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Quick Reciprocations: The Real Rhythms of Poetry

Poets and critics attribute to rhythm powers that it cannot possibly have. Ezra Pound, in 'Credo' (1917) in *Modern Poets On Modern Poetry* (1965) edited by James Scully, states:

Rhythm. – I believe in 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed.

Rhythm can express emotion to a limited extent: the rhythm of an elegy, for example, is usually slower than that of a joyful lyric, but rhythm cannot express exact shades of emotion. Some poets would agree that exact shades of emotion, and the shading of one emotion into another, cannot even be fully represented in words. Absolute rhythm as Pound defines it is unattainable. T.S. Eliot also makes exaggerated claims for the power of rhythm. In the chapter on Matthew Arnold in *The Use Of Poetry And The Use Of Criticism* (1933), Eliot writes:

What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origins and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and end.

Seamus Heaney quotes that sentence in 'Englands Of The Mind' in *Finders Keepers* (2002) and describes it as 'One of the most precise and suggestive of T.S. Eliot's critical formulations'. But when the poet penetrates 'far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling', what he discovers cannot be used in a poem until it has been transformed into

consciousness and language. The innateness of a mental capacity, in this instance the capacity for rhythm, is usually an indication that the capacity appeared at an early, perhaps prelinguistic, stage in human evolution. But Eliot is discussing the rhythmic use of language in poetry; and a poet who is as conscious, even self-conscious, of his craft as Eliot knows that the rhythms of poetry are not achieved by 'sinking to the most primitive and forgotten' but through deliberate, sophisticated technique. Similarly, the auditory imagination is partly dependent on the language-processing functions of the brain, which operate largely non-consciously; but in poetry the auditory imagination is a function of the auditory cortex and the poetic imagination, a condition of mind that has some access to the non-conscious but is essentially a heightened state of consciousness. Eliot's quest for origins and ends is expressed more convincingly in the near-mysticism in some passages of *Four Quartets* than in the uncharacteristically psychoanalytic and melodramatic quotation above.

Maud Bodkin presents a more reasoned case in *Archetypal Patterns In Poetry: Psychological Studies Of Imagination* (1934), in which she adopts a Jungian approach to literature. In section V of chapter VI she writes:

The body's enactment, through changes of speech-rhythm and intonation, of changes in the dramatic content of poetry, is the factor that links the reading of verse – even though silent, reduced to sub-articulation – with the ritual dance, concerned as the prototype of the arts. As the wild rhythms of the ancient dance tended to annul the participant's consciousness of separate personality, exalting him to union with his group and with its God, so, in fainter degree, the rhythms of poetry still serve to hold the reader apart from his everyday self

and cares, caught up into the thought and feeling communicated.

The ritual dance, says Bodkin, was 'the prototype of the arts', but we have no way of knowing if dance were more prototypical than the chant or some forms of totemism. Although the ritual dance probably had the effects that Bodkin suggests, that is, the promotion of a collective, tribal consciousness and union with the tribe's god or gods, these effects are different from the effects of reading and enjoying poetry. When the reader is caught up in the thought and feeling of a poem, he might be temporarily released 'from his everyday self and cares', and the experience he recognises in the poem might be a shared experience, but that experience, and the reader's experience of the poem as a work of literature, and the very act of reading, are solitary, conscious and interpretative.

Bodkin continues:

It would seem to be the relation to the dance, the experienced presence of motor schemata, wraiths of gesture and action, that constitutes, even more than sound, the link between the arts of poetry and music.

Perhaps that is the test: if the particular reader of a particular poem finds that his motor schemata are activated, that is, if his motor neurones are activated and produce a physical response or even the mental sensation of a physical response, then for that particular reader there could be a link between the poem and dance. But a physical response that was not accompanied by an imaginative response would be inadequate. When we are moved by a poem, we are more likely to be moved emotionally and intellectually than physically.

William Empson in the first chapter of *Seven Types Of*

Ambiguity (1930) makes interesting comparisons between the rhythms of poetry and the reader's pulse-rate:

Its [rhythm's] direct effect seems a matter for physiology; in particular, a rhythmic beat taken faster than the pulse seems controllable, exhilarating, and not to demand intimate sympathy; a rhythmic beat almost synchronous with the pulse seems sincere and to demand intimate sympathy; while a rhythmic beat slower than the pulse, like a funeral bell, seems portentous and uncontrollable.

