

IV/

LIKE AND

UNLIKE SOUNDS

In different ways, and in varying degree, the sounds of words are similar and different.

This simple fact, almost embarrassingly obvious to state, provides the basis for a tremendous part of poetry's power.

The line from *Macbeth* which I have quoted earlier represents one extreme of likeness:

To-morrow and to-morrow, and to-morrow

That is, repetition can be thought of as the ultimate in like sounds. So rhyme, however we define it, is a matter of unlikeness as well as likeness: "to-morrow" rhymes with "sorrow" because of how the two words are like and unlike. "To-morrow" does not rhyme with "to-morrow" because they are exactly alike; it does not rhyme with "sagacity" because they are too unlike.

Here is an example of like and unlike sounds in an actual poem. The poem provides a good example because it is short (only four lines long) and rich in sounds that chime variously:

The dry soul rages. The unfeeling feel
With the dry vehemence of the unreal.
So I, in the Idea of your arms, unwon,
Am as the real in the unreal undone.¹

The end-rhymes (*feel* with *-real* and *-won* with *-done* at the ends of the lines) make up only part of the poem's complex web of likeness and difference in sound—an audible web so attractive to me that I feel willing to trust the meaning, even while I can't quite get it, because the sounds have so much conviction and appeal.

When I do get the meaning—the imagined embrace of the desired one, which is unreal, confounds and distracts the frustrated lover who feels real absence and an unreal fantasy, dry and vehement—the compacted, fiendishly chiming nature of the sounds seems to enact that action of “raging.” The emotion, the sexual horniness, produces an artifact of extravagant control.

By the audible web of sound I mean, for example, the recurrences in “the unfeeling feel” and “I, in the Idea.” Both of these examples involve repetition of the same sound in a different word: in the case of “unfeeling feel,” a repeated sound with the same meaning made opposite, and in the case of “I, in the Idea,” a different meaning. The triad of “unwon” and “unreal, undone” involves the rhyme between the prefix “un-” and both “won” and “done.”

When you consider also the rhyme between “Dry” (another repeated word) and both “I” and the first syl-

lable of “Idea,” as well as the vowel sound repeated in “real” and “Idea,” the most striking aspect of the poem becomes the way it avoids jamming up, overclotted with too many like sounds. In this sense, the sounds of “soul rages,” “vehemence,” and “your arms” become important because they don't much recur: in a way these sounds, keeping the richness from being overdone, are the most important ones in the poem.

This example indicates that likeness and difference of sound are matters of degree. Rhyme, however one defines that term, is a matter of degree, and not necessarily an either/or toggle.

Just as the varying relation of pitch and duration, in their changing degrees, can be expressive, and just as the varying relation of line and syntax can be expressive, the varying kinds and degrees of likeness of sound can be expressive.

“The dry soul rages” demonstrates that principle in an end-rhymed poem. Here are some lines from a poem that is not end-rhymed, demonstrating the same principle, I think. The poem (by Robert Frost) is in “blank verse”—that is, pentameter (five-foot) lines with no regular end rhyme; but rhyme, or something like rhyme, surely plays a great part in the poem's effect:

An Old Man's Winter Night

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,

That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.

There is a complicated embroidery here. One thread involves like consonant sounds such as those at the end of “doors” and of “stars” and perhaps of “gathers”; or the related consonant sounds (the “s” sound called a “sibilant”) at the end of “eyes” and of “gaze” and of “was,” and perhaps at the end of “loss,” too. But crossing that consonant-thread is another vowel-thread involving the long “a” sound in “pane” and “gaze” and “age.”

Thus, in the line

What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze

the reader may hear “his” and “eyes” and “gaze” rhyming with one another and also with “was” two lines later. But the reader may also hear a likeness between the final word “gaze” and the word “pane” at a caesura (within-the-line pause) above it and the word “age” at the end of a line below it. “Hear” is a more or less figurative term here: that is, the reader doesn’t necessarily think about the sounds I have compared to embroidery threads, or register them consciously. But the effect is felt, just the same: the poem almost sings in end-rhyme

about this solitude, but mutes the singing quality instead: more like humming to oneself, maybe.

And all of this happens in an “unrhymed” poem.

As always, description lags, in its cumbersome way, far behind what it gestures toward. Much is always left-out, even as the sentences of description pile up. It would be interesting, for example, to think about the likeness and difference of syntax as it stretches and folds across the two units, of two lines each, which both begin with the words “What kept”: the two units are parallel, but not perfectly parallel, in ways that contain and echo and contrast with the play of like and unlike sounds.

Here is a sentence from farther along in the poem, three lines that illustrate how close to the audible effect of end-rhyme a supposedly unrhymed poem can come. Listen to the terminal “t” sound (called a “dental” sound, as is that of “d”) as it falls sometimes at the ends of lines, at other times after the caesura or pause within the line, at still others at no particular pause:

A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.

To say the sentence aloud, hearing the delicate, fluctuating echo on *light, sat, what, light, that* is among other pleasures to hear the way there are pentameters within pentameters. That is, because the passage is made out of

units of three and two feet, there is a kind of buried pentameter line that would read,

To no one but himself where now he sat,
if the poem were written a little differently, and another one that would read,

Concerned with he knew what, a quiet light
The terminal "t" sound marks off these possibilities with an effect of great penetration.

