

Sounding Sense: the place, problems and potential of performance in poetry

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Drawing on a strand of findings from the Cambridge Poetry Teaching Project, a small-scale research study co-ordinated through the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge, this article examines contemporary understandings of poetry performance in teaching contexts. Positioning these understandings in relation to past practices, we contend that within contemporary English teaching, the experience of performance is now largely separated from knowledge of poems developed through detailed analysis. Through an examination of theories of poetry and language more generally, we argue that performance should be more fully integrated into poetry teaching, and suggest ways in which a consideration of principles and choices relating to performance has the potential to cultivate the resources of the inner ear and to instantiate a kind of knowledge whose educational value should be given equal status with the analytical understanding of poems that currently drives the examination system.

Keywords: poetry, performance, English curriculum

Introduction

The sense of sound and what Robert Frost called the ‘sound of sense’ is (*sic*) lost unless we hear it. Increasingly our inner ear is failing and an entire sound archive, from which great poetry was not only created but appreciated and understood, is fading away. For centuries this inner ear was trained through the speaking of poetry aloud, the oral tradition not a discipline but a voluptuous joy as we absorbed into memory the resonance of sound. It is a privilege of which many, particularly children, are now deprived. (Hart 2006, p. 5)

Josephine Hart’s suggested antidote to what she sees as a deepening malaise is to make good performances and recordings of poetry readings more accessible for both the general public and in schools – though it is clear she feels this is an uphill struggle

within our current culture. But why, exactly, should this be the case? After all, in 21st-century Britain, live poetry performances are found in most towns and cities, poet appearances on radio and television programmes are on the increase, whilst audio and video recordings of poems on the internet proliferate. Meanwhile, within the education system, from primary-school classes to university English courses, poetry is read aloud by teachers, children and young people. However, as we shall argue in this paper, there is an underlying problem whose roots go deep. The relationships between hearing poetry performed, practising one's own poetry reading, and cultivating the resources of an 'inner ear' are not at all well understood. And, although educators still espouse the virtues of reading poetry aloud, the benefits of hearing and speaking it are rarely fully realised in practice.

The present exploration draws on a strand of findings from The Cambridge Poetry Teaching Project, a small-scale study in which we conducted in-depth interviews with teachers from Key Stage 1 to university about their perceptions of poetry teaching. They were an 'elite' group, in as much as all were self-professed poetry enthusiasts – which afforded a very distinct perspective on what practitioners at each stage are trying to achieve with their students, and on the challenges presented by various institutional and curricular pressures. Our aim here is to position contemporary understandings of poetry performance (especially in teaching contexts) in relation to past practices, and to theories of poetry and language more generally. We shall focus our enquiry on two main questions. First, what value does the performance of poetry have? Second, how might performance in poetry teaching be reconceived as a more integrated strategy? The former naturally entails some consideration of the role of sound; in relation to the latter we shall examine some competing theories of performance and consider how they might operate in tension with each other to inform pedagogic practice. These questions

naturally focus attention on the ontological status of the poem itself, and in reflecting on these aspects of their practice, our interviewees were indeed expressing deeply held beliefs about the essential nature of poetry. We conclude that there is a need to better understand the connection between performance and such beliefs if we are to ensure that children experience poetry in all its vitality.

For the purposes of this discussion, we use the term *performance* simply to denote the act of speaking poetry aloud, whether from the page or from memory, in any context or setting. In other words, the term does not necessarily imply the sense of a polished delivery or more formal presentation to an audience (though it may also refer to such an event). In relation to poetry teaching, this encompasses all the performance modes through which students encounter poems, both the ones they hear and their own reading aloud or recitation.

Poetry as sound

One of the most striking things to emerge from our data was the way in which the majority of our participants prioritised the experience of poetry as spoken word. This is less surprising in the primary phase, though the principle was often articulated with extraordinary passion: one Year 5 teacher saw ‘reading it out loud’ as so fundamental that it was ‘the *only* way’ to start. However, the idea that poetry should be encountered first and foremost in the aural mode was reiterated by teachers working in all phases. ‘It’s written to be spoken,’ said one secondary teacher, ‘so you’re only getting half the measure if you’re starting by dissecting the text’. Reading aloud was seen as important for understanding – ‘it’s only when poems are read aloud, I think, that students understand them properly’ (university lecturer) – and for enjoyment – ‘it’s really important to me because it’s so joyful ... it’s a real pleasure’ (secondary teacher). Nor was performance seen as a one-off event: as one teacher educator said, the aim was ‘to

