



Awakening the Dionysian Nerve

Bringing Poems off the Page and into the Body

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“We speak of memorizing as getting something ‘by heart,’ which really means ‘by head.’ But getting a poem or prose passage truly ‘by heart’ implies getting it by mind and memory and understanding and delight.”

—John Hollander

IMAGINE TAKING A MUSIC CLASS in which you are required to read the scores to music but never actually listen to music. Too often, this is what is done in the classroom when students are asked to read poetry. Remember your eighth-grade teacher telling you to turn to page 563 of your textbook and read a poem by Emily Dickinson, then answer the questions that follow? You did as you were told, closed the book, and the poem was gone forever. Memorizing and saying poems aloud, however, allows students not only to hear poems but also to experience them, learning *how* a poem means as opposed to *what* a poem means.

The best way to understand poetry is to experience it. This goes against the traditional approach

of dissection and analysis, but memorization opens complex emotional pathways in the psyche, and, as Lucio Mariani says, “allows the Dionysian nerve hidden in each of us to surface and become stimulated so that [we] get to have the admittedly difficult but extraordinary experience of knowing a poem directly.” As John Ciardi and Miller Williams write in their landmark book *How Does a Poem Mean?* “The common question from which an approach begins is ‘what does the poem mean?’” In response, they write, “the reader tends to ‘interpret’ the poem rather than to experience it.”

The pianist will tell us that the arrangement of notes on the page is not the music. “The music,” he will say, “is this...” at which point he will begin to play. The same is true for poetry. That is, the little black marks we call letters that we organize into words are like music notes; they are only notations for how the poem is to be spoken (or sung, as the case may be). The thing on the page we call a poem is no different than the score to a piece of music.

Bringing the poem off the page and into the body, not merely opening a book and reading it, is essential if we are to understand the poem. Paul Valéry compares it to looking at a photo of a stained-glass window as opposed to standing before the window itself and basking in its brilliant colors.

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Here are some things to consider when memorizing and reciting a poem:

Silence

Any composer will tell us that silence is equally as important as the notes. The same is true in poetry. This is why we have line breaks and stanza breaks. It is important to honor the silence in poetry.

As we speak we are breathing out or exhaling. Li-Young Lee calls this the “dying breath.” When “the breath dies,” says Lee, “meaning is born.” When we inhale it is impossible to speak. Inspiration comes in this silence, in the breath, of a poem. The word inspire comes from the Latin *spirare*, “to breathe,” which is also the root of “spirit.”

So, what to do with line breaks and stanza breaks? No two line breaks and no two stanza breaks are treated exactly the same. In other words, there is not a set length of time one should pause at the end of a line. It will vary according to the poem in question. Again, with practice and attention the poem will inform you how it is to be said. Denise Levertov, in her essay “On the Function of the Line,” muses that the rhythm of a poem depends on “a sense of a pulse, a pulse behind the words.”

To get a feel for this “sense of pulse behind the words,” try this second stanza from “To a Poor Old Woman” by William Carlos Williams (she is eating plums):

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

When you pause according to the “pulse behind the words,” more emphasis falls on the word or phrase that begins the next line. Notice how the nuance of meaning shifts:

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

Wendy Bishop, in her guide to writing poetry, *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem*, invites us to consider the way Sharon Olds breaks her lines in the following poem, “The One Girl at the Boys’ Party.” Here are the first six lines:

When I take my girl to the swimming party
I set her down among the boys. They tower and
bristle, she stands there smooth and sleek,
her math scores unfolding in the air around her.
They will strip to their suits, her body hard and
indivisible as a prime number . . .

Bishop suggests that you read the poem aloud several times and asks, “What do you make of (and how do you read) the several lines ending on ‘and’—a coordinating conjunction that some poets feel does not belong at the focal point of a line break?” It is a good question that gets the reader thinking about the line and line breaks.

Sound

When we speak we emphasize or de-emphasize certain words in order to express what we are trying to convey. In linguistics this is called “prosody,” the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech. To get a feel for the sound of words, we must forget for a moment what words mean, what they symbolize. Imagine a graphic equalizer on your stereo. Notice how the bars move up and down with the music. Now imagine if you had one to represent your speech patterns. Let us take the first line of Mary Oliver’s “The Summer Day.”

Who made the world?

By stressing and de-stressing words, this line could take on varying shades of meaning. There are at least four. Listen:

Who made the world?

suggests that we are interested in the maker of the world.

Who *made* the world?

suggests that we are interested in the making of the world.

Who made *the* world?

suggests that it is this world that we are focused on and not some other world.

Who made *the world*?

suggests that it is the world we are interested in and not the heavens, for example. Of course this is the most basic illustration because more than likely we would stress more than one word in a line and un-stress certain other words. For example:

Who *made* the world?

There is also a rhythm to be found moving line to line, down the page. Try saying aloud the first stanza of “On the Yard” by Etheridge Knight a few times and listen to how it commands a certain rhythm down the page.

A slim
young fascist
fresh from the Hole
slid into me
murdered me
with his eyes
and said, “Man,
why ain’t you
doing something?”

Poems are living and breathing creatures. The way a poem feels right one day may not feel right the next. The way you say a poem to an audience of strangers will probably be different than the way you would say the same poem to loved ones around the kitchen table. Also, the way you say a poem may not sound the way someone else says the same poem. This does not mean that one is correct while the other is incorrect. To compare this to music again, let us take Bach’s cello suites. Listen to recordings by Mstislav Rostropovich alongside Pablo Casals, Janos Starker, Yo-Yo Ma, Mischa Maisky, and Maria Kliegel. Although each cellist is playing the same piece, each

will have a uniquely different sound. Musicians say that cellists “speak” the suites. Some will be warmer or more soulful while others may sound more stolid and mathematical. Yet they are all looking at the same score and “interpreting” the piece according to his or her unique sensibility.

The poem is not what is on the page. Poetry is organic, alive. We should let the poems we read speak through us. Poems, if allowed to inform us, should not need theatrics to heighten the experience. Once we have become comfortable with the practice of memorizing and saying poems, the poems’ meanings and nuances start to reveal themselves to us. Through this practice we develop a sort of aesthetic emotion that allows us to embrace the totality of the work while at the same time being aware of its details. Bringing the poem off the page and into the body, not merely opening a book and reading it on the page, is analogous to Gary Snyder’s remark on language: “To see a wren in a bush, call it ‘wren,’ and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel ‘wren’—that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world.” ☺

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