The poem at such points seems to tremble between blank verse and full end-rhyme, as though the old man's night is partly a matter for narration, partly for something more lyrical. The poem's conclusion continues that double quality:

And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him, and he shifted,
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night.

In the last three lines, the rhyme between "one aged man" at the beginning of a line and "or if he can" at the end of another line is separated by the kind of "buried" pentameter line I've referred to—

Can't keep a house, a farm, a countryside—

And one effect of this musical, shifting, echoing quality is to intensify the widening of what "keep" means, so that the man "keeps" something as metaphysical as "a countryside." This philosophical sweep is not loud or heavy partly because, I think, the pattern of sounds provides something like a leavening counterpoint. And the repetition of the word "man," itself, reminds us that metaphysical or not, the story is also actual, present.

A free-verse poem that I have quoted at the end of Chapter I, Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," provides a good example of like sound in lines that are neither iambic nor end-rhymed:

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow,

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun, and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

In the first two three-line stanzas, the similarity of “winter” and “glitter” accompanies the similarity of “mind” and the first syllable of “winter.” In going from “mind” to “winter,” the “i” is shorter in the second word, and the dental sound changes from “d” to “t,” but the consonant clusters of “nd” and “nt” (both described technically as a “nasal” sound followed by a “dental”) are reinforced by the stress that falls on them and by the many repetitions that are on the way—beginning with the sound of “pine-trees,” which echoes the vowel of “mind” and the consonants of “winter.”

The recurrence of the nasal-dental cluster becomes quite rich and prominent in this passage:

not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The repeated words “sound,” “land,” and “wind” make the audible presence of like sounds so intense that their relative absence becomes an important part of the final four lines. (I say “relative” absence because the word “And,” with its distinct pauses before and after, echoes the rhyme-sound distinctly—a bravura touch to put so much musical and syntactical force on so bland a word.) Because “beholds” and “snow” and “nothing” and “is” are quite dissimilar from mind/sound/land/wind, they have an emphasis similar to the emphasis I tried to point out in “The dry soul rages”; sometimes, the like sounds serve to dramatize and heighten the unlike sounds.

In a way parallel to how an enjambment is a place where the syntax might stop, but pushes forward instead, the shift away from a consonant sound may mark a moment when things might chime, but depart instead. Here, the relative absence of a consonant sound, and its one recurrence on “and”—like the enjambment on “beholds”—emphasizes and tempers the change from one kind of severity to another: from the brilliant, bleak landscape to the differently severe process of “beholding.”

So far, I have spoken of only one kind of likeness: degree of rhyme. But “The Snow Man” contains a few

examples of another kind of likeness or unlikeness, such as the phrases

January sun

and

distant glitter

and

junipers shagged,

all phrases in which I hear a kind of delicious contrast between the Latin and the Germanic roots, a little like that between crunchy and soft. Though the sounds are physically similar—"distant" and "glitter" with the same vowels, "January" and "sun" sharing a consonant—"distant" and "January" and "juniper" are from a subtly more abstract or scientific-sounding area of the English lexicon, while "sun" and "glitter" and "shagged" and "crusted" are from a more immediate-sounding or concrete-sounding part of the language. While the phrases involve sounds that are similar physically, the sounds of the words, in this more figurative or emotional sense of "sound," are in contrast.

This is an effect Stevens seems to like especially, and even more striking examples in his work come to mind, like the phrase in "Sunday Morning,"

inarticulate pang,

or in these lines, from the same poem:

Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

"Tipped" is from a Germanic root, akin to the Old High German word *zipf*; "consummation" is from the Latin. So, too, for each of the two-word phrases I have quoted: "January" is Latin and "sun" is Germanic; "distant" is Latin and "glitter" is Germanic; in the next phrase, it is the adjective, "shagged," that is Germanic and the noun, "juniper," that is Latin.

I think that Stevens, in his particularly characteristic way of making these Latin-Germanic pairs, may be recording his love for the poems of Keats, more than any single poet. (Phrases in Keats such as "maturing sun," "unravished bride," "dull opiate," "strenuous tongue" flood to mind.)

This expressive contrast is not limited to adjective-noun pairs. To say that "green endures" or to speak of "remembrance" of "birds" is to make the same contrast as in "visionary south." It is a contrast that calls up the history of the English language and the people who have spoken it, often invading, enslaving, raping, and torturing one another, or converting one another to new religions, or marrying one another, and changing the language in the process. The freshness or contrast sug-

gested sometimes by yoking words with different roots calls on such history.

This contrast of roots seems to me validly a matter of sound: I think that the speaker or reader who does not know a Latin root from a Germanic root hears the difference. This is part of why a police officer afraid of being tricked by lawyers may try to hide in Latin roots:

Simultaneously with the individual being apprehended, he indicated prior information he had obtained concerning that locality.

