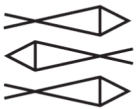
THE SOUNDS OF POETRY

A BRIEF GUIDE

ROBERT PINSKY



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Nor is there singing school, but studying

Monuments of its own magnificence.

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, *"Sailing to Byzantium"*

THE SOUNDS OF POETRY

Introduction

The idea in the following pages is to help the reader hear more of what is going on in poems, and by hearing more to gain in enjoyment and understanding.

Every speaker, intuitively and accurately, courses gracefully through immensely subtle manipulations of sound. We not only indicate, for example, where the accent is in a word like "question," but also preserve that accent while adding the difference between "Was that a question?" and "Yes, that was a question."

It is almost as if we sing to one another all day.

We do not need to be taught such things: if they were taught in school, we would find them hard and make a mess of them.

In this regard, the way we use the sounds of language is like the way we use "down" and "up" with certain English verbs: I have never heard a child, however small, or anyone, however stupid, make a mistake when discriminating among such expressions as: "Can you put me up?" and its cousins—"Don't put me down," "It brings me down," "I wasn't brought up that way," "Then

what it comes down to is, why bring it up?" and so forth. If we learned these distinctions by making charts and memorizing them, or by rules, we would blunder.

It is the same with what Robert Frost calls "sentence sounds."[1] Because we have learned to deal with the sound patterns organically, for practical goals, from before we can remember, without reflection or instruction or conscious analysis, we all produce the sounds, and understand them, with great efficiency and subtle nuance. Because of that skill, acquired like the ability to walk and run, we already have finely developed powers that let us appreciate the sound of even an isolated single line of poetry—even if we have very little idea of the meaning—that someone might quote with appreciation, like,

The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs

Or,

In a smart burnoose Khadour looked on, amused

Or,

Absence my presence is, strangeness my grace

Or,

Back out of all this now too much for us

Or,

Let be be finale of seem

Or,

Further in Summer than the Birds

Or,

Sorrow is my own yard[2]

The hearing-knowledge we bring to a line of poetry is a knowledge of patterns in speech we have known to hear since we were infants. If we tried to learn such knowledge by elaborate rules or through brute, systematic memorization, then just as with the distinctions involved in *putting up with me* and *putting me up*, we would not be able to use them as fluently as we do.

And yet, having learned these graceful, peculiar codes from the cradle—the vocal codes that poets have used to make works of art—we can gain a lot by studying the nature of what we learned long ago without study: learning to hear language in a more conscious way can enhance our pleasure in lines and poems. Athletes, by study or coaching, can learn to walk or run more effectively.

Study of that kind is the intention of this book: to enhance the reader's pleasure in poetry through knowledge of a few basic principles and their tremendous effects. I try to explain the principles in plain language, with a minimum of special terms, objectively, by paying close attention to particular poems and specific words. Technical language, vague impressions about the emotional effects of sounds (the supposedly exuberant or

doleful *w*'s, the anxious or sensual *t*'s, etc.), elaborate systems, categories that need memorizing, little accent marks and special typographical symbols—all these, I work to avoid.

This is a brief guide: my goal is not an all-inclusive map but a brief, plain, accurate presentation of the most important points. More exhaustive approaches characterize such good books as Alfred Corn's *The Poem's Heartbeat*, Harvey Gross's *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason*, and James McAuley's *Versification*. In these sources the reader can find excellent accounts of terminology, detailed discussion of exceptions and anomalies, aesthetic and semantic theories, definitions and examples of received forms.

A wonderful historic account is John Thompson's *The Founding of English Meter*, from which I have learned a great deal. Thompson's book first sent me to George Gascoigne's sixteenth-century "Certayne Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of English Verse or Ryme," the first such essay in English and still one of the best.

Often, I quote some poetry without identifying the author. (In such cases, the poet is identified in the notes at the back of the book.) The purpose is to defer interesting matters such as a given poet's reputation, themes, biography, historical context, and so forth, in order to concentrate for the moment on this book's one subject: the sounds of poetry in English.

Theory

There are no rules.

However, principles may be discerned in actual practice: for example, in the way people actually speak, or in the lines poets have written. If a good line contradicts a principle one has formulated, then the principle, by which I mean a kind of working idea, should be discarded or amended.

Art proceeds according to principles discernible in works of art. Therefore, if one is asked for a good book about traditional metrics, a good answer is: *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*, or *The Complete Poems of Ben Jonson.* Two excellent books about so-called free verse are the two-volume *Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.* One of the most instructive books on short lines is *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.* To learn a lot about the adaptation of ballad meter to modern poetry, an invaluable work is *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems.* No instruction manual can teach as much as careful attention to the sounds in even one great poem.

But a guide can be helpful. The theory of this guide is that poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art. The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing.

