SOUND
AND
SENSE

An Introduction to Poetry

THIRD EDITION

LAURENCE PERRINE
Southern Methodist University

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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.

---

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

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,
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*

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

---

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

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).

The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday,
And at least you know

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 (b. 1914)

QUESTIONS

1. In what respect are maps "of time, not place" (7) 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" (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

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?

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° — test
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

1. Vocabulary: *touchstone* (5), *superscription* (16).

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)

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?

4. Comment on the phrases "in fee" (3), "of price" (5), "richly pay" (13), "of some interest" (14), "strange gain" (15), "your riches" (24), "your great store" (24), "this sea-hoard" (25). What do they have in common? What is their effect?

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?

THE WRITTEN WORD

A	*B*
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.

QUESTION

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

Lucifer in Starlight 329
LYLY, JOHN
  Cupid and my Campaspe played 35

Macbeth, from 137
MACBETH, GEORGE
  Bedtime Story 31
MACKINTOSH, E. A.
  Cha Till Maccruimein 272
MACLEISH, ARCHIBALD
  Ars Poetica 160
  Dr. Sigmund Freud Discovers the Sea Shell 68
  You, Andrew Marvell 87, 88–89
Man He Killed, The 23, 24–26
Many-maned scud-thumper 190
Margrave's Birthnight, The 102
MARVELL, ANDREW
  To His Coy Mistress 77
Mary Hynes 314
May all my enemies go to hell 121
Meeting at Night 55
MELVILLE, HERMAN
  The Apparition 156
  The Bench of Boors 233
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