And Graham Hough, in the chapter, 'Prose, Verse And Poetry' in *An Essay On Criticism* (1966), relates the rhythms of poetry to the rhythms of the heart-beat and breathing. Empson's and Hough's analogies seem to have a common-sense plausibility, but the rhythms of poetry are not derived from or influenced by the physiological rhythm of pulse, heart, or breathing; they are related to the rhythms of speech, which are partly determined by the pronunciations of words, especially the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. Pulse-rate, heart-rate, and rate of breathing, all of which are controlled by the autonomic and not the central nervous system, are three different, individually variable rhythms. In fact, rhythm in poetry is a product of the poet's craftsmanship and artistry; it is shaped and re-shaped by the poet until it is an integral part of the finished poem. The reader may be unaware of this; indeed, some poets are not fully aware of the ways in which they create rhythm, but neither poet nor reader relates his pulse-rate, heart-rate, or rate of breathing to the rhythm of the poem.

Stephen Spender, too, makes an exaggerated claim for the power of rhythm. In 'The Seminal Image' in *The Struggle Of The Modern* (1963), he writes:

Rhythm carries the tone of the inner personality.

Spender's concept of an inner personality is, one assumes, similar to the concept of the poetic self, and one notes his courage in risking the vulnerability of exposing his poetic self in his prose as well as his poetry; even so, the idea of the inner personality having a tone, and the associated idea of the power of rhythm to express that tone, are hard to accept. Spender adds:

It [rhythm] is the least analysable element in a poem: the invisible quality in which the poet exists.

But rhythm can often be analysed, measured; and one could argue that other elements in a poem – the meaning, music, imagination, and vision – are less analysable than rhythm. In fact, there is little or nothing to be gained from dismantling a poem to try to show that the poet's presence is stronger in one element of the poem than another; but if one were to make such an attempt, then one would argue that the poet exists as much in the other elements of a poem as in the rhythm.

Graham Dunstan Martin offers an original, precisely reasoned, but ultimately unconvincing comparison of the rhythms of poetry and jazz. In 'Some Varieties Of Oddness' in *Language Truth And Poetry* (1975), Martin writes:

If verse is a music, it is certainly more like jazz than classical music, in that it presupposes a basic underlying rhythm (audible in verse only in the mind's ear; whereas the drums or the double bass keep it steadily audible in jazz), above which the actual verbal or melodic line moves in syncopation.

But the music of poetry is not the same as music itself; and

the rhythms of poetry are related not to the rhythms of music but to the rhythms of speech, and are thus related to the pronunciation of words and word-clusters. In his carefully detailed comparison of the rhythms of poetry and jazz, Martin names only one musician, the tenor saxophonist, Lester Young (1909–59), who represents only one style, sometimes known as mainstream, of the many contrasting styles of jazz. Rhythm in poetry could be compared to tempo in music, but the tempos in jazz, from the blues to the racing tempos introduced by the founders of the bop movement, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, are more varied and extreme than the tempos at which one reads poetry. Martin illustrates his case by quoting in full E.E. Cummings' poem, 'ygUDuh', but the lurching, irregular rhythms of that satirical monologue are designed to echo the speech of a drunken, uneducated racist.

The claims made by Pound, Eliot in his essay on Arnold, Empson, Hough, Spender, and Martin are sometimes daring but they are mistaken. Rhythm cannot express shades of emotion; it does not operate only at a non-conscious level; it cannot express the poet's inner personality; and it is not similar to the rhythms of jazz. What, then, can rhythm actually do in a poem?

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In Chapter XVIII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge writes:

As far as metre acts in and for itself; it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment

objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence.