make sure that it's read aloud quite frequently, not just once'. Some ventured further, and wondered whether the effects were enhanced when students initially encountered a poem aurally but without sight of the printed text. 'I often read a poem and they don't see it, and that is because I want it to live in their heads,' one primary teacher explained. And two of the teacher educators spoke enthusiastically about a Poetry Archive project where experiencing poems through listening only produced an observable difference in the quality of the children's attention. What seemed to be shared by all these participants was the sense that a culture of performance is essential for developing appreciation and understanding of poetry; conversely, a culture focusing almost exclusively on the written text may short-circuit sensuous, embodied and emotional apprehension. The small number of participants who put relatively little emphasis on reading aloud were operating in schools where individual teachers were given little scope to vary a set of (often rather functionalist) directives on teaching methods, which generally left them feeling that their personal and professional judgment had been compromised.¹

The practice of reading aloud was therefore seen by nearly everyone as a vital way of engaging with the distinctive and intrinsic nature of the form. As one secondary teacher put it:

Reading a poem aloud is so important for students because I think the sound is so ... inherent within the meaning. It's so much part of the meaning that they need to hear it.

The resources of sound

These comments may be seen as continuing traditions of recitation and literary study that have privileged the oral and performative aspect of poetry, that tend to regard the visual text as a transcript of the spoken one, and that subscribe, like James Reeves

(1965, p. 29), to the view that ‘the printing on the page is really a poem at second hand’. And yet, current practices have shifted attention towards the page: the majority of poetry reading is a silent, private affair, whilst a body of contemporary poetry appears composed for the eye as much as for the ear. Moreover, the UK curriculum and assessment framework (and also Ofsted reports) treats the poem almost solely as a print-construction, with the 2007 revision making only a slight concession towards engagement with the spoken form.¹¹ This situation was noted by a number of our interviewees, some of whom observed that no one is ever invited to comment on an audio recording of a poem in an examination.

One of the difficulties of building a vital sense of a poem as oral performance into teaching practices in a coherent and sustained way, however, is that its phonic effects on its audience are cumulative, and, as Don Paterson puts it, ‘achieved instinctively by the poet and registered subliminally by the reader’ (Paterson 2007, p. 65). The difficulty is compounded by the central role accorded to rhythm in many of the most dominant theories of poetry. Derek Attridge, for example, suggests that to understand and enjoy poetry we have to hear and participate in its rhythms – which include metrical rhythms, but also other patterns within the poem. (Attridge 1995). Even more insistently, Ivor Winters writes, ‘the rhythm of the poem permeates the entire poem as pervasively as blood permeates the body: remove it and you have a corpse’ (Winters 1951, p. 434). And in perhaps the most influential of all modern theories of the significance of sound in poetry, T. S. Eliot’s *auditory imagination*, the most profound level reached by poetry is ‘the feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end’ (Eliot 1933, p. 118). Again, this stresses the idea that

rhythmic modulations communicate something of immense importance that is not available to conscious thought.

The felt significance of rhythm in poetry is perhaps explained by its part in our lives in general: rhythm is woven into the very fabric of existence, but, like the beating of our hearts, it creeps into our awareness only occasionally. A great deal of recent research investigating the nature of rhythmic processes in living organisms, or *chronobiology*, points to the fact that physiological rhythms operating at all levels of biological systems appear to be essential to life itself (Clayton *et al.* 2004). Moreover, studies in entrainmentⁱⁱⁱ indicate that the highly complex ways in which we ‘tune in’ to and interact with perceived rhythms are vital for physical and social wellbeing.

But – and here is the rub – it is extraordinarily difficult to teach anything very useful or meaningful *about* rhythm in poetry. As Stephen Tunncliffe observes:

One cannot isolate or study – let alone *teach* – rhythm in poetry. Just because it is so central to the art form, it is bound up with almost every other feature capable of being discussed about poems, particularly those concerned with sound and pace. (Tunncliffe 1984, p. 127)

Clearly, if poetry is stuck on the page it is hard to appreciate its rhythms, much less participate in them. It is not easy, however, to bridge the experience of the way sound and rhythm modulate sense in the performance of poems (which is deep-rooted but largely pre-conscious) and the detailed exploration of these effects as articulated through analysis. It is our contention that contemporary practice has consequently tended to create a space for experience of performance that is largely separate from the kinds of knowledge of poems developed through detailed analysis. We shall now discuss some of the implications of this largely unexamined divide.

