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Using Music to Teach the Sounds of Poetry:

Some User-Friendly Advice for the Non-Musician

JAYME STAYER

"My verse is less to be read than heard..."

—Gerard Manley Hopkins¹

In his numerous interviews and essays, Donald Hall often notes that we spend too much time talking about what poetry says instead of how it sounds. "In teaching poetry," Hall argues, "we tend to glorify something we call *meaning*, and this glorification omits the real body of the poem."² Parsing the elaborate conceits of a Donne sonnet is more intellectually satisfying than discussing the sounds, rhythms, and music of poetry. We seem to feel we haven't done our jobs as teachers until we've given students a paraphrasable meaning of a poem. But a paraphrase—as the New Critics were always hissing—violates the very integrity of what makes a poem an interesting aesthetic object.

Hall's suggestion that we spend more time valorizing the sounds of poetry begs a question: how can we do so convincingly with students who are not English majors? The basic terms of fiction—plot, character, action, scene, setting—are terms that students are comfortable using because such terms not only apply to eighteenth century novels but to movies, sitcoms, and music videos. However, the basic terms of poetry—iamb, dactyl, tetrameter—

might as well be Greek to students; the proliferation of such technicalities can make the study of poetry seem dry and intimidating. I have found that not only do students—even English majors—avoid poetry, but even some who teach literature steer clear of poetry, preferring to teach fiction, novels, essays, theory, and criticism.

I will offer some suggestions here that address both the gap in our teaching of poetic sounds and the fears and prejudices of students. While I do foist, unapologetically, the entire apparatus of poetic terminology on my students, my use of music to reinforce such concepts is supplemental and non-technical. In fact, much of my use of music in the Introduction to Literature classroom has less to do with actually listening to CDs, and more to do with talking about what my students already know about music, and then applying that knowledge to poetry.

Using Music to Introduce Poetry

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“memorable speech” and believe that the reason why poetry is memorable is more because of its sounds than because of its content. Students cannot recite the Bill of Rights or the Gettysburg Address, aside from a phrase or two, but they can hum hundreds of tunes and

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repeat lots of lyrics. And the rare students who *can* recite the preamble to the *Constitution* are able to do so because they learned the melody to which *School House Rock* set it. To bring these points into relief, near the beginning of the semester I give my students a non-graded, four-part quiz to push them to think of the musicality—the “hear-able-ness”—of poetry.

First, I give them the opening lines of a few nursery rhymes, such as “Peas Porridge Hot” and “Mary

Had a Little Lamb,” for which they must supply the final lines. For the second part of the quiz, I give them the opening “Once upon a time,” and ask them to write out the rest of the first sentence of the Cinderella story. For the third section, I ask them to write out as many lines of poetry as they can remember, deliberately declining to define the word “poetry” for them. Fourth question: I ask students if they like poetry, and to explain why or why not.

Usually, even students who haven’t heard or spoken nursery rhymes for many years are still able to recall the exact wording of the final lines of “Peas Porridge Hot” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” But they stumble, predictably, on the prose sentence that begins their preferred version of the Cinderella story, though they are as familiar with that fairy tale as with “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” The third section—write out poems you know—most students leave blank, though some are able to produce a garbled line of Robert Frost or Shakespeare. Students rarely, if ever, write out the lyrics to songs they know; they are skeptical that song or rap lyrics or Dr. Seuss would “count” as poetry. For the last question—do

they like poetry?—an emphatic *no* is the usual response.

The results of this quiz then serve as a springboard for discussion about many issues, some music-related, some not. The issues related to music include: poetry as historically rooted in an oral (and aural), rather than written tradition; poetry as historically based in song; popular music vs. highbrow poetry; the definition of the word “lyric”; why much poetry is more memorable—and memorizable—than prose; and the irrelevance of clear “meaning” for a poem. Students who remember that the peas porridge is “nine days old” have no idea what porridge is, nor do they care what the poem is “saying”; the point of the poem seems to be the rhythmic urge underlying its relentless thumping.

