

Second Edition

Sound and Sense

An Introduction to Poetry

by LAURENCE PERRINE

Southern Methodist University



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PART ONE: *The Elements of Poetry*

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

—*Alexander Pope from An Essay on Criticism*

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Denotation and Connotation

A primary distinction between the practical use of language and the literary use is that in literature, especially in poetry, a *fuller* use is made of individual words. To understand this, we need to examine the composition of a word.

The average word has three component parts: sound, denotation, and connotation. It begins as a combination of tones and noises, uttered by the lips, tongue, and throat, for which the written word is a notation. But it differs from a musical tone or a noise in that it has a meaning attached to it. The basic part of this meaning is its DENOTATION or denotations: that is, the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word. Beyond its denotations, a word may also have connotations. The CONNOTATIONS are what it suggests beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning. It acquires these connotations by its past history and associations, by the way and the circumstances in which it has been used. The word *home*, for instance, by denotation means only a place where one lives, but by connotation it suggests security, love, comfort, and family. The words *childlike* and *childish* both mean "characteristic of a child," but *childlike* suggests meekness, innocence, and wide-eyed wonder, while *childish* suggests pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums. If we name over a series of coins: *nickel*, *peso*, *lira*, *shilling*, *sen*, *doubloon*—the word *doubloon*, to four out

of five readers, will immediately suggest pirates, though one will find nothing about pirates in looking up its meaning in the dictionary. Pirates are part of its connotation.

Connotation is very important to the poet, for it is one of the means by which he can concentrate or enrich his meaning—say more in fewer words. Consider, for instance, the following short poem:

THERE IS NO FRIGATE LIKE A BOOK

There is no frigate like a book
 To take us lands away,
 Nor any coursers like a page
 Of prancing poetry.
 This traverse may the poorest take
 Without oppress of toll;
 How frugal is the chariot
 That bears the human soul!

—Emily Dickinson [1830–1886]

In this poem Emily Dickinson is considering the power of a book or of poetry to carry us away, to let us escape from our immediate surroundings into a world of the imagination. To do this she has compared literature to various means of transportation: a boat, a team of horses, a wheeled land vehicle. But she has been careful to choose kinds of transportation and names for them that have romantic connotations. *Frigate* suggests exploration and adventure; *coursers*, beauty, spirit, and speed; *chariot*, speed and the ability to go through the air as well as on land. (Compare "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and the myth of Phaëthon, who tried to drive the chariot of Apollo, and the famous painting of Aurora with her horses, once hung in almost every school.) How much of the meaning of the poem comes from this selection of vehicles and words is apparent if we try to substitute for them, say, *steamship*, *horses*, and *streetcar*.

QUESTIONS

1. What is lost if *miles* is substituted for *lands* (2), or *cheap* for *frugal* (7)?
2. How is *prancing* (4) peculiarly appropriate to poetry as well as to coursers? Could the poet have without loss compared a book to coursers and poetry to a frigate?
3. Is this account appropriate to all kinds of poetry or just to certain kinds?

That is, was the poet thinking of poems like Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (page 8) or of poems like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (page 263) and Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners" (page 265)?

Just as a word has a variety of connotations, so also it may have more than one denotation. If we look up the word *spring* in the dictionary, for instance, we will find that it has between twenty-five and thirty distinguishable meanings: It may mean (1) a pounce or leap, (2) a season of the year, (3) a natural source of water, (4) a coiled elastic wire, etc. This variety of denotation, complicated by additional tones of connotation, makes language confusing and difficult to use. Any person using words must be careful to define by context precisely the meanings that he wishes. But the difference between the writer using language to communicate information and the poet is this: the practical writer will always attempt to confine his words to one meaning at a time; the poet will often take advantage of the fact that the word has more than one meaning by using it to mean more than one thing at the same time. Thus when Edith Sitwell in one of her poems writes, "This is the time of the wild spring and the mating of tigers," she uses the word *spring* to denote both a season of the year and a sudden leap, and she uses *tigers* rather than *lambs* or *birds* because it has a connotation of fierceness and wildness that the other two lack. In the following sonnet the word *wreathèd* (line 14) means "twisted or convoluted," but it may also mean "hung with seaweed." Both meanings are appropriate to the image of Triton.

THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon; 5
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; 10
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

—William Wordsworth [1770–1850]

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *boon* (4), *Proteus* (13), *Triton* (14).
2. Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *earth* for *world* (1), *buying and selling* for *getting and spending* (2), *exposes* for *bares* (5), *back* for *bosom* (5), *dozing* for *sleeping* (7), *posies* for *flowers* (7), *nourished* for *suckled* (10), *visions* for *glimpses* (12), *sound* for *blow* (14).
3. Should *Great God!* (9) be considered as a vocative (term of address) or an expletive (exclamation)? Or something of both?
4. State the theme of the poem in a sentence.

A frequent misconception of poetic language is that the poet seeks always the most beautiful or noble-sounding words. What he really seeks are the most *meaningful* words, and these vary from one context to another. Language has many levels and varieties, and the poet may choose from them all. His words may be grandiose or humble, fanciful or matter of fact, romantic or realistic, archaic or modern, technical or everyday, monosyllabic or polysyllabic. Usually his poem will be pitched pretty much in one key. The words in Emily Dickinson's "There is no frigate like a book" and those in Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed" (page 20) are chosen from quite different areas of language, but each poet has chosen the words most meaningful for his own poetic context. Sometimes a poet may import a word from one level or area of language into a poem composed mostly of words from a different level or area. If he does this clumsily, the result will be incongruous and sloppy. If he does it skillfully, the result will be a shock of surprise and an increment of meaning for the reader. In fact, the many varieties of language open to the poet provide his richest resource. His task is one of constant exploration and discovery. He searches always for the secret affinities of words which allow them to be brought together with soft explosions of meaning.

THE NAKED AND THE NUDE¹

For me, the naked and the nude
 (By lexicographers construed
 As synonyms that should express
 The same deficiency of dress
 Or shelter) stand as wide apart 5
 As love from lies, or truth from art.

¹ Mr. Graves has recorded "The Naked and the Nude" (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).

Lovers without reproach will gaze
On bodies naked and ablaze;
The hippocratic eye will see
In nakedness, anatomy; 10
And naked shines the Goddess when
She mounts her lion among men.

The nude are bold, the nude are sly
To hold each treasonable eye.
While draping by a showman's trick 15
Their dishabille in rhetoric,
They grin a mock-religious grin
Of scorn at those of naked skin.

The naked, therefore, who compete
Against the nude may know defeat; 20
Yet when they both together tread
The briary pastures of the dead,
By Gorgons with long whips pursued,
How naked go the sometime nude!

—Robert Graves [1895-]

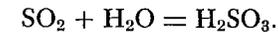
QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *lexicographers* (2), *construed* (2), *hippocratic* (9), *dishabille* (16), *Gorgons* (23).
2. What kind of language is used in lines 2–5? Why? (For example, why is *deficiency* used in preference to *lack*? Purely because of meter?)
3. What is meant by *rhetoric* (16)? Why is the word *dishabille* used in this line instead of some less fancy word?
4. Explain why the poet chose his wording instead of the following alternatives: *brave* for *bold* (13), *clever* for *sly* (13), *clothing* for *draping* (15), *smile* for *grin* (17).
5. What, for the poet, is the difference in connotation between *naked* and *nude*? Try to explain reasons for the difference. If your own sense of the two words differs from that of Graves, state the difference, and give reasons to support your sense of them.
6. Explain the reversal in the last line.

The person using language to convey information is largely indifferent to the sound of his words and is hampered by their connotations and multiple denotations. He tries to confine each word to a single exact meaning. He uses, one might say, a fraction of the word and throws the rest away. The poet, on the other hand, tries to use as much of the word as he can. He is interested in sound and

uses it to reinforce meaning (see Chapter 13). He is interested in connotation and uses it to enrich and convey meaning. And he may use more than one denotation.

