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Charles Smith  
*Western Michigan University*

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# LEND AN EAR TO POETRY

*Charles Smith*

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

It seems to me as I read much of contemporary poetry that there is in it less and less of any appeal to a sophisticated ear for the nuances of sound. To all intents and purposes the poet apparently assumes that his reader is tone deaf. In fact, to all intents and purposes the poet seems to be tone deaf too. The rhetorical effects involve only the sense of sight; they are imagery in the most restricted sense of the word. (Both in poetry and in life man, of course, has always neglected any development of or appeal to the other three senses. Only very rarely does a poet like John Keats make us smell, taste, and touch, as well as hear and see.)

Yet poetry is primarily an aural experience. Among primitive peoples it has its origins in chants and spells and incantations and in the spellbinding of bards and troubadours who conveyed their enchantments orally. Poetry develops earlier than prose as a fully formed medium of art, and its development does not wait upon the coming of the written record.

It is in the nature of poetry to use many appeals to the ear, and these appeals are capable of a great deal of refinement in the hands of a skilled artist.

There is, for instance, rhythm. All art, of course, exists in patterns of rhythm. But poetry, like music, sometimes makes its patterns more obvious than does, say, sculpture or painting. In Tennyson's "Northern Farmer/New Style" we have an example of a very obvious appeal to the ear in joining rhythm to meaning.

The Farmer, a canny old North Countryman who married for money, wants his son to do likewise. But the son obstinately insists upon marrying the girl he loves—the daughter of the parish curate, who is as poor as the mouse in her father's church. The old man argues with the boy, pointing out that property is the thing to choose. Love will come later. But look for property now. Listen, he says, to his horse's hoofs. Even they plead the cause of property.

Doesn't thou 'ear my 'erse's legs, as they canters  
awaäy?

Proputty, proputty, proputty—that's what I  
'ears 'em saäy.

The rhythm of the second line is dactylic, and a horse gallops in dactylic rhythm.

A much more subtle employment of rhythm to reinforce mood and

meaning is in the opening of John Milton's great lyric "Lycidas." "Lycidas" is an elegy upon the death of Edward King, an acquaintance of Milton's at Cambridge, who met an early death by drowning in the Irish sea. The poem begins

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more,  
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

Try reading this aloud, putting as much feeling as you can into it. Note how slowly you are forced to go by the rhythmic pattern which the poet has chosen to use. The first line, by virtue of its spondaic nature, sets the deliberate, measured beat of a funeral march. There are ten syllables in the line, and eight of them are stressed syllables. It is impossible to hurry or go lightly over this line. In the fourth line the back-to-back placement of two stressed syllables beginning with the same fricative—"forced fingers"—bumps the reader almost to a halt.

The fifth line begins with a trochee—"shatter"—a foot of two syllables in which the accented syllable stands first. After this first foot Milton finishes the line in the iambic meter which dominates the poem. Why the rather dramatic departure in this first foot from his prevailing rhythmic pattern? I think it safe to assume that it is because here he wants the sense of a blow that fragments something—first the impact, then the falling fragments. And this is the sense of the trochee—first the accented, then the unstressed syllable. Edward King died young and unexpectedly. There was the blow, the fragmentation, and then life sadly resumed its normal rhythm.

Are we reading too much into this? Would Milton himself be surprised that he meant all this? There is some solid evidence that he wouldn't. The manuscript of "Lycidas" still exists. In it we find that Milton first wrote the beginning of this line, "And crop your young leaves . . ." He crossed this out and substituted the present reading, "Shatter your leaves." In other words, the change from the prevailing iambic pattern was deliberate, and while it would be foolish to suppose that he went through any step by step reasoning process in affecting the change (he probably simply tried it out on his ear), it certainly is not foolish to reason out why the rhythm of the present reading is more effective.

While we have the opening line of "Lycidas" before us, it might be well to look at some sound effects other than those directly involving

meter. Listen to the deep vowel sound *o* in the first line. Note how Milton draws out this mournful sound by coupling it with the continuants *r* and *m* in the word *more*. (Edgar Allan Poe thought that the word *nevermore* is the longest word in the English language; so he used it as a refrain in “The Raven.”) Note his use of repetition to further establish the mournfulness.

Listen to the thin wailing sound of *sere* and *year*. Here he has gone up the scale in vowel sounds, and again he prolongs the effect by his use of the continuant *r*. Listen to the harshness of the repeated *k* sound in the third line and the rough, hoarse breathiness of the “forced fingers rude” in the fourth line as he speaks of the rude shock of Edward King’s early death. These five lines are a symphony of sound effect adding feeling to the sense.

Another avenue by which poetry makes its appeal to the ear is rhyme. This is an avenue closed to prose, which does, of course, use rhythm and onomatopoeia. In the history of poetry rhyme has been in fashion and out of fashion. At the moment it is out of fashion and generally regarded as “square” by the poets now in business. It will return to favor, naturally, as it is a legitimate and powerful instrument for making the poetic impact.

On a rather obvious—and somewhat humorous—level take this passage from Thomas Love Peacock’s “The War-Song of Dinas Vawr”:

The mountain sheep are sweeter,  
But the valley sheep are fatter;  
We therefore deemed it meet  
To carry off the latter.

