

Pedagogical Practice

Teaching Poetry Using *Sound Ideas*

In teaching first year college poetry classes,* we authors of *Sound Ideas: Hearing and Speaking Poetry* take this as our initial premise: discovering what students need to know. Ours is a questing rather than lecturing approach. That is, telling students about elements of prosody before they find what they need is probably unproductive for teacher and student.

Ideally, we believe a teacher should use the book as a resource, rather than in the fashion of a standard text by which one goes chapter by chapter as if chapter one (with assignments and questions) is necessary before chapter two, and chapter three follows necessarily from two, and so on.

For example: we begin the first class with the poem “The Sound I Listened For” (*Sound Ideas*, p. 4). A student is asked to read it aloud. Then we ask: “Were there any difficulties? Do you want to try it again?” Or have another read it, then ask: “What difference did you all hear?” Once we hear the difficulties, problems, or mistakes a student makes in reading the poem, we have something specific to address; we have a need. And what is needed may well be a discussion of line, but perhaps also of tempo, or of image. We would thus try to address the difficulties or errors rather than sticking tightly to matters only of Line. The student can be directed to go to the appropriate section on that topic.

Since it is likely that a student reading a poem will run into difficulties and make mistakes—we all do, after all—we assure them all that such errors and problems are perfectly normal and are the bases for the teacher to examine and remedy what they do not know. We often said that any student who gives an answer to a question must also ask a new one. Problem solving is what we do. As one student encounters a problem, the others can become involved as they listen to one another and work to find solutions.

*We have utilized the same approach with high school students, upper level college, workshop students at all levels, just about any group

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Chapter 1, Line

In reading “The Sound I Listened For” questions like these may arise:

“Why did you emphasize that word, not the other ones?”

“Why did he slow down at the end of the third line, and she did not?”

“What difference does that make?”

“How can we resolve the matter?”

“Where in the poem do we look to find out?”

The poem itself tells us how to read it, how we enunciate the line breaks (how much, what kind of pause) how each may differ, the speed (tempo) of our voices.

We listen for difficulties or uncertainties in understanding sentence structure, vocalizing the line breaks, word emphasis, and the like, places where the student’s voice reveals uncertainty, in other words, questions: Where is the difficulty? How do we solve it?

To practice hearing difference in line break—why Francis ends line two “and went”—we practice reading it with a slight pause or hesitation. What happens to the movement of the line as we do this? Then try line four: does Francis wish us to pause after “ceased”? Why? How? Is it important in the poem to hesitate after the line break “ceased”? Can we describe the kind of pause (does our voice drop there?) or the length of the pause? Does he also do so after “A moment”?

If need be, we could test our understanding and experiment with line breaks, for example by creating different ones. Read aloud or write on the board such altered lines as

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....

What happens to our voice if we read the lines this way? Do the pauses change, and does our emotion change? What is Francis’s purpose in the poem in using long lines (how many syllables each?) and not neat short ones?

Denise Levertov’s “Stepping Westward,” (*Sound Ideas*, p. 22) uses a very different line and stanza form. As we read the first half dozen stanzas, “Were there passages where you had difficulty in reading?” When one woman in a workshop was reading from the poem,

If woman is inconstant,
good, I am faithful to

ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now...

she said she did not like the lines—she found them awkward to read. How did she want them to sound like? Was she anxious that she could not read the lines well? Why did Levertov write the lines this way,

short and abrupt? Or are they abrupt? What else might be happening in the speaker's voice? Are the line breaks or the stanza breaks uneven? Who is Levertov's speaker and what are her concerns, her emotions? Are there differences, by the way, between the pause for a line and for a stanza break?

At times one may find it necessary to clarify sentence structure; in this poem one passage could be confusing:

than to be glad to be
what, woman,

and who, myself,
I am, a shadow...

