



The Music in Poetry

by **Kenneth Koch**

Music can make us do what it wants.

—Pythagoras

Poetry searches for music amidst the tumult of the dictionary.

—Boris Pasternak

IT'S HARD TO SAY IF THE MUSIC OF POETRY creates the emotion in a poem, or if it is the poet's emotion that creates the music. Probably both are true. The intention to write with music, and the fact of doing so, are likely to put the writer in a state in which any emotions present have a good chance of coming out. It's a well-known quality of music that it can get to feelings very fast; and when a person writes, it can deepen and color whatever is there to be said. There have been poets who wrote poems while listening to music—but usually they

are just finding their own, in the words they write. This music is the most essential part of the "translation" a poet makes from ordinary to poetic language.

The music of words is usually not easy to hear, if hearable at all, in conversation or in expository prose. There are, however, ways of using words that make the music heard, that can make the music so audible that it's not possible to ignore it. Sentences or phrases that seemed merely workaday, practical, and even drab, when rearranged slightly, may begin to sing—to have notes, tones, and colors. In the sentence "May I open a window to make it cooler for us all?" one doesn't hear much music. By using various kinds of repetition, "poetry language" can bring out the so-far-unheard music that is there:

KENNETH KOCH is the author of many books on teaching poetry, including *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, *Sleeping on the Wing*, and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* The most recent books of his own poetry are *One Train* and *On the Great Atlantic Rainway: Selected Poems 1950–1988*. A new book of poems, *Straits*, will be out this May. He is Professor of English at Columbia University.

NATIONAL POETRY MONTH ISSUE

- I** **The Music in Poetry**
by Kenneth Koch
- II** **Suggested National Poetry**
Month Activities

May I open—
It's hot here—
A window,
And then
How cool
It will be
For us all!

Suddenly the sound similarity of *open* and *window* can be heard, and of *cool* and *all*; and the line divisions and the rhythm make us hear other musics as well. And by the music's becoming audible, the meaning of the passage is somewhat changed: it's no longer so much a request as a communication of experience—of heat, of coolness, of desire, of a certain kind of day. In the original prose sentence the prose meaning charges straight ahead. By means of repetitions, the poetry version keeps this from happening.

Putting together phrases that sound more or less the same to you, that you could dance to in same way, is an easy way to start up a regular rhythm:

Did anybody call today?
Was any time decided on?
Does anybody know?

Something similar can be seen in bodily movement. Raising your right leg once to walk forward probably means you are going somewhere, perhaps to the door, and the gesture (raising the leg) passes unnoticed. But if you raise your leg in precisely the same way a few times more, it becomes noticeable—and you are probably not walking but dancing.

Line Division

Line division is a part of rhythm. It establishes the place where the rhythm temporarily stops. It helps to determine in fact what the rhythm is, by means of the stop—or what in music is called a “rest”—that it creates. “O my luv'e's like a red, / Red rose” has a different rhythm from that of “O my luv'e's like a red, red rose.” Lines can divide statements up in a balancing and rhetorical way,

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing
Drink deep or taste not of the Pierian spring
(Alexander Pope, “Essay on Criticism”)

or in an unsettling way,

moving a perhaps
fraction of flower here placing
(e. e. cummings, “Spring is like a perhaps hand”)

or they can give an apparent (rhythmical) order to jagged and unconnected statements:

To employ her
Construction ball
Morning fed on the
(John Ashbery, “Europe”)

As far as prose sense is concerned, line divisions are an interruption for no reason. Ordinary English, unlike music, doesn't include “rests” except those necessary for understanding the prose sense of what is said: these are indicated by punctuation marks. Line breaks cause stops the way periods and commas do, but, instead of being necessary for sense, they draw attention to tone and sound. In doing so, they make a different kind of sense: poetic sense. The fact that they are interruptions is what they are all about. Reading, and having to stop, one becomes more conscious of the words as things in themselves. For example, if I put line breaks in part of what I've just said, I get:

One becomes
More conscious
Of the words

Here, because of the line breaks, I feel—as I didn't before—the pleasantly similar sounds of *becomes* and *conscious* and also the repetition and variations of the rhythm:

da da DUM / da DUM da / da da DUM

One beCOMES / more CONscious / of the WORDS

It's a music that is tempting to go on with: “One becomes / More conscious / Of the words / When one looks / At a person / One has loved / For a long, long time / And one knows / That one is saying / What one should / Have said a long / Time before....” In my original sentence, I was aware neither of the music of the words I was writing nor of any sort of poetic promise in them—certainly no love story. But the hesitations caused by the line breaks resulted in my speaking in a way I speak when I am unhappy, and this seemed to lead inevitably to my speaking of something sad.