Implications for teaching

There are two main ways of conceptualising the value and the function of poetry as sound within contemporary teaching and, although these do not stand in obvious contradiction to each other, the relationship between them is deeply problematic. Within the first model, which we might characterise as *experiential*, performance is conceived as the mode in which the poem's distinctive qualities may be apprehended as a whole. Here, the purpose of performance is to provide experience of the poem as something other than 'metrified prose' – Reeves' derogatory term for a diminished conception of poetry in which the rhythm functions as a musical accompaniment to make it more attractive to the ear. (A long way from T. S. Eliot's claims for the profound reach of the auditory imagination.) Reeves regards it as unfortunate that most people tend to regard poetry in this way, but acknowledges:

the danger is less if they have been given a 'poetic' approach to poetry from the start; if, that is, they have been taught to enjoy the sound and rhetoric as a total experience, without troubling prematurely about the thought. (Reeves 1958, pp. 82–83)

This approach is also conceived as a necessary corrective for modern teaching methods that focus primarily on analysis of the poem on the page. Thus the best way to ensure ongoing pleasure and engagement (at least up to the middle stages of secondary school) is, as Linda Hall instructs, simply to 'read lots of poetry to our pupils on a regular basis. Let the poems speak for themselves' (Hall 1989, p. 51).

The *analytic* approach, on the other hand, focuses on performance in order to understand the expressive techniques that make meaning fully active. This approach tends to focus more on points of detail in relation to sound qualities than its more experiential counterpart, fending off the danger of treating poetry as decorated prose by insisting that sound functions as a primary expressive component of meaning, even where this is not immediately obvious. Nearly all theorists agree that there is an

important relationship between sound and sense in poetry, though with significant variations in ideas about exactly what it is. Within most contemporary secondary and higher education teaching, though, this concept tends to be applied as a formalist of analysis of the poem on the page, after an initial (often rather perfunctory) reading of the poem out loud has taken place, with minimal commentary or discussion. As Hall says, despite the fact that other ideals and practices have been urged from some important sources (such as the Bullock report, 1975), it is clear that teachers nevertheless ‘continue to employ a cluster of strategies, all of them linked to an overall analytical focus’ (Hall 1989, p. 51). Thus, in practice, the expressive conception of sound as an adjunct of meaning in poetry tends to be a rather fraught and inconsistent business. A sound feature may be picked out, slightly arbitrarily, to illustrate its mimetic quality in context, whilst others go without comment or are assigned a purely formal role. And since it is difficult to apply the expressive concept in analysis of the poem as whole, it is rather inevitably confined to a set of isolated technical comments on local features. Such sporadic, arbitrary forms of commentary are, moreover, encouraged by criteria-led marking schemes.

A further difficulty with this approach is that rhythm – the essential distinguishing feature of poetic form – is not very amenable to this kind of formal analysis. This is because it is hard for students to describe rhythmic features accurately and also because the approach tends to rationalise and rigidify qualities that are actually more fluid and subliminal in experience. As Richard Andrews explains:

Part of the problem with poetry is that there is no adequate modern prosody. Consequently we find it hard to talk about the range of rhythms in contemporary verse. And as a further consequence we don’t talk about it and begin to rule it out of our sensibility. And because poetry is so implicated with rhythm, poetry goes too. (Andrews 1991, p. 50)

In practice, most expert teachers of poetry switch between the two approaches. Through the experiential model, the value of performance in its own right is asserted as a means of cultivating enjoyment of poetry and unconsciously developing the responsiveness of the inner ear. But it is not directly linked to the analysis of poems; indeed, it is wary of applying the wrong kind of thought either too early or too intensively. As an early years teacher in another recent study put it, ‘you don’t [teach poems]. You read them. You give them a high profile. You explore them with children.’ (Perkins 2011, p. 36).

Through the analytic model, on the other hand, phonic qualities in poetry performance are recognised where these can be understood as expressing the underlying meaning. In practice this is much more difficult than it sounds, and performance of the poem then tends to become a prelude to the ‘real’ work of analysis and interpretation, in which sound plays a relatively minor part and rhythm is almost completely ignored. These models therefore tend to pull apart from one another, with the second increasingly predominating as students move up the educational ladder.