Coleridge's use of 'metre' clearly includes the idea of rhythm generally, and not only strictly metrical poetry. The reader may not be conscious of the rhythm at any one point in a poem but he feels the cumulative effect, an effect Coleridge identifies not as repetition but an alternating satisfaction and expectancy. His phrase, 'quick reciprocations', gives the impression of rhythm and counter-rhythm; and that, of course, is how rhythm works in English-language poetry. No two lines in a poem can have exactly the same rhythm unless they have the same number of stressed and unstressed syllables in exactly the same sequence. Such reduplication is possible in strictly metrical poetry, but a more common experience is to find that, in a poem in which the rhythm is regular, most lines offer slight variations on the basic rhythm.

T.S. Eliot in 'Reflections On Vers Libre' (1917) emphasises the importance of this kind of rhythmic variation:

But the most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or by taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse.

Lascelles Abercrombie makes a similar observation in 'The Sound Of Words' in *The Theory Of Poetry* (1924). He quotes John Clare's 'The Invitation' ('Come hither, my fair one'), and then he comments on its rhythm:

We feel a constant pattern maintaining itself through

many variations. These two things, constancy and variation, are the essential things not merely in this metre, but in the very idea of metre.

And in the chapter, 'Technique', Abercrombie identifies the basis of rhythm in poetry:

syllabic sound – the quality of vowels and consonants in combination –

Robert Graves, too, writes of the need for rhythmic variation. In 'Harp, Anvil, Oar' in *The Crowning Privilege* (1959), he states that poetry can be 'soporific unless frequent changes occur in the metre'. And Denise Levertov in 'Some Notes On Organic Form' (1965) in *New & Selected Essays* (1992) notes the same feature:

some rhythmic norm peculiar to a particular poem, from which the individual lines depart and to which they return.

Graves is less convincing when he extends the idea from the poem to the poet. In 'Poets And Gleemen' in *The White Goddess* (1948) he states that twentieth-century poets would agree that there is a metrical norm 'to which a poet relates his personal rhythm', and that the norm serves to define a poet's 'rhythmic idiosyncrasies'. Perhaps what Graves calls personal rhythm overlaps with personal poetic voice; it would take an exceptionally sensitive ear to identify a twentieth-century poet by his use of rhythm alone.

Poets and critics have noted other functions of rhythm in poetry. William Empson in the first chapter of *Seven Types Of Ambiguity* writes:

A metrical scheme imposes a sort of intensity of interpretation upon the grammar, which makes it fruitful even when there is no 'song'.

That is, the rhythm of a poem can seem to make the poem's language more important, more meaningful, even when the language is unimpassioned. Empson writes of the effect of rhythm on meaning; Graham Dunstan Martin in 'Some Varieties Of Oddness' in *Language Truth And Poetry* notes the effect of rhythm on the tempo and sound of a poem:

I should prefer to think that conventional metre imposes a time-scale of its own upon language, slowing its pace, and concentrating our minds upon the word and its phonic associations and not purely upon the denotative aspect of the concept, as in prose.

We usually read poetry, whether silently or aloud, at a slower pace than we read prose, and at this slower pace we can be more aware of the word, its sound, echoes, and connotations. But one has to add that rhythm can also be used to quicken the pace of a poem; I.A. Richards notes in 'Poem XI' in *Practical Criticism* (1929):

A poet may imitate the motion of his subject by the motion of his verse.

Denise Levertov, too, discusses the extent to which rhythm can reflect the subject of a poem. Her understanding of the links between subject matter and rhythm is based on American concepts of rhythm in poetry, which are more varied, more adventurous, and sometimes more fanciful than British concepts. In 'Some Notes On Organic Form', she states:

In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception.

At first thought the claim seems excessive. Surely perception can be expressed only through words. But when one notes that Levertov is not referring to the content or substance of perception but to its movement, that is, the fluctuating flow of ideation in a poem, then one sees that rhythm can be directly related to that flow. Levertov gives clearer expression to the link between rhythm and the flow of ideation when she adds:

The varying speed and gait of the different strands of perception within an experience (I think of strands of seaweed moving within a wave) result in counterpointed measures.

When rhythm is adapted to reflect changes in the tempo and the mode of transition from one image or idea to another, then a counterpointing of rhythm, and of ideation, can be achieved. Coleridge's 'quick reciprocations', Eliot's 'fixity and flux', and Levertov's 'counterpointed measures' express what rhythm actually does in poetry.