The quiz and discussion are useful exercises because they get a number of important issues on the table early in the semester, enable me to straighten out some misconceptions, and suggest to students that they might have an instinct for poetry. Most of all, students begin to recognize that poetry is poetry because, like music, it revels in its sounds.

Using Music to Teach Scansion

The scanning of poetry never fails to baffle my undergraduates, even those who are English majors. I’ve polled my students every semester, and would guess that only 20 percent have actually scanned poetry; of those students, practically none can still do it, or they’re playing possum in hopes that I’ll drop the matter.

Scansion is a necessarily artificial and limited way of teaching the rhythms of language, and if my polling is any indication of what goes on in high schools, then scanning poetry is probably considered as *démodé* as diagramming sentences. Among its many limitations, traditional scanning procedures only divide the English language into stressed and unstressed syllables, whereas real speech patterns can be parsed in more complicated ways. And teaching the technique requires some lecturing and patience on the part of the teacher, and is less pedagogically appealing than a discussion of a poem’s meaning.

However, since many undergraduates are unsure where the stress lies in the word “beautiful” (some are unsure that the word has three syllables), I am convinced that they need to be taught the crude basics if we intend them to hear the subtler variations.

I find that while most college level literature anthologies offer unobjectionable definitions of scansion and its terms, few adequately explain a procedure by which the uninitiated can begin to tackle a line of poetry. Preparatory to introducing my own rules, I explain the purpose of scanning and define a list of terms specific to scansion (dactyl, iamb, foot, meter, etc.).

Rules for Proceeding:

RULE #1: When scanning, generally follow the natural stresses of polysyllabic words. I guarantee you that there is no poem in the English language that would ever require you to pronounce the word “HAP-py” as “hap-PY.” When in doubt about a multi-syllable word’s stress, use a dictionary. Or— even easier—shout out the syllable you think should be stressed, and mutter the unstressed ones. If you’re wrong, the word will be unrecognizable.

RULE #2: Iambic is the most common pattern of poetry in English, so look for iambs when in doubt, particularly when scanning a run of single-syllable words.

RULE #3: When you come across a difficult passage, skip it and move to the next line until you’ve found a pattern.

RULE #4: When you resume analysis of that difficult passage, coerce, flatter, cajole—but **DO NOT FORCE**—the line into that regular pattern you’ve found in the rest of the line or poem.

RULE # 5: Once you have marked the stressed and unstressed syllables, go back and divide the line into feet.

With these rules in front of us, at the board I will scan some easy (regularly iambic) lines of poetry with students following me and giving input. Then I have them work on their own on

a poem that is set to a melody they know. I have tried using “America the Beautiful,” but its melody creates too many problems. Its slow speed obscures students’ sense of where the accents would naturally fall; so instead of recognizing the regular iambs of the speech pattern (o BEAU ti FUL for SPA cious SKIES), students were hearing the elongated melody and downbeat stresses (OOOO BEAU-TI-FUL FOR SPA cious skies). I have more luck with “The Star Spangled Banner.” The anapestic rhythm of the words is mirrored in the melody, enabling students to hear that rhythm more clearly: o-o SAY can you SEE by the DAWN’S ear-ly LIGHT / what so PROUD-ly we HAILED at the TWI-light’s last GLEAM-ing. With the single exception of the word “early” (both syllables unstressed here, rather than its natural speech pattern: EAR-ly), the natural stresses of all the other polysyllabic words work with the anapestic pattern of the poem.

Using Music to Teach Rhyme, Alliteration, and Assonance

My subtitle is a little misleading: I actually use music to solidify, rather than introduce the related concepts of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. After we’ve spent some weeks identifying these effects in poems, I send them home with a worksheet on which I have written out, in paragraph form, the lyrics to a song, such as Cole Porter’s “I Get a Kick Out of You,” or some other Porter, Gershwin, or Hart song whose lyrics are filled with wit and word play but whose melody students are not likely to have heard before. Their job is to read the lyrics and divide the song into line breaks; without listening to any recording of the song to help them. Students must also separate their lines into recognizable stanzas; finally, once the words are rewritten to look like a poem, students are to write out the rhyme scheme in the margin, and identify any alliteration (similar consonant sounds) and assonance (similar vowel sounds) they find.³

The irregular line-lengths and multiple internal rhymes of the Porter lyric make the students’ job of determining line breaks a sub-

jective matter. When I split them into groups the next day to compare answers, the point is not to get them to agree to a right answer, but to notice how their differing answers highlight different elements of the word play in the song: what is an end-rhyme to some is an internal rhyme to others.