The purest form of practical language is scientific language. The scientist needs a precise language for conveying information precisely. The fact that words have multiple denotations and various overtones of meaning is a hindrance to him in accomplishing his purpose. His ideal language would be a language with a one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning; that is, every word would have one meaning only, and for every meaning there would be only one word. Since ordinary language does not fulfill these conditions, he has invented one that does. A statement in his language looks something like this:



In such a statement the symbols are entirely unambiguous; they have been stripped of all connotation and of all denotations but one. The word *sulfurous*, if it occurred in poetry, might have all kinds of connotations: fire, smoke, brimstone, hell, damnation. But H_2SO_3 means one thing and one thing only: sulfurous acid.

The ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings that words have, then, are an obstacle to the scientist but a resource to the poet. Where the scientist wants singleness of meaning, the poet wants richness of meaning. Where the scientist needs and has invented a strictly one-dimensional language, in which every word is confined to one denotation, the poet needs a multi-dimensional language, and creates it partly by using a multi-dimensional vocabulary, in which, to the dimension of denotation, he adds the dimensions of connotation and of sound.

The poet, we may say, plays on a many-stringed instrument. And he sounds more than one note at a time.

The first problem in reading poetry, therefore, or in reading any kind of literature, is to develop a sense of language, a feeling for words. One needs to become acquainted with their shape, their color, and their flavor. There are two ways of doing this: extensive use of the dictionary and extensive reading.

EXERCISES

1. Robert Frost has said that "Poetry is what evaporates from all translations." On the basis of this chapter, can you explain why this statement is true? How much of a word can be translated?

2. Which of the following words have the most "romantic" connotations?
 a. horse () steed () equine quadruped ()
 b. China () Cathay ()
 Which of the following is the most emotionally connotative?
 c. mother () female parent () dam ()
 Which of the following have the more favorable connotations?
 d. average () mediocre ()
 e. secret agent () spy ()
 f. adventurer () adventuress ()

3. Fill each blank with the word richest in meaning in the given context. Explain.

- a. I still had hopes, my latest hours to crown,
 Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;
 To husband out life's _____ at the close,
 And keep the flame from wasting by repose.
candle, taper
 —*Goldsmith*
- b. She was a _____ of delight.
 When first she gleamed upon my sight.
ghost, phantom,
spectre, spook
 —*Wordsworth*
- c. His sumptuous watch-case, though concealed it
 lies,
 Like a good conscience, _____ joy supplies.
perfect, solid,
thorough
 —*Edward Young*
- d. Charmed magic _____ opening on the foam
 Of _____ seas, in faery lands forlorn.—*Keats*
casements, windows
dangerous, perilous
- e. Thou _____ unravished bride of quietness.
 —*Keats*
still, yet
- f. I'll _____ the guts into the neighbor room.
 —*Shakespeare*
bear, carry, convey,
lug
- g. The iron tongue of midnight hath _____
 twelve.
 —*Shakespeare*
said, struck, told
- h. In poetry each word reverberates like the note of
 a well-tuned _____ and always leaves be-
 hind it a multitude of vibrations. —*Joubert*
banjo, guitar, lyre
- i. I think that with this _____ new alliance
 I may ensure the public, and defy
 All other magazines of art or science. —*Byron*
holy, sacred
- j. Care on thy maiden brow shall put
 A wreath of wrinkles, and thy foot
 Be shod with pain: not silken dress
 But toil shall _____ thy loveliness.
 —*C. Day Lewis*
clothe, tire, weary

charged a better word in Pound's definition? What do its associations with storage batteries, guns, and dynamite suggest about poetry?

RICHARD CORY

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
 We people on the pavement looked at him:
 He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
 Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
 And he was always human when he talked;
 But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
 "Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
 And admirably schooled in every grace:
 In fine, we thought that he was everything
 To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
 And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
 Went home and put a bullet through his head.