Meter

Rhythm can be metrical or non-metrical. Metrical means that the rhythm is to a great degree regular and fixed: a pattern is already set and waiting for the poet to use, a pattern of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables like the da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM in which Christopher Marlowe wrote “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”:

A *BELT* of *STRAW* and *Ivy BUDS*
With *CORal CLASPS* and *AMber STUDS*

or the unrhymed iambic pentameter line (which goes da *DUM* da *DUM* da *DUM* da *DUM* da *DUM*, having one more da *DUM* than Marlowe's lines) that Shakespeare used in his plays:

But *SOFT!* what *LIGHT* through *YONder WINDOW*
BREAKS?

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

Writing in meter, the poet chooses a pattern and stays in it. The beauty of the music meter makes comes from the slight variations that are made on the regular beat.

Meters are identified by two characteristics: the kind of stress pattern they have and the number of times this pattern is repeated in each line. Or, you could say, by the kind of metrical unit and the number of these units in the line. Each unit contains one stressed syllable and usually one, and less often two, unstressed syllables. These units are called feet. The number of words is irrelevant: "feet" are about syllables. The word *good-bye* is a foot and is pronounced da *DUM*. There are different kinds of feet, depending on where the stressed syllable comes and how many other syllables there are. The most common foot in English poetry is called an iamb or iambic foot. *Good-bye* is an iamb, as is the phrase "as if," an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. A line composed of da *DUMs* is an iambic line. The word *baby*—a *DUM* da, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one—is a trochee. Less frequently used feet include the anapest—under*NEATH*, after*NOON*, da da *DUM*—and the dactyl—*HOL*iday, *SEM*inar, *DUM* da da. Words like *afternoon* and *seminar* may be made part of iambic or trochaic lines by placing them so that there is an expected stress on their more lightly stressed syllables, *AFT* and *NAR*:

This afternoon we'll hold a seminar
This *AFTerNOON* we'll *HOLD* a *SEMiNAR*

That is to say, depending on the metrical pattern set up, *afternoon* can be pronounced after*NOON*, as in "In the long afternoon underneath the arcades," or *AFTerNOON*, as in "This afternoon we'll hold a seminar." It can't ever be pronounced after*TER*noon; that pronunciation makes the word unrecognizable.

Familiar phrases also have a meter to begin with: "in *LOVE*," for example, is iambic, as is "worn *OUT*." "*KISS* me" is usually trochaic. What you mean to say of course can change their pattern:

For I am *IN* love and not *OUT* of love.

An iambic line doesn't have to be composed of iambic words or phrases, but of iambic feet, which may include parts of non-iambic words. In Romeo's "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks," both *yonder* and *window* are trochaic but fit into the iambic pattern of the phrasing—the "feet" they're part of are "through *YON*" and "der *WIN*."

Most lines of English metrical poetry have from three to five feet. A line with three feet is called trimeter, and a line with three iambic feet is called iambic trimeter:

My heart keeps open house,
My doors are widely swung
(Theodore Roethke, "Open House")

A line with four iambic feet is iambic tetrameter:

Had we but world enough, and time
This coyness, lady, were no crime
(Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress")

with five, iambic pentameter:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now...
(Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess")

with six feet, an alexandrine:

Fool, said my muse to me, look in thy heart and write
(Sir Phillip Sydney, "Astrophel and Stella")

Seven-foot lines, called fourteeners because of their fourteen syllables, haven't been used much since the Renaissance:

Well (quoth Apollo) since my Peere and Spouse thou
can not bee,
Assuredly from this time forth yet shalt thou be my
tree
(Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, tr. Golding)

The secret of writing well in meter—and of reading it well—is being aware of the two kinds of rhythm of any metrical line: the imposed metrical rhythm and the natural speech rhythm—which isn't eliminated, but simply modified, by the meter. One doesn't want the natural rhythm to be lost, or the line will sound "stilted" and stiff and deprived of the emotion there is in natural speech. One also wishes to keep the elevation and force and elegance that the metrical music can bring with it. So one writes—and reads—hearing both rhythms, in a way, at the same time.

When the natural rhythm seems to *be* the main rhythm and the metrical rhythm is mostly unheard (seeming to

give no more than slight highlights to the natural rhythm), one may have something especially effective and beautiful, as, for example, in Prospero's lines to Ferdinand:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air...

(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*)

When this kind of meter (unrhymed iambic pentameter, also called blank verse) first came into English poetry, it had no such beautiful variety, subtlety, and nuance, and often sounded mechanical and robotic. Natural speech rhythm seemed blocked by stresses too mechanically regular:

Your wonted true regard of faithful hearts
Makes me, O king, the bolder to resume,
To speak what I conceive within my breast
Although the same do not agree at all
With that which other here my lords have said
Nor which yourself have seemed best to like

(Sackville & Norton, *Gorboduc*)

This is meter defeating speech in the sense of keeping it from expressing feeling. It needs variations—and maybe something like Shakespeare's genius—to lift it up.

Blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) has been the standard English meter for plays and for narrative poems. In the ways it has changed, it's a good example of how the poetry language itself changes, how in different epochs it puts different kinds of music in poets' heads. At first, blank verse was often clumsy and mechanical, as in the above *Gorboduc* example. It wasn't much of a pleasure to say aloud. Marlowe created a blank verse line that was at the same time speechlike, elevated, and melodious:

And ride in triumph through Persepolis

(*Tamburlaine*)

Marlowe also invented—or at least perfected—a way of harmoniously joining together a series of blank verse lines (a “verse paragraph”) so that a whole passage had a unifying music, the way a lyric poem does. Shakespeare, who was happily influenced in his blank verse by Marlowe, added to what Marlowe had done.

One thing Shakespeare added was his perfection of the technique of “enjambment”—that is, of runover lines, in which there is no natural syntactical stop at the end of the line, just a metrical one. Contrast these two passages, one early, one late Shakespeare:

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the East, and Juliet is the sun...

(*Romeo and Juliet*)

These lines are “end-stopped,” not enjambed. There is a strong reason to pause at the end of each line. The following lines are enjambed:

The fringed curtain of thine eye advance
Some further space....

(*The Tempest*)

One pauses only slightly after “advance,” there being no syntactical reason to stop; the natural music of the phrasing is such that it hurries one on. This addition of enjambment permitted greater subtlety and flexibility and naturalness in blank verse lines. A later change was the introduction of extra unaccented syllables in the line. This practice is noticeable in Wordsworth and other Romantic poets. Before this time, blank verse lines had to be strictly ten syllables, except for the allowable extra unaccented syllable at the end of the line (“To be or not to be, that is the question”).¹ If there was what seemed to be an extra syllable elsewhere in the line in such cases, it was meant to be elided (skipped over, melded with the next syllable). The reader was meant to read “Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit” as ten syllables, not eleven, by hearing “dis-o-bed-yence” rather than “dis-o-be-di-ence.” Eighteenth-century critics misunderstood Milton's practice and thought he was putting in extra unaccented syllables, writing eleven- or even twelve-syllable lines, but since Milton was the most highly esteemed of poets, this was thought to be acceptable. Somewhat mysteriously, then eleven-, twelve-, and even thirteen-syllabic iambic pentameter lines began to sound all right:

Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements....

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*)

Here the second “foot”—able *WORK*—has three syllables, two unstressed, one stressed. This change brought blank verse closer to ordinary speech while at the same time depriving it of a certain elegance. Some modern writers have found any kind of blank verse too regular, too “old-fashioned” and too “poetic,” and have written instead non-metrical lines with about five stresses in each. Other poets—Frost, for example—have used blank verse with even more freedom than Wordsworth:

Right past both father and mother, and neither stopped it
(Frost, “The Witch of Coos”)

Meter is attractive because it gives an instant feeling of form, of things being well-organized, well-considered,

1. In this line there's also what's called a “reversed foot”—“*THAT* is” instead of “*that IS*,” which is allowable and apparently sounded all right to Shakespeare.)

neat, and clear. It organizes what is said into a recognizable musical pattern and allows us to enjoy variations on that pattern. It can lift what is said so it sounds as if it were being pronounced in a great place, part of a celebration; with it, even the simplest statements may sound momentous:

Keep up your bright swords for the dew will rust them
(Shakespeare, *Othello*)

Kinds of meter (like the kinds of rhyme schemes and stanzas) are part of the language of poetry, as verb forms, subject-verb agreement, and idiomatic expressions are part of the ordinary language. They may be hard to use, or hard to read, at first, but usually not for long. For a poet, writing (or speaking) in iambic pentameter may become as natural and as automatic as speaking in grammatically correct sentences. The formal aspect of meter can give to both poet and reader a sense of technical grace and expertise, even of perfection. It proposes clear artistic standards for the poet to meet, and also may be, by its incessant demandingness, inspiring.

Non-Metrical Poetry

These are all good qualities, though by our own time most poets have been willing to give them up for qualities they found, and preferred, in non-metrical poetry. Almost all non-metrical poetry also does without rhyme (rhyme will be our next subject). Metrical poetry began to sound “poetic,” as if it were mainly living off other poetry and had lost too much connection with the life outside it—with the way people think, talk, and feel.