Then I play the song for them. What students generally miss—until they've heard the melody—is how the song toys with vowel sounds. For example, most students on their homework sheet will have divided the following words into three separate lines: "Flying too high / with some guy in the sky / is my idea of nothing to do." Here, their line breaks tell me that they have noticed that "high" and "sky" are part of their official (end) rhyme scheme, and that therefore "guy/sky" would be called an internal rhyme. But most students notice no assonance. After hearing the melody, however, they pick up rather easily on those effects they missed in their silent reading of the poem. Whereas before, they correctly—if merely—read *guy/high/sky* as rhymes, they now hear how the assonance of the /a+i/ diphthong supplements in a subtler way those more obvious rhyming effects. And who could miss them, hearing Ethel Merman belt out: "Fliiiiiighing too hiiiiigh with some guuuuuuy in the skyyyyyy is myyyy iiiiidee of nothing to do"? This line, with its concatenation of vowels, is a good one for demonstrating that rhyme and assonance are related, rather than distinct concepts. Students, after all, do not hear in this line three examples of rhyme and three of assonance; all they hear is a delightful blur of /a+i/s tyyyyyy the liiiiiine together. Another effect which the melody unearths for students is buried in the lines: "I'm sure that if I took even one sniff, that would bore me terrifically too." Students will have recognized the *if/sniff* rhyme, but on hearing the melody, the cunning rhyme of *if/sniff/ terrIF-ically* will assert itself to their surprise.

Another bonus of this assignment is that it covertly reinforces the concepts of stanza form and enjambment. For several semesters now, the same miracle has occurred in my class, and I attribute it to this assignment I've just explained. At the beginning of the semester,

most students will read a line of poetry under the assumption that the grammar halts with the end of every line. For example, I have been teaching a Millay sonnet that begins: "I, being born a woman and distressed / By all the needs and notions of my kind, / Am urged [...]." Reading that first line, many students assume that the speaker is merely "distressed" in a general way. I point out that the speaker is not vaguely "distressed," but is "distressed / *By* all the needs...." But adverting to this effect (often) and labeling it (enjambment) are not sufficient to solve the problem. Bright students catch on, but average students continue to understand individual lines as self-contained.

However, after finishing this worksheet exercise—which forces students to grapple with the sounds and rhymes of a poem whose formal layout is initially obscured—I have noticed that this problem disappears. Because this assignment asks them to make sense of the grammar of the poem—what it's saying—and *then* asks them to put line breaks in, it therefore clarifies what they had been ignoring or dimly intuiting: meaning and syntax can proceed independently of a poem's line breaks or stanzas.

Concluding Thoughts

If all of the practices outlined above fail to get the sounds of poetry rolling around in a student's head, then I have one final, foolproof method: the memorization quiz. The antediluvian practice of rote memorization is universally condemned as bad pedagogy, yet I would argue that in a poetry class, memorization is a very enlightened practice. Some of the best poets and critics have memorized poetry and encouraged others to do so as well: T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Helen Vendler, to name a few. I require memorization in any course that substantially involves poetry; students have the option of recitation or writing it out. Non-majors in my introductory courses must memorize 28 lines (2 sonnets, or 28 lines of some longer poem); for majors I require 50 lines. And for anyone who complains, I tell them that W. H. Auden used to require his undergraduates to memorize six cantos of Dante:

over 600 lines.⁴ I encourage students to memorize a love poem or a poem about friendship rather than the poem with the shortest lines. Shouldn't every human being have a long song on the tip of the tongue?

