Sound and Sense
An Introduction to Poetry
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PART ONE: The Elements of Poetry

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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?
DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

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 wreathed (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;
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;
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 wreathed horn.

—William Wordsworth [1770–1850]

QUESTIONS

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), dosing 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 NUDE

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
As love from lies, or truth from art.

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;
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
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;
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 (18)? 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:

\[ \text{SO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} = \text{H}_2\text{SO}_3. \]

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 \( \text{H}_2\text{SO}_3 \) 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.
      —Goldsmith
      candle, taper
   b. She was a ________ of delight.
      When first she gleamed upon my sight.
      —Wordsworth
      ghost, phantom, spectre, spook
   c. His sumptuous watch-case, though concealed it lies,
      Like a good conscience, ________ joy supplies.
      —Edward Young
      perfect, solid, thorough
   d. Charmed magic ________ opening on the foam
      Of ________ seas, in faery lands forlorn.—Keats
      casements, windows
   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
      banjo, guitar, lyre
   h. In poetry each word reverberates like the note of a well-tuned ________ and always leaves behind 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, woary

4. Ezra Pound has defined great literature as being “simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” Would this be a good definition of poetry? The word charged is roughly equivalent to filled. Why is 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." 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 frivolous through the livelong day,
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—
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 PARTS 3

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,
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,

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

JUDGING DISTANCES 4

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,
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,
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:
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
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,
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.

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
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,)
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
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.

—Siegfried Sassoon [1886—]
following alternatives: fleshy for puffy (4), eating and drinking for guzzling and gulping (5), battle for scrap (8), totter for toddler (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  
The written word  
Should be as clean as a bone,  
Should be clean as bone,  
As clear as is the light,  
Clear as light,  
As firm as is a stone.  
Firm as stone.  
Two words will never serve  
Two words are not  
As well as one alone.  
As good as one.

B

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,