That is, I am glad to be a woman (the "what"), and I am also glad to be myself (the "who"), that is, a shadow, for the speaker continues to juggle paradoxes. The punctuation is reliable and will help us speak the lines with sense.

Our premise is to respect the integrity of the line as written. If we change the line we change the emphasis, the meaning. To illustrate what happens when we misquote a line, here is an example from Robert Hass's "Heroic Simile." A student had written:

A dying hero gives off stillness to the air.

That is what the poem says literally. But the line actually reads:

A hero, dying
gives off stillness to the air.

The information is the same. But the lines convey a different meaning and emotion. In the text (*Sound Ideas*, p. 29) we say, the placement of "dying," its declining sound ("dy-ing") repeats that of "he-ro," set off with commas, the silence after it, the almost soundless second line emphasizing "stillness," reveal the true tone beautifully. The falling second syllable does relate to line break, but also to word accent, rhythm (chapter three) and meter (chapter four), to which we may need to turn for a moment.

Chapter 2, Sound

All words have sound. A word's sound expresses meaning and emotion (*Sound Ideas*, p. 41).

We can list a number of words with the same meaning, for instance, "silence": Quiet, peace, soundlessness, stillness, vacancy, emptiness. Or we can talk about closing a door: Shut the door. Lock that gate! Please close it. Fasten the door.

Each phrase means the same but the sounds change, thus the emotion. Some consonants are harder and it takes longer to enunciate "Lock that gate" than it does to say, "Close the door."

In Stanley Kunitz's "The Portrait" (*Sound Ideas*, p. 43–44) we listen to the sounds of these first lines, all fairly short, to discover what emotion is being revealed by the speaker.

My mother never forgave my father
for killing himself,
especially at such an awkward time
and in a public park,
that spring ...

After we read the lines, we ask: "Where did the emphasis or stress fall in each line? What brought us to stress the word or words?" If stress falls on "forgave," what makes that happen? What changes if we hit such words as "mother," "never," "father"? Does the emotion change? Why are we sure that "forgave" is the key word?

In following lines, we read

She locked his name
in her deepest cabinet
and would not let him out, ...

The hard consonant sounds express her emotion. Word sounds create impressions; they let us hear things that the poem has not yet actually said. For instance, A.E. Housman's poem begins:

On the idle hill of summer,
Sleepy with the flow of streams,
Far I hear the steady drummer
Drumming like a noise in dreams. (*Sound Ideas*, p. 42)

What feeling does the stanza convey, line by line? How in particular do the first two lines sound? Is that feeling continued? Why? Or why not? What do we know is happening? And what have we not yet been told?

Denise Levertov begins a poem:

Where is the angel for me to wrestle?
No driving snow in the glass bubble,
but mild September. (*Sound Ideas*, p. 49)

We have little information about what is happening, but the sounds tell of a contrast or conflict. Which words have hard sounds; which soft sounds? Can you grasp the nature of the conflict she is expressing?

Chapter 3: Rhythm

We often move our hands and bodies to demonstrate the rhythm we are experiencing while reading a poem aloud. That is why we say rhythm is motion. And motion is emotion (*Sound Ideas*, p. 55). Which is to say, reading silently leaves out much of the feeling of the emotional movement.

In everyday speech our voices reveal rhythm as we express ourselves, pausing, quickening, slowing, emphasizing, pausing again with a longer, more meaningful silence.

Rhythms create the experience of a poem. For instance, Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (*Sound Ideas*, 57–58) begins thus:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And toward our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on

How do we talk about rhythm? Listen as our voice recites Owen's lines, at "Bent DOU-ble" our voice drops slightly; comma; "like old BEG-gars"; again a vocal drop at "UNDER sacks"; "KNOCK-kneed," comma; "coughing like hags," and so on. The rhythm is a kind of falling off, uneven, stumbling, not at all what we might visualize as soldiers marching. Through these lines and those that follow, our voice drops, pauses, hesitates, stops. It is that expressive movement which makes or reproduces the rhythm, the experience of those troops.

