

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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THE IMPORTANCE OF READING POETRY

BY

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For decades children have been taught to read silently. One can understand the reasons for this exercise, but it certainly does not help us understand or necessarily appreciate what we read. The advantage is that there is silence, but there are many disadvantages associated with this common and insistent practice.

1. there is a tendency to skip or ignore uncommon words
2. we may not learn to correctly pronounce words (especially if of foreign origin)
3. the possibility of reading one word at a time which will lessen our ability to comprehend what we read
4. sight reading can lead to skim reading (which does have its advantages) although important points can be easily missed when at a young age

What I will discuss here in the effect of not reading out loud for the *poet* and their *poetry*. In the case of poetry, there is a great risk of failure to identify the rhythm or check the rhythm.

Those with sight or hearing impairment have their other senses becoming more heightened to what they would normally be, and they will have devised other methods to help them. However, for the most today, the poet cares little to listen to what they have written. This is due to the way they *write* their poetry. Yet reading out loud in a simple process capable of making the smallest defect obvious.

Some may enlighten themselves by saying that it is only the formalist who need do this due to the metrical nature of the form they write in, but this is very wrong. In fact, there could not be a more incorrect statement made.

When we consider that *meter is organized rhythm* we see how ridiculous the previous statement really is! Why? Because *every* poem has rhythm. I am not talking about the toe-tapping or finger-tapping rhythm, but there is always a *rhythm*, good or bad. Consider the verse from Shakespeare's Sonnet XVII:

Who will believe my verse in time to come,

It is very clear that there is rhythm and there is something constant about it. The metric points to iambic pentameter which creates a very distinctive rhythm. The rhythm is organized by the meter, yet as we well know, not every verse will be iambic pentameter. In this instance (and many others) Shakespeare has written to this rhythm by using the correct placement of words according to speech stress so that they align perfectly with the metrical accent. The right words in the right place and making perfect sense. This process may be difficult for many, but the difficulty diminishes with study and practice.

Scanning this verse, we have:

|| Whō wīll | bēliēve | mŷ vērse | ĩn tīme | tō cōme

Looking at a verse from T. S. Eliot's "The Naming of Cats":

|| The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,

Scansion gives:

|| Thē Nāmīng | ōf Cāts | ĩs ā dīf | fīcūlt | māttēr

Clearly this verse also has rhythm, but it is very different, and it comes as being livelier. One final example from Pound's "Three Cantos":

|| But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks

Scansion gives:

|| Būt sāy | Ĩ wānt tō | ~ sāy | Ĩ tāke | yōŕ whōle | bāg ōf trīcks

Again a rhythm, but perhaps more complex. Pound's Cantos have many and varied meters, but they create a brilliant rhythm and hence mood.

Admittedly, it is difficult to show with merely one verse, but I believe that these examples indicate that the rhythm can vary greatly. As is also demonstrated, the scansion shows different metrical feet. However, to determine them depends on sound and how it is read. The scansion also depends on how the verses connect to each other or how you would expect them to follow each other.

|| Ās ĩs | ālsō | dēmōnstrātēd ...

Even prose can be scanned according to how it sounds. (There is a tendency to stress *As* due to the manner in which it follows from the previous paragraph.)

The names of the feet are not important and neither is the scansion. The point is that we *discover* the *rhythm by sound*. Bad verse can be bad for a number of reasons, and one is that it lacks any discernible or unintelligible rhythm. I am not talking of breaking the rhythm or changing it since there may be a reason for this, perhaps for dramatic effect.

The problems associated with the rhythm will only come to the forefront when we hear the verse, and it may be as simple as one word or syllable which is ill-placed. This *is* more apparent when it occurs in formal verse and specifically when the speech stress does not align with the metrical accent. We end up with a word or syllable sounding very out of place or requiring a very wrong pronunciation. Regarding formal verse, bad or broken rhythm is easily found when reading out loud. Many of the formal constructs require a specific metrical dance, the most common being iambic tetrameter or pentameter. Unfortunately, there are those who think that every ten-syllable verse is iambic pentameter. For example, there is never a ten-syllable iambic pentameter line ending with the gerund (*-ing*) without the clipped iamb at the start. This is not possible because it would require a major stress on the *-ing*. We find that the metrical accent and speech stress can never align and so disrupts the rhythm. Hence the meter has been violated. Thus in some ways the formalist poet can be at fault. When the rhythm is shot, the meter has been violated.

Vers libre is more forgiving due to the lack, or need of a consistent rhythm for each verse. The rhythm may be more difficult to easily discern, but it will be present. It may also be difficult to tell if the rhythm has gone awry. The rhythm of verses and the poem as a whole creates the atmosphere or mood, but even the most subtle change can ruin the verse or not the entire poem. The importance of rhythm is that it *will* create the mood or the atmosphere for the poem as a whole. This is what you want, and bad verse, regardless of the style, lacks this vital element.

From Eliot:

█ ... for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos

Chaos would refer more to the content aspect of the poem, grammar, superfluous punctuation, choice of words and their poor placement, yet the statement in general applies to any verse and style. Let your verse not be chaotic.

There is nothing embarrassing about reading your own poetry, and the greatest secret is to read it out loud. The only embarrassment will come if another reads your verse aloud and stumbles over the verse. *That* would be a great disappointment to the reader and listener, one which could easily have been averted.