Non-metrical music can be created in various ways. One is by taking phrases that already have a strong natural speech rhythm and putting a few together:

I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul
(Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”)

Lines of different lengths can be given the same music by a parallel syntactic construction—as in these lines, each divided by a preposition:

The anemones are blossoming *beside* the poet of the
body
The roses bloom *above* the dwelling of the five
hundred mechanical engineers
The rocks are falling and the birds are making their
cries of tu-whit tu-wu *beyond* the old gulch.

Strong accents can be forced by means of punctuation and repetition:

I am the poet! the poet of the body!
And where, tell me where, is the poet, the poet of the
soul?

When there are very strongly accented syllables, the mind tends to make music out of their patterns.

Similar effects can be obtained, or intensified, by the way the poem is divided into lines. Line division obliges the reader to put accents where they might not ordinarily be. For example, if Whitman had written

I am the poet / Of the body / And I am the poet / Of
the soul

there would be a distinctly different music from that in the line he actually wrote:

I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul

There are more extreme ways of ending lines that bring accents to syllables that ordinarily would have none:

I have eaten the plums
that were in
the icebox...

(William Carlos Williams, “This Is Just to Say”)

One of the great pleasures of non-metrical rhythm is the chance it gives to find music in ordinary ways of talking and writing. Another pleasure is in being “plain.” Sometimes it seems there is nothing more beautiful that one could read (or write) than lines with that “plain” music:

That’s not a cross look, it’s a sign of life
but I’m glad you care how I look at you
(Frank O’Hara, “Poem”)

oh god it’s wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee
and smoke too many cigarettes
and love you so much
(O’Hara, “Steps”)

Line-ending pauses can be obviously connected to feelings, as in the lines by O’Hara, or not, as in William Carlos Williams’s lines.

Once the rhyme-and-meter barriers were broken, poets tried out all kinds of ways to write poetry without them. Among the more radical experiments are Williams’s one-word-per-line poem “The Locust Tree in Flower”; Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligrammes; “concrete” poems; John Ashbery’s numerous experiments,

including “Europe,” in which the main formal element is the interruption and altering of everything with each new line; Cummings’s jumping-around-the-page poems; and the Italian Futurist F. T. Marinetti’s poems made up entirely of imitations of the noises made during war.² These are all in the Experimental Division of non-metrical poetry, which is a different place from the more usual one, in which the new technique is directed more toward expression than toward experimentation. The two can hardly be separated, though—Apollinaire’s calligrammes are often lyrical and tender—and whatever is discovered by the experimenter is then available for use (and further change) by the lyricist; and these two are sometimes the same poet.

The first consistently non-metrical poet in English was Walt Whitman. He brought into poetry the heightened prose of nineteenth-century political orators and preachers and that of the King James translation of the Bible:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or
ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so
I felt,
Just as any one of you is one of a living crowd, I was
one of a crowd...

(Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”)

The rhythm is the natural rhythm of one’s speaking voice. Not one syllable is changed even slightly—as it would be, for example, if the lines were metrical:

Not distance, no, nor time, nor place avails,
O men and women of a future time,
To separate us, for we are the same
When looking at the river or the sky
Or being members of a living crowd....

This metrical version isn’t the way anyone speaks—there is a musical heightening of such syllables as *VAILS*, *OF*, *FOR*, *AT*, *OR*, and again *OF*, that has no relation to natural colloquial emphasis. The meter is like a rhythmic piano accompaniment that changes the way the words are said—the reader sings along with it. Whitman’s non-metrical lines are more like natural speech, but not quite: someone talking is more likely to say “Neither time, place, nor distance can keep us from being together” or, even more likely, “Time isn’t going to keep us apart, and neither is distance; and I don’t think where we happen to be is going to either.” One skips

2. Futurism was an artistic and literary movement in Europe just before and during World War I, which opposed traditional art with an art that incorporated the violence and rapid movement of modern machines.

over these versions as if there were no music in them at all. But Whitman’s lines, though colloquial, are full of stops and repetitions and variations that make us aware we are at a concert and not out on the street:

It a*VAILS* not, *TIME* nor *PLACE*—*DIST*ance a*VAILS*
not...

While it loses the particular heightening of metrical poetry, this non-metrical poetry gives the impression of being natural and artistic at the same time. As with most artistic changes, something is gained and something is lost. To readers, what is gained is of more interest, since what is lost can still be found in other poems.

Once it was discovered that non-metrical verse could give such pleasures, it became an important part of the language of poetry; many poets wrote it, and most of them wrote it in ways different from Whitman’s. One Whitman-like quality most poems held on to, though, was closeness to natural speech:

Sweep the house clean,
hang fresh curtains
in the window
put on a new dress
and come with me!
(Williams, “Love Song”)

The new rule was that everything could be a poem as long as it “sounded right.” The poem still had to sound right, but there were many more ways in which it could do so.