What we call Owen's particular rhythm is not as important as feeling its movements in our bodies, our gestures. However, since we are dealing with soldiers' movements, we might compare Owen's lines with the traditional marching tempo of this classic:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

We hear a regular, steady marching beat, with emphasis at evenly spaced words across the lines: Eyes, Seen, Glor-y, Com-ing, Lord. In the last line each word has almost equal stress, far different from Owen's faltering rhythm that breaks all sense of heroic.

Rhythm is the movement our voice creates. We can talk about it, discuss it, explore it, feel it in our bodies, for it is tangible, not a mystery.

Under rhythm we discuss three aspects: tempo, pitch, pause. Tempo (p. 62) is the speed by which we speak a line, lines, poem. The first lines of Owen's "Dulce" are slow, abrupt, with many breaks, many words stressed. Lines three and four move somewhat faster, as Owen varies his tempo—the soldiers may feel somewhat safer as they leave the front.

Speaking too fast (blurring the words without articulation) or too slow (flattening the forward movement) eliminates the rhythm. If we speak the lines aloud we are more certain to get the tempo right.

Pitch is the stress on certain words (not the same as stress in meter; chapter four) by which the speaker creates rhythm and physical (e)motion.

In his poem “Snake” (pp. 70–73), D.H. Lawrence uses pitch to point to key words as the snake descends down a rock wall to a level place where he drinks. Pitch accentuates the downward movement:

“He reached down
from a fissure
in the earth wall
in the gloom . . .”

As our voice drops to end each phrase, we hear the steady rhythm of the snake’s movement—down, pause, down, pause, down, pause, until he reaches a plane, and the pitch-accent of our voice levels off: “and sipped with his straight mouth . . .” When both we and the speaker internalize the physical energy of the snake, we/he realize that our intellectual education has denied that vital earth-energy. Without expressing the rhythm, we do not hear the poem.

In our everyday speech, we often pause while we search for a word, emphasize the next word, cause our listener to think before we go on. A pause, which has both length and meaning, can have any number of meanings: a threat, a warning, a promise of love, a joke.

One of the poems we examine is William Blake’s “The Poison Tree” (p. 76), where each line creates a distinct pause because of the expectation that follows:

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not; my wrath did grow.

We are not told what the wrath was about in either case; the point is in telling about it, or not. Line two ends with relief: Ahh, done, crisis over. Line four ends with tension, promise of deadly harm, crisis building. In speaking these lines, our voices convey these differences as we ponder what damage is awaiting the foe. The sentence ends—“did grow.”—yes, but our voice does not drop with same finality as it does at line two. More is coming.

Now meter (chapter four) is a different creature from rhythm, though connected. Meter is a pattern of word accent. Every multi-syllable word has an accent, and one syllable words have accents depending on their place in a sentence.

Mine eyes have seen the glor-y of the com-ing of the Lord.

That regularity creates a certain steadiness of movement—marching, we say. As we sing the lines we hear that regular accent. This is the pattern of meter. (Note: we do not stress each accented word the same: neither “of” gets much emphasis.)

Owen's line "Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs" is also metrical:

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs.

Owen's line moves in contrast to the irregular, faltering rhythm of the prior lines. Regularity of meter may or may not show regular emotion.

So to say a line is metrical does not give it specific emotional value. The pattern of metrical accent has to be read as part of the whole poem and as a pattern underlying the rhythm. That is, we do not read Owen's line hitting each accent; we read it as it makes sense, stress falling on words like "flares," "backs."

Thus rhythm is the movement of our voice across lines, shaped by tempo, by pitch, by pauses. Rhythm may have a relation to metrical regularity—Longfellow's "SHOULD you ASK me WHENCE these STORIES"—but that is not necessary. We read the way the lines tell us to read, and attend to metrical regularity if the lines call for it. Our examination of Blake's poems explores actual speaking (pp. 89–90).

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