Sound and Sense

An Introduction to Poetry

Third Edition

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Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
New York Chicago San Francisco Atlanta
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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CHAPTER THREE

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 Phaethon, 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?
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 (3), 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 that 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.

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
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
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
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.

Henry Reed (b. 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 the
   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 DISTANCES*

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,

*Mr. Reed recorded “Judging Distances” (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).
At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
Of about one year and a half.

Henry Reed (b. 1914)

QUESTIONS
1. In what respect are maps “of time, not place” (7) in the army?
2. Though 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” (42)? 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 (1886–1967)

QUESTIONS
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 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?

SACRAMENTAL MEDITATION VI
Am I thy gold? Or purse, Lord, for thy wealth;
Whether in mine or mint refined for thee?
I'm counted so, but count me o'er thyself,
Lest gold-washed face, and brass in heart I be.
I fear my touchstone touches when I try
Me, and my counted gold too overly.
Am I new-minted by thy stamp indeed?
Mine eyes are dim; I cannot clearly see.
Be thou my spectacles that I may read
Thine image and inscription stamped on me.
If thy bright image do upon me stand,
I am a golden angel in thy hand.
Lord, make my soul thy plate: thine image bright
Within the circle of the same enfoil.
And on its brims in golden letters write
Thy superscription in an holy style.
Then I shall be thy money, thou my hoard:
Let me thy angel be, be thou my Lord.

Edward Taylor (1642–1729)

QUESTIONS
2. In lines 13–14 the word plate means a gold disc and enfoil means to place on a bright background (as one mounts a jewel on a foil). What steps in the process of turning gold ore into gold coin are referred to in the poem?
3. In line 5 the phrase “my touchstone touches” is probably to be in-
terpreted as "the touches of my touchstone." What fear does the speaker express in stanza 1? What hope in stanza 2? What prayer in stanza 3?
4. What meanings have refined (2) and count and counted (3, 6)? On what meanings of angel (12, 18) does the poem pivot? For what reasons is golden rather than silver or bronze used for the coinage in the poem?

**PORTRAIT D'UNE FEMME**

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
You have been second always. Tragical?
No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
One average mind—with one thought less, each year.
Oh, you are patient. I have seen you sit
Hours, where something might have floated up.
And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
And takes strange gain away:
Trophies fished up; some curious suggestion;
Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale for two,
Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
That might prove useful and yet never proves,
That never fits a corner or shows use,
Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:
The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
Idols, and ambergris and rare inlays.
These are your riches, your great store; and yet
For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
In the slow float of differing light and deep,
No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.
Yet this is you.

_Ezra Pound (b. 1885)"

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**QUESTIONS**

1. Vocabulary: in fee (3), uxorious (9), mandrakes (18), ambergris (23), deciduous (25).
2. The Sargasso Sea, an area of still water in the North Atlantic, is legendarily a place where ships have become entangled in seaweed and where the ocean floor is littered with sunken vessels and their scattered cargoes. What kind of woman is Pound describing? In what ways is her mind like the Sargasso Sea?
3. Pound seeks to create an impression of the rich and strange, as opposed to the dull and average. How does he do it?
5. Comment on the phrase “pregnant with mandrakes” (18). Why do these two words go well together?
6. Pound might have called his poem “Portrait of a Woman” or “Portrait of a Lady.” Which would have been more accurate? What advantages does the French title have over either?

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**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**
Which of the above versions of a poem, by an anonymous writer, is the better? Why?
My Star 84, 85–87
Naked and the Nude, The 42
Naming of Parts 47
NASH, ODGEN
The Sea-Gull 69
The Turtle 178
NASHE, THOMAS
Spring 210
Neutral Tones 268
Night of Spring 228
NIMS, JOHN FREDERICK
Love Poem 334
No longer mourn for me when I am dead 325
No Platonic Love 303
Not only how far away, but the way that you say it 48
Not that the pines were darker there 293
Nothing is plumb, level or square 104
Nothing is so beautiful as spring 60
Now hardly here and there a hackney-coach 60
NOTES, ALFRED
The Barrel-Organ 210
O my love is like a red, red rose 111
O Rose, thou art sick 94
O Western wind, when wilt thou blow 108
Oak, The 204
O’CONNOR, FRANK
Devil, Maggot and Son 33
Ode on a Greek Urn 323
Ode on Melancholy 325
Of this bad world the loveliest and best 107
Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today, 264
Oh who is that young sinner 209
Old Adam, the carrion crow 300
Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night 339
Old House, The 74
On a Certain Lady at Court 114
On a Dead Hostess 107
On a Girdle 40
On a starry night Prince Lucifer uprose 320
On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer 240
On His Blindness 139
Of moonlit heath and lonesome banle 58
On the Beach at Fontana 269
On the Late Massacre in Piemont 330
Once am sure there’s nothing going on 326
Once more the storm is howling 356
Once riding in old Baltimore 305
One dot 307
One must have a mind of winter 347
One that is ever kind said yesterday 79
O’REILLY, JOHN BOYLE
A White Rose 84, 85
Our vases were white from stocks and stones 146
“Out, Out—” 135
Out upon it! I have loved 130
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Parting at Morning 56
Parting, Without a Sequel 188
Passing through huddled and ugly walls 187
PATMORE, COVENTRY
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Portrait d’une Femme 52
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ROTHKE, THEODOR
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Rose Family, The 112
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel
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Round the cape of a sudden came the sea 56
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She looked over his shoulder 141
She should have died hereafter 137