The appeal of non-traditional poetry (to sum up a little) was its seeming more “natural” (no artificial regimenting of syllables), more “modern,” practical, plain, down to earth, with less decoration and less fuss. It was more permissive, freer, and offered a much greater variety of possible kinds of poems. It was thus, potentially, more surprising and unpredictable (writing or reading a poem you never know what you’re going to get). Connected to this uncertainty is the “metaphysical” interest of not knowing whether or not it is “really poetry,” i.e., the pleasure of living, as it were, on the edge of art.

All this, along with the main appeal of the new poetry: its offering, by being colloquial, a more immediate connection of language and feeling:

don’t be shy of unkindness, either
it’s cleansing and allows you to be direct
like an arrow that feels something
(O’Hara, “Poem”)

Non-metrical rhythm made a big change in the language of poetry. Every poem is now written with the possibility of using either its music or those of meter and

rhyme. Poets didn't entirely stop using meter and rhyme, but most now feel free either to use them or not. This change hasn't diminished the resources of the language of poetry, but rather has increased them.

Rhyme

Rhyme is a poetic use of the sound of words, as meter is a poetic use of the order (and thus the rhythm) of syllables. Rhyme is part repetition and part variation: the beginning consonant sound has to be different and all that comes after it has to be the same—*hat/cat*, *horse/force*, *tomorrow/sorrow*, *attitude/latitude*. As can be seen from these examples, the rhyming has to begin on the stressed syllable of the word: *SORrow*, *toMORrow*.

The most familiar kind of rhyme is complete rhyme: *sleep* and *keep*. These complete rhymes are the kind that traditionally come at the ends of lines. Along with adding music to the poem, they help give it an organization. But there are other kinds of rhyme, too, sound similarities that echo through poems and give them music of a subtler, less noticeable kind. These partial rhymes, as they are called, may be repetitions either of the vowel sounds of accented syllables—*sleep* and *reef*—or of their beginning and ending consonants—*sleep* and *slap*. (There is also the minimal sound similarity called alliteration, in which the only thing that is the same in two syllables is the beginning consonant sound: *bus* and *bed*; *sleep* and *slender*.) When end-rhymes determine the tune of a poem, these partial rhymes contribute to the tone and color of the music. In unrhymed metrical poetry (as in Shakespeare's plays), and in some modern poetry without either meter or end-rhymes, these partial rhymes may carry the main burden of music.

Rhyme is more obvious than meter. It's louder. It draws attention to itself and can be heard right away.

Farewell, too little and too lately known,
Whom I began to think and call my own;
For sure our Souls were near ally'd; and thine
Cast in the same Poetick mould with mine...

(John Dryden, "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham")

When rhymes come at the ends of two lines in a row, as they do here, the lines are called couplets. (Three rhymed lines constitute a triplet, which is much rarer.) These loud, quickly occurring rhymes tend to create an effect of neatness, compactness, and convincingness.

Rhymes at the ends of alternating lines give the pleasure of surprise and of satisfaction after a little suspense:

Who says that fictions only and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?

May no lines pass, except they do their duty
Not to a true, but painted chair?

(George Herbert, "Jordan (I)")

In the old English ballads, only the second and fourth lines of the four-line stanza have rhymes:

O long, long may their ladies sit
With their fans into their hand
Or ere they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailing to the land...

(anonymous ballad, "Sir Patrick Spens")

Rhyme schemes are sometimes more intricate, as for example in some poems by Ben Jonson and John Donne. Rhymes may also be used very irregularly, as in Milton's "Lycidas" or in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

In most poems written before our time, rhyme is loud and clear and is meant to be noticed. It creates pleasing sounds and a rich musical texture. In some poems written as songs, rhyme and other sounds seem to be the main things there:

Whenas the rye reach to the chin
And chopcherry, chopcherry ripe within

(George Peele, "Whenas the Rye Reach to the Chin")

When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,

Tu-who;

Tu-whit, tu-who, a merry note
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

(Shakespeare, "When icicles hang by the wall")

Rhymes and the repetitions add to the festivity: the words "sing" more than they "say." This richness of rhymes—and of sound similarities of all kinds, including alliteration—has also been used for more difficult and less familiar celebrations:

Enough! the Resurrection
A heart's clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days,
dejection
Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal
trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but
ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am at once what Christ is, since he is what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,
immortal diamond
Is immortal diamond.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire...")

Hopkins's rhyming words strike quickly, with an effect like lightning; a reader is rushed from one to the other.