Putting Humpty Poetry together again: embodied knowledge

How, then, might these two approaches be reconciled to provide the basis for a more effective and coherent pedagogy? First, we would argue, there needs to be a greater recognition that the analytical approach to poetry, although it has many strengths and virtues, is in itself inadequate and incomplete. It can only work properly in conjunction with the more holistic approach that accords the practice of performance an essential, rather than ancillary, function. This is not because the analytical approach is necessarily detached from the ‘experience of the poem’ (which it regularly invokes), although, in practice, this approach does tend to focus more on the poem as text. More fundamentally, the analytical approach cannot be self-sufficient because it has no adequate way of engaging with the sound elements of poetry that are not apprehended

as directly expressive of the poem's assigned meaning. It cannot cultivate the inner ear or develop a sense of the power of auditory imagination because it is predicated on the notion that sound is simply an embodiment of sense. Superficially, this might appear identical to the performance precept that the sense of the poem should always be the prime determinant of how it should be performed. The difference, in fact, though subtle, is profound. Making sense the main guide to choices in performance is a way of enabling the most powerful possible interaction between the poem's sound qualities, especially rhythm, and its meaning. It does not, however, reduce sound to meaning, which is the near inevitable consequence of an exclusive reliance on the analytic approach. As Amittai Aviram argues, the cumulative effect of sound patterns is to create 'the non-sense element of poetry [which] cannot be subsumed into sense as one among various other rhetorical devices.' (Aviram 1994, p. 227). Rather, he goes on, it is rhythm that 'controls both elements of the poem, meaning and sound'. (p.2) These elements are best conceived as in dialectical tension with each other, a concept that justifies a twin-track approach to pedagogy that is responsive to relationships between sound and meaning without collapsing the two into each other.

To adopt such a twin-track approach, we have to see regular performance of poems in the classroom not merely as an anchor point for the dissection of meaning and technique, but as fulfilling a heuristic purpose of its own. The possibility that performance may constitute a form of knowledge and understanding in its own right was acknowledged implicitly by a number of our interviewees; for example:

[it's a] first rule of thumb – you can't know it until you've heard it and tasted it, you know put it on your tongue. [university lecturer]

I don't see any other way in which you can really feel a poem, unless you read it to yourself. [early years teacher]

Here is an implicit recognition that the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'sensory

experience' (through tasting and feeling) are bound up together; that performance may be seen as a means of taking the poem into ourselves, experiencing it poetically and subjectively rather than examining it as object or artifact; and of the value of embodied experience, as opposed to purely cognitive or cerebral engagement. This accords with an accumulating body of neuroscience evidence which challenges the embedded view that the senses operate essentially as mechanical servants of the mind. Rather, the perceptions of the body are thoroughly integrated into our cognitive state, such that to speak of what the body 'knows' is far from metaphorical: the body *does* know, and often knows things that the conscious mind does not.^{iv} But perhaps this is something that poets have known all along. 'Even if one forgets [the poem] afterwards,' wrote Denise Levertov '... one's body doesn't forget' (Levertov and Spears Brooker 1998, p. 80). Speaking poetry may therefore be understood as vital in affording a properly embodied experience of its rhythms and cadences, and in allowing us to feel at subconscious levels the way the vowels and consonants shape the mouth and regulate the flow of air – all of which may contribute in subtle and complex ways to our overall apprehension and understanding of the poem.^v From this it follows that listening to poetry being well read and practising speaking it for oneself should go hand in hand.

Potentially, this connection is an important source of developing knowledge and understanding, but it requires a reflective space within which awareness of what may be understood in this way can be developed and affirmed. The dominant model with the practice of our participants is that of a teacher's reading followed up with a range of student activities aimed at developing understanding certain aspects of the poem – and very rarely is any link made between the distinctive qualities of the reading itself and these activities. Very few of our teachers drew students' attention to effects the teacher was trying to achieve in their own reading, and advice on the students' own

performance was minimal. There appear to be no models from which to develop effective performance, nor opportunities to reflect on different styles or approaches in any depth. Indeed, the practice of performance seems to take place inside its own self-sufficient sphere, validated by the assumed merits of experiencing poetry as sound *per se*, just as the analysis of poems takes place in another separate – but equally self-sufficient – domain. This is corroborated by other researchers who have conducted broader surveys, though Dennis Carter, interestingly, suggests that the Welsh experience is different because of the Eisteddfodau, the competitive musical and poetry festivals which take place annually in schools, villages and towns. ‘Most children in Wales, therefore, have plentiful opportunities to learn and speak poetry both individually and in groups’ (Carter 1998, p. 14). This is also the experience of children in some other European countries.^{vi}