Here through a combination of rhyme and onomatopoeia Peacock gives the attentive ear the sound of musketry fire—or at least that’s what he said he was doing.

By combining masculine rhyme (rhyme on a single syllable) with feminine rhyme (rhyme on more than one syllable, of which only one is stressed) the poet may give a poem a lingering haunting effect, as Thomas Hood does in his “The Bridge of Sighs,” a lament over the suicide by drowning of a young London prostitute:

One more unfortunate,  
Weary of breath,  
Rashly importunate,  
Gone to her death! . . .  
The bleak wind of March

Made her tremble and shiver;  
 But not the dark arch  
 Or the black flowing river: . . .

In the lines from "Lycidas" examined earlier note how Milton shortens the fourth line so that its sixth syllable rhymes with the tenth syllable of the preceding line. In other words, he hurries the rhyme in almost awkwardly, which adds to the keenness of our apprehension that Edward King's death was untimely.

Even the lack of an expected rhyme has its effect in "Lycidas." The poem is in rhyme, but the first line stands out as an exception—it does not rhyme with anything. It is as if we had broken into the middle of a continuum, unexpectedly, as the continuity of Edward King's life was broken by accidental death.\*

Alliteration, another appeal which poetry makes to the ear, is much the same thing as rhyme. It is rhyme on the initial rather than on the terminal sounds of words. In old English poetry alliteration and accent followed various set patterns and were the main properties in the poet's technical equipment.

Alliteration is strong seasoning, and may easily overwhelm its own effectiveness. Sometimes, of course, it is overused on purpose, usually with overtones of humor. We have, for example, Alexander Pope's sardonic

See Sin in state, majestically drunk;  
 Proud as a peeress, prouder as a punk;

from *Epistle II. To a Lady*. And we have Vice President Agnew's also sardonic "nattering nabobs of negativism."

But there is no purpose, only indiscretion, in Algernon Charles Swinburne's "The lilies and languors of virtue; the roses and raptures of vice." Here alliteration beguiles the reader away from the sense and the total effectiveness of the poem, rather than reinforcing it.

One of the most beautiful examples of the use of alliteration for poetic impact is in "Lyric 7" of Lord Tennyson's elegy *In Memoriam A. H. H.* *In Memoriam* is a book of lyrics which constitute a continuing record of Tennyson's crushing grief over the death of his

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\* I think we may disregard the offering of a graduate student at the University of Michigan, who answered immediately when Professor Humphreys inquired, "What does line one rhyme with?" He piped up, "Line fifty-eight." "That left me wondering," Professor Humphreys told me later, "whether some ears might carry the echo of a sound for fifty-six intervening lines. The student was a music major."

closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Hallam, who was Tennyson's constant companion at Cambridge and in travels after college, and was engaged to be married to Tennyson's sister, had died at the age of twenty-two, plunging Tennyson into despair.

In "Lyric 7" he tells how during a long night of sleepless agony he arose and walked through the streets of London in a drizzling rain until he came to the dark house where Hallam had lived. It was night still when he arrived, and he was there when dawn came.

And ghastly through the drizzling rain  
On the bald street breaks the blank day."

The thudding of the *b*'s in the second line falls like hammer blows upon the ear and the heart of the sensitive and sympathetic reader.

As we saw Milton do in his elegy "Lycidas," Tennyson also uses spondees to give this line its unbearably deliberate pace. Five of the eight syllables that make up the second line are accented. And, of course, there is also the harshness of the *k* sound, as in Milton's "I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude . . ."

A much more delicate and more subtle appeal to the ear than alliteration is assonance, a repetition of vowel sounds, with different consonants accompanying them, in the stressed syllables of lines. A stanza from "The Cuckoo Song," a thirteenth century English lyric, is a good example of assonance and a bit of proof that earlier poetry made its primary appeal to the ear.

Sumer is i-cumen in—  
Lhude sing, cuccu!  
Groweth sed, and bloweth med  
And springth the wude nu.  
Sing, cuccu!\*

In his description of the waterfalls in the land of the Lotus-Eaters Tennyson makes rich use of assonance on the deep *O* sound:

A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,  
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;  
And some through wavering lights and shadows broke,  
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.

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\*Translated:

Summer is come in—  
Sing loudly, cuckoo!  
The seed grows, and the meadow blows  
And sprouts the new wood.  
Sing, cuckoo!

Here Tennyson couples assonance with play upon the continuant *M* and *N* sounds, which gives the passage its sonority and its almost somniferous pace.

Rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance—all of these are appeals to the ear, not to the eye and not to the intellect, although, of course, they may reinforce the appeal to the intellect. They are part of what Hazlitt, an early nineteenth century English critic, meant when he said, “A poem is more than the sum of its meanings.” They are part of poetry’s primary appeal—to the ear.

Perhaps there is more wisdom than one might think in the verses which a long forgotten Michigan “poetess,” Julia A. Moore, used to preface her book of poems, *A Sentimental Song Book*:

Come all good people, far and near,  
Oh, come and see what you can hear.