Rhymes can also slow down reading:

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathèd pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

(Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes")

It's natural to pause at each musical effect to enjoy the sensations it gives, sensations that may be both of music and of other kinds of experience. In the Keats stanza, for example, the sweet musical harmony of *knees*, after *frees* and *degrees*, encourages the reader to pause there, and, in so doing, to get more of an experience of Madeline's knees as well as of the music. Of course, both in the Keats and Hopkins lines, there is a lot of other musicality to go along with the rhymes: alliteration ("Flesh fade...fall," "half-hidden," "in fancy, fair"); internal rhymes and half-rhymes of all sorts ("resurrection/clari-on," "beam/worm," "sea-weed/dreams"); and sequences of strongly stressed syllables that make the meter slower and richer ("world's wildfire, leave but ash," "attire creeps rustling," "mermaid," "sea-weed").

Organizing is the other main thing rhyme does—along with making a pleasing music. Rhymes at the ends of lines do the most obvious organizing—they are like the bows dancers might make at the end of a series of steps. The poem stops for a moment, then starts up again. The new line may continue or may take the poem in a new direction. But the rhymes create a kind of unity of the music that carries over to the thought. They tie the lines together—in couplets, in quatrains, or in some other way.

For poets, rhymes provide a way to make things fit; rhymes give poets something to go toward. Poets may have a meaning in mind, something they want to say, but as their poems head for that sense, they also head for a "sound sense." The rhymes help keep things musically on course. It can be difficult—and frustrating—for the poet to find rhymes, but it can always be done (in an emergency, one can change the first rhyme word, after all). The effort, momentary or lasting, may be inspiring. There must be an uncountable number of wonderful things in poetry that have come from the need to find rhymes. Often, I'd guess, poets aren't even particularly aware of searching for rhymes. Conversant as they are with the language of poetry, it may be more that it is the sound similarities that are there in advance, to influence and to

organize what they end up saying. A rhyme may in fact be the first sign of a poem the imagination gets.

The reader shares the poet's pleasure in the simultaneous appropriateness and surprisingness of the rhymes. Good sense and communication don't ordinarily go with such foolishness as *done/one*, *frees/degrees/knees*; and it's agreeably surprising when they do.

This surprising appropriateness can also have a comic effect; Byron is a great master of that. Of sixteen-year-old Don Juan's taking meditative walks in the woods, Byron says,

You may think 'twas philosophy that this did;
I can't help thinking puberty assisted;

and of Juan's prudish mother,

In virtues nothing earthly could surpass her
Save thine "incomparable oil," macassar!

(Byron, *Don Juan*)

It's a pleasure to see a poet's being so frivolous, masterful, and free with what is supposed to be so serious a responsibility: one of the things his or her performance will be judged by—proper rhymes.

Non-Rhyming and Irregularly Rhyming Poetry

Rhyme, of course, was a big issue in the evolution of modern poetry. To a lot of poets, rhyme, like meter, seemed part of the old dispensation and an outmoded technique for poetry to use in dealing with the new life of the twentieth century. The very virtues of rhyme, the things it accomplishes best, were what was wrong with it: its "beautiffulness" and its "efficiency," its capacity for organizing poems and for making what they said convincing and precise (the world didn't seem so beautiful, so well ordered, or so understandable). Also rhyme seemed to limit "freedom": the lure of being absolutely free in what one wrote was that one just might, in that way, come on something true. Or perhaps just new—that was also an attraction and a reason for giving up the old ways. Rhyme seemed to go with a past world.

Different poets, as might be expected, reacted in different ways. W. B. Yeats held on to rhyme, but let it be rougher, less exact—rhyming *blood* with *aloud*, *summon* with *superhuman*, *work* with *dark*, *lap* with *escape*. Wallace Stevens held on to rhyme, as to other features of the poetic language, but put it in unexpected places—as in the rhymes in these lines:

no thread
Of cloudy silver sprinkles in your gown
Its venom of renown, and on your head
No crown is simpler than the simple hair...

(Stevens, "To the One of Fictive Music")

Or rhyme could be used for a few line endings and then dropped:

When the rain stops
and the cat drops
out of the tree
to walk...

(Robert Creeley, "Midnight")

Or a poet might be attracted to a kind of rhyming so quiet and subtle as to pass unnoticed:

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious fastidiousness. Certain Ming products, imperial floor-coverings of coach-wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen something that I like better—a mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted animal stand up, similar determination to make a pup eat his meat from a plate...