This way of saying "At the same time as we caught the guy, he said he knew about the place before" takes a largely intuitive, as it were ear-guided, direction. Our plain, short, rude words for bodily functions and substances and parts are Germanic: the longer, more clinical words are Latin. You don't need to know this to hear that the difference between "shit" and "excrement" is parallel to the one between "fucking" and "sexual intercourse." We *hear* the difference, without necessarily thinking about it. (The fact that we hear it is demonstrated by the phrase I have quoted, "inarticulate pang": the clearly Latinate adjective contrasts with the monosyllable "pang" in the way I have described, but to my knowledge the root of "pang" is unknown. It *sounds* Germanic.)

So, when Elizabeth Bishop writes toward the end of "At the Fishhouses," about the very cold water:

If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand
would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire

I think we hear some Germanic plainness in "your wrist would ache" contrasted with some Latinate definition in "immediately" (a word that means "without any intervening medium"—nothing coming between). And that contrast anticipates the contrast between the Germanic *bones, ache, hand, burn, water, fire*—those substantial realities—and the Latinate *transmutation*: a process that changes the substantial. The Latinate word is part of the way Bishop's poem surges upward from immediate experience to something more reflective or mysterious.

I don't mean to suggest that this combining and contrasting of roots is a conscious process for the writer, any more than it is for the reader. When Thomas Jefferson wrote of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," I doubt that he was thinking of the primal, physical effect of Germanic "life," the Roman, legalistic force of Latin "liberty," the courtly, equestrian connotations of Norman French "pursuit," and the return to Germanic roots with "hap." It sounded right to him, as it sounds right to us.

Similarly, Frank O'Hara is not thinking about such matters when he writes, in "Steps":

the apartment was vacated by a gay couple
who moved to the country for fun
they moved a day too soon
even the stabbings are helping the population
explosion
though in the wrong country

Part of the comic effect has to do with the way quasi-legal or ponderously journalistic terms from the Latin ("vacated," "population explosion") contrast in sound with "moved to the country for fun" and "stabbings." The contrast in roots is not necessarily for the sensuous effects of Keats and Stevens.

When Allen Ginsberg writes in "Kaddish" of "Money! Money! shrieking mad celestial money of illusion," he evokes speed and intensity of mind by the speed of motion among kinds of root. His phrases in "Howl" like "contemplating jazz" or "ultimate cunt" rely on this same rhetorical turn.

When the word with a Latin or French root rhymes with the Germanic root, we hear that, too. Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" demonstrates his ear for this kind of expressive contrast. The poem's first stanza is:

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was specter-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
Had sought their household fires.

"Leant," "desolate," "specter," and "dregs" all share a vowel sound. "Day" and "gray" and "gate" share another—in fact, the end-rhyme of "day" and "gray," two monosyllables from the same area of the language, is potentially dull. The passage is about a spiritual dullness, and one way it resists banality is by means of certain distinctive words: unlike "gray" and "day," "coppice" and "bine-stems" and "scored" (with its brilliant evocation of both a musical score and incised scratch marks) have a lot of character.

But if the "gray/day" rhyme is a little flat, the rhymes of "desolate" with "gate" and "lyres" with "fires" gain a lot of energy because the roots differ: "desolate" from Latin "desolans" and "gate" nearly as concrete and Germanic as a noun can be. "Lyres" comes through French from the Greek, and "fires" is not only Germanic but basic, even more basic than "gate": it might be one of the first words one would learn, and it is rhymed with a classical symbol of art, poetry, and music.

Other terms for the kind of word or root I have been calling Germanic might be Anglo-Saxon or Old English. These terms call attention to yet another part of the complex matrix in "The Darkling Thrush." The alternating lines of four and three feet, and the alternating end-rhymes, recall the formal closeness of this poem to hymns and ballads. A sophisticated work, dated "December 31, 1900"—the exact turn of the century—Hardy's poem harks back to the English ballad, to folk poetry and communal singing, while it is also a literary work, well aware of predecessors like Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." The play between modern and old, literary and folk elements, runs through the very sounds. Here is the second stanza:

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervorless as I.

The Germanic or Old English root "outleant" rhymes with the Latin or Romance root "lament." The hard, earthy, and northern monosyllables of the "pulse of germ and birth/Was shrunken hard and dry" are like one color, with the more southern and perhaps more

learned-sounding "spirit" and "fervorless" as another one.

Given such intricate patterns of sound, in great measure intuitively heard and intuitively perceived, the pattern of end-rhyme is like a grid or baseline on which a poem builds its unique, expressive structure of likeness and unlikeness. The couplet scheme (conventionally notated as *aabb*) of end-rhyme in "The dry soul rages"; the alternating scheme (conventionally notated as *abab*) of end-rhyme in "The Darkling Thrush" or "To Earthward"; the elaborate *abbaccbb* that swirls through the first stanza of "My Picture Left in Scotland"; the absence of end-rhyme in "An Old Man's Winter Night" or "The Snow Man" or "Howl"—these paradigms tell only a little about the chiming and echoing of vowel and consonant in the actual works.

As with other aspects of the sound of a poem, rhymed and unrhymed are not only matters of degree, infinitely varied; they also vary, expressively, in the context of all the other aspects of the poem. Hearing as much of that variation as possible is the goal.