—*Edwin Arlington Robinson [1869–1935]*

QUESTIONS

1. In how many senses is Richard Cory a gentleman?
2. The word *crown*, meaning the top of the head, is familiar to you from "Jack and Jill"; but why does Robinson use the unusual phrase "from sole to crown" instead of the common "from head to foot" or "from top to toe"?
3. List the words in the poem which express or suggest the idea of aristocracy or royalty.
4. Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *sidewalk* for *pavement* (2), *good-looking* for *clean favored* (4), *thin* for *slim* (4), *dressed* for *arrayed* (5), *courteous* for *human* (6), *wonderfully* for *admirably* (10), *trained* for *schooled* (10), *manners* for *every grace* (10), *in short* for *in fine* (11). What other examples of effective diction do you find in the poem?
5. Why is *Richard Cory* a good name for the character in this poem?
6. This poem is a good example of how ironic contrast (see Chapter 7) generates meaning. The poem makes no direct statement about life; it simply relates an incident. What larger meanings about life does it suggest?

7. A leading American critic has said of this poem: "In 'Richard Cory' . . . we have a superficially neat portrait of the elegant man of mystery; the poem builds up deliberately to a very cheap surprise ending; but all surprise endings are cheap in poetry, if not, indeed, elsewhere, for poetry is written to be read not once but many times."² Do you agree with this evaluation of the poem? Discuss.

THE RICH MAN

The rich man has his motor-car,
His country and his town estate.
He smokes a fifty-cent cigar
And jeers at Fate.

He frivols through the livelong day, 5
He knows not Poverty her pinch.
His lot seems light, his heart seems gay,
He has a cinch.

Yet though my lamp burns low and dim,
Though I must slave for livelihood— 10
Think you that I would change with him?
You bet I would!

—Franklin P. Adams [1881–1960]

QUESTIONS

1. What meanings has *lot* (7)?
2. Bearing in mind the criticism cited of Robinson's "Richard Cory," state whether you think that poem or this has more poetic value. Which poem is merely clever? Which is something more?

NAMING OF PARTS³

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens, 5
And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,

² Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, Norfolk, Conn., New Directions, 1946, p. 52.

³ Mr. Reed has recorded "Naming of Parts" (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).

When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches 10
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy 15
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it 20
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy 25
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For to-day we have naming of parts. 30

—Henry Reed [1914–]

QUESTIONS

1. What basic contrasts are represented by the trainees and the gardens?
2. What is it that the trainees "have not got"?
3. How many senses have the phrases "easing the Spring" (stanza 4) and "point of balance" (27)?
4. What differences of language and rhythm do you find between those lines concerning "naming of parts" and those describing the gardens?
5. Does the repetition of certain phrases throughout the poem have any special function, or is it only a kind of refrain?

JUDGING DISTANCES⁴

Not only how far away, but the way that you say it
Is very important. Perhaps you may never get
The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to report on a landscape: the central sector,
The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday, 5
And at least you know

⁴ Mr. Reed has recorded "Judging Distances" (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army
 Happens to be concerned—the reason being,
 Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know
 There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and
 the poplar, 10
 And those which have bushy tops to; and lastly
 That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly,
 Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.
 You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting: 15
 At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen
 Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,
 Don't call the bleeders *sheep*.

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of
 example,
 The one at the end, asleep, endeavors to tell us 20
 What he sees over there to the west, and how far away,
 After first having come to attention. There to the west,
 On the fields of summer the sun and the shadows bestow
 Vestments of purple and gold.

The still white dwellings are like a mirage in the heat, 25
 And under the swaying elms a man and a woman
 Lie gently together. Which is, perhaps, only to say
 That there is a row of houses to the left of arc,
 And that under some poplars a pair of what appear to be humans
 Appear to be loving. 30

Well that, for an answer, is what we might rightly call
 Moderately satisfactory only, the reason being,
 Is that two things have been omitted, and those are important.
 The human beings, now: in what direction are they,
 And how far away, would you say? And do not forget 35
 There may be dead ground in between.

There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got
 The knack of judging a distance; I will only venture
 A guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers,
 (Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished,) 40
 At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
 Of about one year and a half.