(Marianne Moore, "Critics and Connoisseurs")

The rhyme of *Ming* and *something* is hard to catch; and so, in the predominantly colloquial prose rhythm of the lines, is the rhyme of *up* and *pup*. The pleasure a reader may get is hearing a not-quite-identifiable or findable music.³

Williams, on the other hand, gave up rhyme (and meter) completely. He said he wanted to get to the music of the American spoken language because that's where the poetry was—there, and as he says in one of his poems, in the sound of such wholly urban, contemporary things as a cement mixer. Giving up rhymes, he came on other sound similarities that intruded less on the sound of talk: "I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the *ICE-BOX* / and which / you were probably / saving / for *BREAKFAST*." *Icebox* and *breakfast* seem unrelated, plain words, but when put together like this they make music with their *s*, *b*, *k* sounds and their trochaic (*DUM da*) rhythm.

The end of conventional rhyme (complete rhymes at the ends of lines) makes other sound similarities—the various kinds of partial rhymes—suddenly more audible and more important to the music. The poet, having given up rhyme, doesn't stop hearing the music of the poem: that the poem "sounds right" is essential to its being a poem, and sound similarities have everything to do with that. Sound, of course, is not only related to the emotional and intellectual content, but is infused with it and an integral part of it. So the poet must start hearing a music that is just as beautiful as before but now not sustained by regu-

larly recurring notes. The intervals between one thought, between one musical impulse or one musical idea or sequence and another, can be smaller or greater, according to the secret ways in which the mind is led by its desire to hear music. This music is not necessarily anchored down at given and expected points. Along with making for a subtler kind of music, the displacement of sound similarity—from its role as an organizing force in the poem to being entirely something the poet is more or less unconsciously drawn to—may result in a correspondingly irregular and less rationally controlled train of thought. The end-rhymes are gone that completed thoughts and that organized them into a whole; the poet's mind is left floating among possible musics, which may occur at the ends of lines or more likely in their middles. This new music is appealing because it is surprising and fresh. To some poets it is irresistible, too, for where it leads them, for giving them the power to find a new order in the apparent disorder of sounds and thoughts. The new irregularly heard music can lead to a big, fragmentary collection of clearly depicted anecdotes and scenes, held together by invisible connections of sound and emotion, as in Williams's "Della Primavera Trasportata al Morale: April"; or to quite another kind of poem, such as Ashbery's "Clepsydra," in which meaning and music seem to have melted into one another so as to be indistinguishable:

and you
Must wear them like clothing, moving in the shadow of
Your single and twin existence, waking in intact
Appreciation of it, while morning is still there and
before the body
Is changed by the faces of evening....

There are certainly "meanings" here, but of a kind that were not possible to poetry before the displacement of ordinary rhyme. The kinds of "partial rhyme" here include pure vowel rhymes like *waking*, *appreciation*, *changed*, and *faces*, all with their stressed *a* sounds; and the quieter rhythmical repetitions of *clothing*, *moving*, *walking*, *morning*, and *evening*. There is also the intriguingly paradoxical rhyming of *single* and *twin existence* (of which one accepts the logic intuitively because it sounds right). The effect *changed* has on *faces* (in the last line quoted) clearly illustrates how sound can influence meaning, especially when the intellectual content is so kept in abeyance. One has no idea what the faces are, but the stress that the *a* in *changed* obliges one to put on the first syllable makes these faces, whatever they are, momentous, moving, and perhaps even a little frightening, in a way they wouldn't otherwise be—if, for example, the lines read "before the body / Is altered by the faces of evening."

3. One can even see a little of this in Keats—*sea-weed* and *bed*—though in Keats the effect is to make the sound more sensuous, not rougher, as in Yeats.



Drawing by Joe Brainard

Stanzas and Poetic Forms

Another aspect of poetic music is the stanza, which can be thought of as a version (in poetry language) of the paragraph. There are also the predetermined forms of entire poems—sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, and others. Stanzas and poetic forms such as the sonnet are pure poetry language, being essentially nothing more than ways of organizing other forms of poetic music—rhythm and rhyme. Stanzas with the “rests” that fall between them are even more definitive than those at the ends of lines for orchestrating the repetitions and variations of meter and rhyme, and dividing what is said into units—as do the different “movements” of symphonies, or of string quartets. This division adds possibilities to what the poet can do. Stanzas may continue directly from one to the next, or take off in new directions, for example. The most commonly used stanzas in English are the couplet—two rhyming lines together—and the quatrain—a four-line stanza usually rhyming lines 1 and 3 and lines 2 and 4, or just lines 2 and 4. Other stanzas include the three-line terza rima (e.g., “Ode to the West Wind”), the eight-line ottava rima (e.g., *Don Juan*), and the nine-line “Spenserian” stanza (e.g., *The Faerie Queene*). Stanza forms have an obvious influence on what is written and on how it is read. You would probably find that the same story, if you told it in couplets, in quatrains, or in ottava rima, for example, would be in noticeable ways a different story. The stanza is part of the music, which, as Pythagoras said, “makes us do what it wants.”