In England, however, it seems likely that the general decline in the practices of choral speaking and recitation has contributed to the reduction of spaces for discussing both the techniques and underlying principles involved in speaking verse. As a result many students, even those opting to specialise in literature at higher-degree level, appear to lack confidence in reading verse aloud. As two university lecturers remarked:

*Most students ... aren't actually used to reading aloud.
Often they read terribly badly ...*

We would argue that one reason for the gap between professed ideals and institutional practices may be that the link between understanding the sense of poems and performing them has been weakened in recent years. While the commitment to poetry as an embodied mode of experience remains strong, less in evidence is the central precept of past advice on poetry performance: that successful readings are based on understanding of what the poem means. One can trace this precept back at least to the classic texts of the 1940s and 1950s; it resonates throughout the writings of Mona

Swann, Marjorie Hourd, and James Reeves, for instance, and can be most clearly in J. A. Symonds' 1901 edict, 'Attend strictly to the sense and the pauses: the lines will then be perfectly melodious' (quoted in Harding 1976, p. 36). This stance does endure in some of the more recent poetry teaching advice which maintains the supremacy of the oral mode: Hall, for example, opines that, if 'speaking with meaning is our first aim, then long before the first reading aloud the mind of the readers must be focused on the meaning above all.' (Hall 1996, p. 78). However, the perceived need to cultivate such performance values over time appears to have become exceptional, and performance generally seems to be relegated to an ancillary role. Learning effective performance as an essential means for understanding relations between sound and sense is no longer advocated in the detailed, carefully exemplified form that it once was. Compared with the earlier, classic texts, recent professional literature provides few examples of poems explored in detail in relation to performance.

Rhythm and dramatic expression

The lack of such models within contemporary teaching culture means that there is also little awareness of the kinds of choices that may be involved. It is possible, for instance, to distinguish two major differences of emphasis within theories of poetry performance. The first, which we will call the *dramatic* mode, is a more naturalistic style of reading that brings out the expressive and emotional content of the poem as fully as possible. Often associated with poetry readings by actors, this was the mode favoured by the majority of our participants who articulated any preference. Similarly, most traditional advice on reading poetry in the classroom encourages variation in tone and expressive vitality; Reeves, for example, states that reading poetry well requires 'a good voice, patience, understanding, some histrionic power, even some personality' (Reeves 1958, p. 14). Indeed, many teachers clearly relished the opportunity to perform verse

themselves and enjoyed the dramatic element, no doubt encouraged by the fact that this approach has obvious advantages in securing the attention and engagement of a class. It is interesting to note, alongside this, that a number of teachers observed a preference in both students and syllabuses for dramatic monologue, as opposed to more lyric or meditative forms of poetry; both could possibly be seen as symptomatic of an age that is increasingly oriented towards the dramatic mode and highly attuned to self-fashioning through performance.

The second tradition, which we will call the *poetic* mode, has a rather different emphasis and assumes rhythm to be the poem's most essential feature. Proponents, who include a significant proportion of poets, tend to disdain readings that obscure the poem's rhythms with too much histrionic power – rather as the poem itself can be taken over by a speaker using the poem primarily as a vehicle for their own personality.

Winters gives a particularly stringent criticism of this position, stating that '[T]he reader has no more right to revise the rhythms in the interest of what he considers an effective presentation than he has the right to revise any other aspects of the language. The poem, once set in motion, should appear to move of its own momentum.' (Winters 1951, pp. 86–7). Influential contemporary poets, such as Don Paterson, have also insisted that, although all poetry is in some sense 'dramatic', poems 'are *not* primarily dramatic constructions, and should *not* be 'acted'' (Paterson 2010, p. 496, original italics). He goes on to suggest that, paradoxically, 'a more 'neutral performance ... can be far more expressive, as it *expresses* the fact that the meaning is nicely ambiguous' (497, italics original).

Interestingly, only two of our interviewees articulated any awareness of the distinction between these two modes of performance. One, a secondary school teacher, reported varying her reading style to suit particular poems, but expressed a preference

for what she termed a ‘neutral’ style that was less dramatically expressive and more closely attuned to the poem’s rhythms. ‘I don’t like people imposing their own story on the language ... to get the language ‘out to the kids’’. The other, a university teacher, was even clearer, stating, ‘a poem is not a dramatic utterance, therefore the full dramatic resources of the voice are kind of irrelevant to what the poem is doing’. Expanding on this, he suggested that a poem ‘doesn’t express a character directly, even if it’s a dramatic monologue. It’s still not speech quite – it may have the rhythms of speech but it isn’t exactly speech’.