Moreover, there is a special intimacy to poetry because, in this idea of the art, the medium is not an expert's body, as when one goes to the ballet: in poetry, the medium is the audience's body. When I say to myself a poem by Emily Dickinson or George Herbert, the artist's medium is my breath. The reader's breath and hearing embody the poet's words. This makes the art physical, intimate, vocal, and individual.

Other conceptions of poetry might include flamboyantly expressive vocal delivery, accompanied by impressive physical presence, by the poet or a performer; or the typographical, graphic appearance of the words in itself, apart from the indication of sound. Those areas are not part of this book's conception.

Ezra Pound wrote that poetry is a centaur. That is, in prose, one aims an arrow at a target. In a poem, one does the same thing, while also riding a horse. The horse I take to be the human body. Poetry calls upon both intellectual and bodily skills.

I hope to focus on the way an extraordinary system of grunts and mouth-noises evolved by the human primate has been used as the material of art. Poetry in this vocal and intellectual sense is an ancient art or technol-

ogy: older than the computer, older than print, older than writing and indeed, though some may find this surprising, much older than prose. I presume that the technology of poetry, using the human body as its medium, evolved for specific uses: to hold things in memory, both within and beyond the individual life span; to achieve intensity and sensuous appeal; to express feelings and ideas rapidly and memorably. To share those feelings and ideas with companions, and also with the dead and with those to come after us.

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ACCENT AND DURATION

What determines the stress or accent in English words and sentences? What precisely does it mean to say, for example, that we stress the first syllable in the word "rabbit" and the second syllable in the word "omit"? What exactly does the voice do to create that audible, distinct accent? (A term that for now I will use interchangeably with "stress.")

This is a more interesting question than might appear at first. Just considering the question can, in itself, help one to hear more about the sounds of the words we speak.

For instance, the answer that stress is produced by increased loudness or volume is not completely satisfactory, as a little experimentation will suggest. Consider what a speaker does to distinguish between, say, the first word and the last word of the following sentence:

Permit me to give you a permit.

Turning the volume down or up has some relation to what our voice does, but fails to explain the delicate but

quite distinct difference that virtually all speakers can indicate and virtually all listeners can detect.

I'll focus more minutely for a moment. Here is an English sound:

it

In the nature of the English language, the sound, which happens also to be a one-syllable word, is neither stressed nor unstressed, by itself. It is neither short nor long, by itself.

The sound is conventionally stressed, relative to the syllables near it, when one says "bitter" or "reiterate" or "she had wit." It is conventionally unstressed when one says "italicize" or "rabbit" or "*Pat* had it."

These examples demonstrate a useful principle: the stress on a syllable in English is not inherent in the sound, but relative. A syllable is stressed or unstressed only in relation to the syllables around it. As a corollary, accent is a matter of degree. This knowledge is useful because if accent or stress is a matter of degree, we can hear interesting rhythms even in a line where the basic structure is the simple pattern of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables. For example:

> It is not growing like a tree
> In bulk, doth make man better be.[1]

Each of these two lines is made of four pairs of syllables. Each pair of syllables is arranged so that the second one

has more accent than the first: "is" sticks out just a bit more than "It" in the very light first pair; and "grow" sticks out more than "not" in the rather heavy second pair; and "like" sticks out quite a lot more than "-ing"; and "tree" definitely sticks out more than "a." In the final pair of the line ("a tree"), the difference between the unstressed first syllable and the stressed second syllable is greater than in the earlier pairs. We could analyze the second line similarly, noting that the considerable pause early in the line also varies the rhythm.

What is interesting is that within the simple system of four pairs, each pair ascending in accent from first syllable to second, the actual rhythm of the words is not singsong or repetitious, because so much varies. Unless you make the mistake of pronouncing the words in some special, chanting or "poetic" manner, you can hear both the pattern and the constant variation. The degree of accent varies and the degree of difference between the unstressed and stressed syllable also varies, from one pair to the next.

In fact, the syllable "not," unstressed within its pair, has about the same or even more stress than the syllable "is," which is stressed within its pair. Thus, the first four syllables in the line ("It is not grow-") actually ascend in degree of accent. From such observations, we can conclude that the line is not simply a thump on every other syllable: a diagram of the line would not be a series of equal hills and valleys, sawtooth fashion, but a much more varying, precise graph, with the stressed syllable

Index of Names and Terms

NOTE: I have included in **bold face** a few terms that are not used in the main text of this book but that readers may encounter elsewhere and want defined. My definitions are cursory, particularly in relation to "received forms" like **sestina** and **villanelle**, which I confess do not much interest me. For more complete definitions, and more terms, an excellent reference work is *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. See also the works I mention in the Introduction.