To both poets and readers of poetry, stanzas give extra pleasures of form within the larger form of the whole poem. A stanza can be admired for itself; a harmony of

good stanzas can be even better. *Stanza* is the Italian word for *room*; it’s derived from the Latin word for “stopping place” or “place to take a stand.” Each stanza may be paused in or quickly moved on from. In modern poems without rhyme or meter, a stanza may still be there that frames the music, as in Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” or Williams’s “Woman at a Window”:

She sits with
tears on

her cheek
her cheek on

her hand
the child

in her lap
his nose

pressed
to the glass

Poetic forms for whole poems tell the poet in advance how long the poem will be and what demands must be met on the way. The requirements inspire and provide a challenge to do something new in an old situation. Sometimes a form has become very successful, a great international star, as the sonnet did. The sonnet, as Petrarch wrote it in the fourteenth century, was a fourteen-line poem made up of two main parts, one eight lines long and rhyming ABBA ABBA, and the other six lines long, rhyming DEF DEF or some variation of that. Better known to readers of English is the kind of sonnet Shakespeare wrote, which may be divided into four parts: three quatrains rhyming ABAB CDCD EFEF and one final couplet rhyming GG. The Shakespearean version is—in English at any rate—easier to write than the Petrarchan one, which demands many similar rhymes. The sonnet form allowed for repetition and variation of a witty kind; it was long enough to get something said and short enough to “think in” and write in one sitting. It appealed to poets and to readers for several hundred years, and was obviously a form that caused poems to exist, caused poets to write them, as the form of the blues has caused songs to exist.

Modern poets, as would be expected, given their feelings about rhyme and meter, have had doubts about conventional stanzas and forms. Some, like Yeats and Auden, went on using them; others didn’t. Some poets invented new ones. Ashbery’s sixty-six-page poem “Litany” is written in two columns on each page that are meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues; O’Hara’s “Day and Night in 1952” begins as a page and a half of prose poetry and concludes with thirty-three lines

of verse each ending with the word *of*. Stevens invented a blank verse stanza for lyric poems (“Sunday Morning,” “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”) as well as the numbered variations-on-a-theme format of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

There is a reason, beyond the simple wish for newness, for new forms. After a certain time, a poetic form, somewhat like a style of dancing or painting or a way of dressing, begins to have a “period atmosphere,” which adds a certain kind of meaning to the poem. Immediately, whether intended or not, it says, “I am a traditional form, and in being so I invite you to consider the past time that

used me, as well as the more ordered view of life that my form represents.” A sonnet can no longer be just what it says any more than a Renaissance costume can be just a smart outfit. This doesn’t mean good sonnets can’t be written in our time, but that when they are written they are likely to have an additional sound and sense due to their history.

This discussion is brief, but should give an idea. For more, George Saintsbury’s *History of English Prosody* is a wonderful big book on the subject.



Suggested National Poetry Month Activities

This April, help celebrate the third annual National Poetry Month. Here are a few ways you can make poetry more fun for your students, and also more visible to the public.

- Have your students write short poems, put them in balloons, and set them free, all at once.
- Have your students write lines on the flat sides of chopsticks, place them side by side, then roll them a quarter turn, to see new poems created. Then have Chinese lunch.
- Have everyone in the school contribute one line each to an epic poem.
- Have your students write poems on T-shirts.
- Tape a strip of adding machine paper around the outside of your school building (or inside your classroom) and have the students collaborate on the world’s longest poetic line.
- Have your students write lines on small pieces of poster board. Then use these to make poetry mobiles, to hang from the ceiling.
- Have your students design poetry postcards and poetry bookmarks. Photocopy them on colored card stock, trim them, and distribute them.
- Have your students white out the words in comic books or comic strips and replace them with lines from poems.

Most of these poetry writing ideas come from Dave Morice’s book *The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet*, published by Teachers & Writers.



PLUGS

Kenneth Koch’s article in this issue is excerpted from his new book, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. The book will be available in hardcover from Scribner on April 1, 1998, and will cost \$27.95. Koch also has a new book of poems due out this spring from Knopf, entitled *Straits*.

We recently received a lovely anthology of children’s poetry called *The Movement of a Tickle*, published by the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House in Erie, PA. If you’d like a copy, contact Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, Benedictine Sisters of Erie Inner-City Fund, Neighborhood Art House, 201 East Tenth St., Erie, PA 16503-1007, tel. (814) 455-5508. Include a contribution, small or large.

The 21st Century Poetry Journal publishes work by children nationwide three times a year. For submissions guidelines, write to The 21st Century, P.O. Box 30, Newton, MA 02161. A sample issue costs \$3.