry originated in orality, but has moved away from it.

Ordinarily when we read a poem quietly to ourselves we seek the intellectual meaning, and such too appears to be the practice when we either attend a class or teach a class on poetry. We two authors have, on the other hand, been exploring ways of teaching poetry with attention to reading and listening to the entire poem, as well as to memorizing and presenting poems, and we have become convinced that such an approach does greater justice to readers and to poems.

In a letter to Sylvia Plath, poet Ted Hughes neatly describes what we have in mind:

Tonight I read Yeats aloud for about an hour, and I shall do this. An hour in the morning and an hour at night. Up to the inventing of Caxton’s press, and for most people long after that, all reading was done aloud. . . . Eliot says that the best thing a
poet can do is read aloud poetry as much as he can. . . . Silent reading only employs the parts of the brain which are used in vision. Not all the brain. This means a silent reader’s literary sense becomes detached from the motor parts and the audio parts of the brain which are used in reading aloud—tongue and ear. This means that only one third of the mental components are present in their writing or in their understanding of reading—one third of the emotional charge.  

My own experience amplified this conviction that reading the page is not enough. After teaching John Milton’s Paradise Lost for some twenty-five years, I had the opportunity to join a group that presents live dramatized readings of the books. Each of us felt we knew Milton quite well, but each of us registered amazement at how much the books changed as we began the process of preparing to speak the poem, and how much we were changed when hearing others of the ensemble speak their passages. Even Adam, whom I had thought I disliked, in Book IX, became a far richer, even sympathetic, character when dramatized, for we heard all his words being articulated with clarity, with emphasis and emotion. At least as important as attending to the drama of the poem, we all realized that the poetry itself became far more alive and richly meaningful. We simply heard a great deal more at all levels. Not that I would give up the classroom study of Milton, but now I know there is something more. The profound change we experienced in the move from page to voice is like that one encounters when first reading a play, and then acting in it, discovering on the stage the characters’ tensions and complexities, the enjoyment of the whole work.

If we take up the assumption that we can and should read poems aloud and listen to them being read, questions come to mind: How do we listen to poems? How do we speak poems? Are there good ways and bad ways—even right ways and wrong ways—to read a poem, say, Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” or Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” or a favorite Shakespeare sonnet like “That time of year”? In brief, what is it that we intend this book to add to what most texts and books about reading poetry offer by way of direction or advice in reading?

What happens when we listen to poems, speak them aloud, and let them into our bodies? How much deeper can we move into poems; how much more can we hear through this openness? Responses to such questions
When we see poems on a page, they normally appear in the form of lines. A line of verse may be made up of a complete sentence, or it can be part of a sentence, a clause, a phrase, or a part of a word group, for example, a preposition separated from its object. Poems are written in lines because lines can be used for a wide variety of effects, so we begin the process of listening to and speaking poems by examining what these effects are, what line does.

At the very least, breaking a sentence into lines is a way to achieve emphasis. In order to make a point in ordinary speech we might say, “I wish you would not do that!” Our tone of voice and gestures ensure emphasis on the right words. But on the page the words do not show emphasis. In verse we use line to create expression. If we were to write,

I wish you would not
do that!

stress falls on “do” because the space, break, or pause after “would not” sets up emphasis on “do that.” If we change the line, we change the emphasis.

We begin with line because it is an essential element of verse, and the way we hear and say the line shapes meaning. The line is a unit in itself, whether or not it is a complete sentence. We read the line with attention, and at its end we pause to some degree even when the syntax runs to the next line. Our principle is: respect the integrity of the line as written.

Because the word verse meant originally a turn (as in reverse) at the
end of a line, there is an expectation of a turning, a going back, as well as a continuation to the next line, the turn often marked by a kind of pause. The idea of *verse as turn* has been at times imaged as the movement of a dancer, stepping across the stage or platform, then pausing before returning. We are aware that in staged Greek verse, the movement and pause of dancers coincided with those of the line. The term *verse* can also suggest the action of a plowman, advancing across a field, then turning at the end of a furrow to head back. Whatever its early senses, verse continues to mean a turn, thus a pausing to denote that feel of turning, continuing to something more. So line suggests a physical movement forward. When speaking verse we acknowledge the turning at the end of the line with a vocal mark, a pause, an emphasis. How that turn can be recognized and vocalized is our concern here.

The first poem we discuss could well stand as the title of this chapter, for it is about hearing the movement of line. Here is Robert Francis’s “The Sound I Listened For”:

What I remember is the ebb and flow of sound  
That summer morning as the mower came and went  
And came again, crescendo and diminuendo,  
And always when the sound was loudest how it ceased  
A moment while he backed the horses for the turn,  
The rapid clatter giving place to the slow click  
And the mower’s voice. That was the sound I listened for.  
The voice did what the horses did. It shared the action  
As sympathetic magic does or incantation.  
The voice hauled and the horses hauled. The strength of one  
Was in the other and in the strength was no impatience.  
Over and over as the mower made his rounds  
I heard his voice and only once or twice he backed  
And turned and went ahead and spoke no word at all.

The first line, which draws attention to “the ebb and flow of sound,” would seem to be a complete sentence, so we are inclined to pause before turning to learn when the sound took place. But the sentence continues to move (for six and a half lines) so we need to pause but not break the movement of the sentence. While Francis’s lines lead us forward, each line end has a distinct and different break. In line two “as the mower came and
went / And came again,” our slight pause at “and went” slows the mower’s action before the change and return, “And came again.” The pause at the end of line four is different again because it breaks the verb from adverb: “how it ceased / A moment while he backed . . .” If we do not “cease,” we do not hear the moment of cessation, an important dramatizing of the mower’s movement.

As Francis’s poem comes off the page, we hear how he uses line to shape action and meaning, and we hear the speaker’s attention to the action. By means of line (and other verse elements we will come to later), Francis unifies the man and the action, the strength and command of voice with the response of the horses. The sound of the mower’s voice is harmonized with the sound of the mechanism, just as my listener’s attention is to the man, voice, action, and turn. If “The strength of one / Was in the other and in the strength was no impatience,” we understand that the plowman’s voice was not contrived but natural, coherent with his horses and his work: “it ceased / A moment.” Even at “he backed / And turned and went ahead . . .” there is a physical pause during which he “spoke no word at all.” We not only pause at line break, we pause differently at each, depending on the way the line prepares us for the next line.

While lines can be of similar length (Francis’s are twelve syllables each) or irregular, line breaks occur in order to create voice expression. Take an example: “I don’t care what you want.” What the sentence means is clear on the page. But the precise vocal emphasis, tone, and emotion remain indefinite. Introducing a line break isolates a word to throw emphasis on it. We can compare these variations:

I don’t care what
you want.

I don’t care what you
want.

I don’t care
what you want.

Each has the same informational meaning—but very different emotional meaning. Each line break changes the pause and emphasis, and thus makes possible this flexible emphasis in verse—and of course creates a good deal more, such as rhythm.