We are certainly not suggesting that any hard and fast line needs to be drawn between these distinctive reading styles, nor advocating the wholesale adoption of either, since each clearly has characteristic strengths as well as inherent dangers. Nevertheless, it seems clear that, for a variety of reasons, the dramatic mode has become dominant. And if, as we have argued, rhythm is at the centre of the ‘poemness’ of the poem, there would appear to be a need for wider awareness of different ways of embodying rhythm in performance – if cultivation of the inner ear is not to be lost.

Exploration through example

Our research indicates that there is currently very little discussion with students of what they are trying to achieve in reading verse aloud. Similarly, there is scant coverage in professional teaching texts of what, specifically, the activity may involve, even though performance continues periodically to be advocated in general terms. We have argued that there is a need to open up debate about the underlying principles of verse speaking, so that teachers can become more aware of the different traditions, of their competing strengths, and of choices in performance. We have also argued that there is a need to both exemplify and explore these possibilities much more fully than is done currently through particular examples. Implicit within these arguments is a sense that awareness

of the rhythmic dimensions of poetry is particularly hard to develop, and that the meta-language currently available for doing so is inadequate. With some trepidation, we now venture an exploration of some of these issues in relation to one poem and its reading, in order to offer for further debate a view of what kinds of knowledge and awareness might develop from considering choices in verse speaking, particularly in relation to rhythm. The discussion is very roughly appropriate to university-level teaching or perhaps, with a little modification, for a sixth-form group, but we hope that the principles may also be transferrable to teaching for younger students. To provide a ‘worked example’ in its entirety requires exposition at some length, but we feel this is justified by the conviction that experience of wholeness of the poem is paramount.

‘The Sick Rose’ by William Blake

O Rose thou art sick!

The invisible worm

That flies in the night

In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.

We have chosen this particular poem partly because it is used to illustrate teaching strategies and best practice in a fairly recent book by Trevor Wright (2005) that is in some ways characteristic of contemporary attitudes towards poetry teaching, at least within secondary schools, sixth forms and higher-education. Wright begins his exploration of ‘The Sick Rose’ with the observation that ‘when you read a poem like

this and ask for reactions, children will immediately self-censor' (Wright 2005, p. 45). He suggests that some secondary-school students will almost certainly find the poem 'stupid, or boring' and feel they don't get what it is about, but he argues, usefully, that such honest reactions should be respected and worked with, rather than dismissed. He goes on to show how the apparent simplicity of the poem's phrasing is, indeed, rendered complicated and potentially confusing by the lack of clear context for understanding its subject: the Rose and the worm. He demonstrates that this difficulty is nevertheless a significant part of how the poem works on us, and suggests ways in which pupils who are initially baffled or frustrated may be led towards engagement with various levels of ambiguity and openness in the poem's meaning. This is insightful and helpful, as far as it goes. But the focus in terms of understanding is entirely directed towards interpretation. The assumption is that the initial reading out loud, which will have been undertaken by the teacher, will have left a large proportion of the pupils confused or hostile. The question of whether a different quality of initial reading might have produced greater engagement – allowing students to feel they had understood something in a sensory mode at the emotive heart of the poem – is sidestepped. There is no suggestion that providing an opportunity to think about the rhythm and phrasing of the poem (or indeed to try out different options in relation to these) might have been an alternative (or complementary) route to developing engagement and understanding. And, perhaps most crucially, there is no hint that returning to the experience of reading the poem out loud towards the end of the session might restore its wholeness. In this respect, the advice appears wholly characteristic of the dominant practice in secondary schools and universities. The initial reading out of a poem is simply seen as a curtain raiser; the real work consists in its interpretation, and this is seen as largely separate from the experience of the poem in performance. But how might it look, if we tried to

restore some sense of the choices to be made in performing this poem, and to relate them to the process of understanding and interpretation?

Beginning with the poem's rhythm, which we feel should be of central concern, the first thing to note is that the poem has the appearance of a miniature ballad, with two four-line, cross-rhymed stanzas communicating a tragic story (the worm destroying the Rose's life) in a succinct manner, with simple diction. These are all features associated with the classic ballad form, even though one would hesitate to call Blake's little poem, in any simple sense, a ballad. It would be helpful if the students were able to draw on experience of poetry in ballad forms, but even without such background knowledge, it will be immediately obvious that the poem is distinctive in both its overall brevity and in the short length of its lines, which vary between 4 and 6 syllables each. The poem has been laid out to emphasise this compressed quality, which becomes even more apparent if the poem is rearranged, running alternate lines on and joining the two stanzas together. It would then become a single quatrain of two rhyming couplets, with four major beats, or stressed syllables in each line – exactly like most ballads, though still distinguished by extreme brevity.