—Henry Reed [1914-]

QUESTIONS

1. In what respect are maps "of time, not place" in the army?
2. Though they may be construed as belonging to the same speaker, there are two speaking voices in this poem. Identify each, and put quotation marks around the lines spoken by the second voice.
3. Two kinds of language are used in this poem—army "officialese," and the language of human experience. What are the characteristics of each? What is the purpose of each? Which is more precise?
4. The word *bleeders* (18)—i.e., "bloody creatures"—is British profanity. To which of the two kinds of language does it belong? Or is it perhaps a third kind of language?
5. As in "Naming of Parts" (these two poems are part of a series of three with the general title "Lessons of War") the two kinds of language used might possibly be called "unpoetic" and "poetic." Is the "unpoetic" language *really* unpoetic? In other words, is its use inappropriate in these two poems? Explain.
6. The phrase "dead ground" (36) takes on symbolic meaning in the last stanza. What is its literal meaning? What is its symbolic meaning? What does the second speaker mean by saying that the distance between himself and the lovers is "about one year and a half"? In what respect is the contrast between the recruits and the lovers similar to that between the recruits and the gardens in "Naming of Parts"? What meanings are generated by the former contrast?

BASE DETAILS

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
 I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
 And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
 You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
 Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel, 5
 Reading the Roll of Honor. "Poor young chap,"
 I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
 Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
 And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
 I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed. 10

—Siegfried Sassoon [1886-]

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *petulant* (4).
2. In what two ways may the title be interpreted? (Both words have two pertinent meanings.) What applications has *scarlet* (2)? What is the force of *fierce* (1)? Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the

following alternatives: *fleshy* for *puffy* (4), *eating and drinking* for *guzzling and gulping* (5), *battle* for *scrap* (8), *totter* for *toddle* (10).

3. Who evidently is the speaker? (The poet, a British captain in World War I, was decorated for bravery on the battlefield.) Does he mean what he says? What is the purpose of the poem?

LOVE SONG

Your little hands,
Your little feet,
Your little mouth—
Oh, God, how sweet!

Your little nose,
Your little ears,
Your eyes, that shed
Such little tears!

Your little voice,
So soft and kind;
Your little soul,
Your little mind!

—Samuel Hoffenstein [1890–1947]

QUESTION

1. The connotations of a word, like its denotations, are controlled by context, and are thus subject to change. What are the connotations of *little* in lines 1–10? in lines 11–12?

THE WRITTEN WORD

A

The spoken or written word
Should be as clean as a bone,
As clear as is the light,
As firm as is a stone.
Two words will never serve
As well as one alone.

B

The written word
Should be clean as bone,
Clear as light,
Firm as stone.
Two words are not
As good as one.

QUESTION

1. Which of the above versions of a poem, by an anonymous writer, is the better? Why?

4

Imagery

Experience comes to us largely through the senses. My experience of a spring day, for instance, may consist partly of certain emotions I feel and partly of certain thoughts I think, but most of it will be a cluster of sense impressions. It will consist of *seeing* blue sky and white clouds, budding leaves and daffodils; of *hearing* robins and bluebirds singing in the early morning; of *smelling* damp earth and blossoming hyacinths; and of *feeling* a fresh wind against my cheek. The poet seeking to express his experience of a spring day must therefore provide a selection of the sense impressions he has. Like Shakespeare (page 11), he must give the reader “daisies pied” and “lady-smocks all silver-white” and “merry larks” and the song of the cuckoo and maidens bleaching their summer smocks. Without doing so he will probably fail in evoking the emotions which accompanied his sensations. His language, therefore, must be more *sensuous* than ordinary language. It must be more full of imagery.

IMAGERY may be defined as the representation through language of sense experience. Poetry appeals directly to our senses, of course, through its music and rhythm, which we actually hear when it is read aloud. But indirectly it appeals to our senses through imagery, the representation to the imagination of sense experience. The word *image* perhaps most often suggests a mental picture,

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