Many students memorize poems that they analyzed in their papers, and some have reported that they understood their poems better—and differently—as a result of having memorized it, which is exactly the point of the exercise. Memorization gets the words into our bones in a way that even repeated readings and analysis do not. I emphasize the value of the exercise by reciting, throughout the semester, a few of the poems I have memorized.

Ultimately, if you believe as passionately as I do that poetry must ring in students' ears, then the best paradigm is the teacher's own recitation. I am so fanatical about this point that every discussion of a poem begins with a full recitation of the entire poem. Because of the constant threat of pop quizzes in my class, students are almost always well-prepared, with unfamiliar words looked up and specific questions written down. Hence, my own or a student's recitation prior to discussion refreshes and clarifies rather than introduces the poem. Full recitation takes up a lot of class time, but the point of such an introductory class is not to drag students through a multitude of poems, but to teach students strategies for making poems come alive.

Reading a love poem as if it really *were* a love poem to an audience of sarcastic business majors requires some risk, not the least of which is the temptation to self-aggrandize—ment, or worse, the teaching of poetry modeled on the ghastly cult of *Dead Poets Society*—romanticizing the nebulous “feeling” response to poetry and condescending to the analysis of it. I find it deeply problematic that this movie—and others like it—popularize the image of English teachers as tweedy, loveable sorts who inspire self-expression in students by standing on desks and clutching copies of *Walden* to their hearts. The insidious and unacknowledged consequence of such a pedagogy is that it marginalizes the unenthusiastic, which cements their resistance rather than brings them closer to witnessing at the altar call of

poetry, as Hollywood would have it. Put in its bluntest terms, such a pedagogy separates students into two categories: the “sensitive” and the “insensitive” (or the saved and the damned), which, when the metaphysical hokum is cleared away, reveals the categories to be the brown-nosers vs. the skeptics who refuse to fake an emotion.

But such dangers noted, I remember the effect a convincing recitation had on me in a high school English class, and so I have stolen it from my former teacher: I have shocked students with my classroom rendition of e.e. cummings' short poem on the death of Buffalo Bill. I speed through the fast lines, shout out the exclamation (“Jesus!”), and whisper the final lines, with raised eyebrow and accusatory smirk: “how do you like your blueeyed boy / Mister Death?” This is an intentionally overdone performance—I have earned spontaneous applause for it—but it brings home a point better than any worksheet or lecture. The poem is a lament and a curse, and it has to be shouted and moaned in those tones, not in the flat monotone with which students generally

read. Since I assign the poem for homework before springing my rendition on them, they are startled at the contrast between the collection of word-gibberish they read for homework and the performance they hear. It shows them that they read the poem the wrong way: their mistake was not in misunderstanding the meaning of the poem, but in failing to imagine its sounds.

Sometimes I can get students to take such risks in their own recitations of poems. My students and I were rewarded one day when a student volunteered to read a poem aloud, asking first if he could read it the way I would read it. Why not? I shrugged. He did not get past the

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first two words—roundly oratorical, passionately quivering—before the class had exploded in laughter. I would like to think he was parodying, not imitating me, but I was thrilled rather than embarrassed to know that my students might connect poetry with living sounds rather than inert, incomprehensible words.

Notes

1. Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. 4th ed. Eds. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie. New York: Oxford UP, 1970. 257.
2. Hall, Donald. *Goatfoot Milk tongue Twinbird: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry, 1970-1976*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1978. 49.
3. As with many assumptions of this pedagogical piece, I realize that I've simplified definitions. The genre of poetry cannot only be defined by its sounds, as I imply here. And my simplistic contrast between alliteration as consonant clusters and

assonance as similar vowel sounds is both inaccurate and inadequate. However, if I can get all of my non-English-major sophomores up to the level to which this article aspires, I will have done much for the cause of poetry. If these sophomores turn into English majors, then I can complicate their use of these terms in my upper-level courses.

4. For the story of Auden's astonishing requirement, and his students' and colleagues' futile attempts to force a change of policy, see Dorothy J. Farnan's *Auden in Love*. New York: Meridian, 1985. 73-77.

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