Focusing on form in this way highlights choices in performance. For example, should the line divisions be respected, however lightly, or should the poem be read as though it were a single prose sentence (ignoring the stanza division as well), after the initial declaration that the Rose is sick? Another advantage of seeing the poem's rhythms playing off the conventions of ballads is that ballad metre is distinguished by having a regular number of strongly stressed syllables in each line, without necessarily having a regular syllable count or the using same metrical feet throughout. In other words, the rhythm is characterised by the strong stresses, irrespective of their precise position in the lines. Realising this, and perhaps introducing slight pauses that slow the

reading down to take account of the short line divisions, we then become aware, without in any way forcing the issue, that the strong beats occur on words that are especially important, emotive and interesting. The strongly stressed ballad metre helps foreground the relationship between 'rose' and 'sick', 'flies' and 'night', 'dark' and 'love', and so on, making the ear especially attentive to the resonance between these often slightly unusual juxtapositions. A good reading will slow down to allow sufficient emphasis on the stresses (in a way that still feels natural) for these resonances to be experienced fully in the body, even before they are taken up in the conscious mind.

Possible emphases in phrasing the poem, and its suggestive pauses, are also brought into stronger focus by the distinctive division into short lines. For instance, the active agent in the poem, 'The invisible worm', is introduced on a single line as the subject of the longish sentence that constitutes the remainder of the poem after its opening declaration. The main verb in the first half of this sentence, 'found out', is separated from its subject, the worm, by a subordinate clause consisting of two linked phrases ('that flies in the night / in the howling storm'). A good reader will indicate in their phrasing where a sentence picks up its principal direction again, with its main verb, after the interpolated subordinate clause. The stanza division here suggests reading with a slightly longer pause, to indicate that we are moving back from the qualifying statement to the main line of action. The lines in the subordinate clause might well be read at a slightly faster pace, so that the return to the main line of action is registered with somewhat more deliberation. It is worth noticing, moreover, how the two phrases in the qualifying clause are aligned rhythmically in a symmetrical relationship with each other. 'That flies in the night' and 'In the howling storm' are mirror images of each other rhythmically (iamb-anapaest; anapaest-iamb). The repetition of the formulation 'in the X' in the two adjoining anapaests provides an opportunity for this mirroring

effect to be brought out subtly in performance phrasing; thus the uncanny aspect of the poem's strange juxtapositions can be embodied, lightly, in the way it is spoken. This is an aural correspondence that a good reading can subtly emphasise, since it helps establish a pattern of connections that helps feed the auditory imagination and the inner ear.

Finally, but by no means exhaustively, one might wish to think about the obviously distinctive rhythms of certain lines. Should a reading make something of this, relating it to the sense of the poem in some way? The second line, for instance, contains six syllables, but these are all very short, with the exception of the last word, 'worm'. It is very hard to say 'The invisible' without the tongue cantering through it; it is also possible to emphasise the slight undulating movement in the rhythm, here, that in context could impart a writhing, worm-like feel. And the mimetic effect is enhanced by slowing down the pronunciation of 'worm', drawing the word out slightly at the end of the line to unfurl its insidious horror. Blake's writing was powerfully influenced by Milton, and the image of a worm flying invisibly through a tumultuous region of the night to prey on innocent beauty invokes parallels with Satan's journey from hell to corrupt Eve in *Paradise Lost*. The image of an *invisible* worm penetrating and corrupting the body provokes horror at a literal level too, of course. These underlying associations could thus legitimate a lingering on the word 'worm'.

A rather different effect could be established by lingering on the stressed syllables of another rhythmically distinct line, the Rose's bed 'Of crimson joy'. This is the shortest line in the poem, and the only one with a purely iambic rhythm. The notion of a fly-borne canker worm being implanted within the inner recesses of a rose's bloom, and consequently blighting the flower, is conveyed perfectly adequately as the surface meaning of this image. The rhythmic distinctiveness and brevity of this line should alert

the reader to its special charge, however, and indeed a range of metaphorical associations need to be activated to bring out the full force of the poem here. At one level, the bed 'of crimson joy' may denote the sensuous pleasure encapsulated by a red rose in bloom, but the phrasing is clearly suggestive of other meanings too, particularly those relating to sexual love. 'Crimson' is a variety of red: a royal, celebratory shade of the colour that would at first seem to intensify 'joy' in a positive way. But the 'crimson joy' of the bed also carries associations with the blood-stained sheets that are the consequence of 'deflowering', the enforced loss of innocence. In this context, the juxtaposition of 'crimson' and 'joy' operates like a little time bomb, waiting to explode in multiple directions in the head. Lingering slightly on the stressed syllables in this line is thus a way of allowing potentially explosive contradictions time to embed themselves, perhaps unconsciously, before the final rhyme between 'joy' and 'destroy' brings these out fully.

This approach is constructed from a strong awareness of rhythmic qualities. Whilst it takes account of the strictures of the *poetic* style of performance, variations in phrasing, pace and emphasis also bring out expressive possibilities inherent to the poem's inner drama. Different readers will, of course, perform a poem in different ways, and our example is not intended to be prescriptive. But we hope it illustrates the richness and subtlety of thought that can go into trying to perform a poem well; moreover that it indicates that the kind of knowledge which comes out of this process is not the same as that which comes from analysis of the poem on the page, even where that analysis tries to take some account of the way words sound.

Conclusion

Back in 2004, John Gordon, writing on the way poetry communicates through sound, argued that an understanding of its modality would be of profound interest for debates

about the future of the English curriculum, not least because of the increasing role of audiovisual technology and new media. He called for the development of an educational discourse reflecting on the public utterance of poetry (Gordon 2004). Our own study indicates that enthusiastic teachers of poetry remain strongly committed to the sound modality of the form and try to build opportunities for the experience of poetry as performance into the classroom. But it also suggests that, in practice, performance tends to be relegated to a subsidiary role, either as a prelude to the task of analysis of the poem on the page or as a student activity in which little detailed attention is paid to what they are trying to achieve. The full potential of performance for developing understanding is therefore rarely realised. We have argued that there is a need for a more searching debate on the purpose and value of performance in relation to poetry, and for more of what Mike Hayhoe and Stephen Parker call ‘transactional talk about how to perform the poem’ that ‘indirectly celebrates its form and meaning’ (Hayhoe and Parker 1988, p. 48). Such indirect celebration must be a primary means for re-activating the ‘voluptuous joy’ of sound and sense in poetry, that Hart (2006), among others, sees us as in danger of failing to pass on to our children. But we would argue that, beyond this, performance has the potential not only to celebrate form and meaning, but also to instantiate a kind of knowledge whose educational value should be given equal status with the analytical understanding of poems that currently drives the examination system. Only then will the full cultivation of the resources inner ear, which reaches deep into the auditory imagination, be achieved.

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- ⁱ However, these individuals were also at an early stage in their careers, and there was evidence that the teachers who had acquired confidence in their professional status and in their own convictions about the teaching of poetry had also been able to develop a strong personal practice, in which they were able to negotiate institutional requirements.
- ⁱⁱ See John Gordon Gordon, J. 2008. True soundings: The findings of the 2007 ofsted report , poetry in schools and pupils' responses to poetry they hear. *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education* 15, no. 2: 223 - 33., 'Sound[']s right: pupils' responses to heard poetry and the revised National Curriculum for English for a full appraisal of the frameworks in relation to modality'.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Entrainment refers to a specific phenomenon whereby 'two rhythmic processes interact with each other in such a way that they adjust towards and eventually 'lock in' to a common phase and/or periodicity' Clayton, M., R. Sager and U. Will. 2004. In time with the music: The concept of entrainment and its significance for ethnomusicology. *ESEM CounterPoint* 1..
- ^{iv} Most famously, the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio produced some astounding studies that nevertheless demonstrated convincingly that 'The body ... contributes a content that is part and parcel of the workings of the normal mind 'Damasio, A.R. 1995. *Descartes' error*. London: Quill. .
- ^v Don Paterson has made a cogent argument that, language exhibits a deep phonoaesthetic iconicity: contrary to the persistent structuralist view of words as arbitrary signs, the physical sound and feel of words does bear relation to their meanings.
- ^{vi} For example in Greece, the national curriculum includes memorising, studying and performing substantial traditional poems throughout the school system, while in France, primary school children memorise and recite a number of different poems in each year of the primary education.