

The Sound Sense of Poetry: Reading Techniques

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I

The two parts of my title attempt both to state and exemplify the present theme. In doing so they imitate the workings of poetic language. The words ‘Sound Sense’ try to combine a colloquial usage that is close to ‘good sense’ or ‘wisdom’, yet also includes a shading of ‘well made’ or ‘ringing true’. When linked to ‘of Poetry’, they also point towards the relation of ‘sound’ and ‘sense’ in art works of this kind — as if there were an invisible hyphen between the two words: ‘sound-sense’. Multiplying implications by the combination of words is what phrases in poetry frequently do, and the exact extent of such implications will often be hard to draw with any definitive certainty. In the main title, what is being signaled is the complex matter of how poetry can be felt as ‘sound’ (well-made, unflawed, good, true) in relation to its ‘sense’ (the feel of its texture, and the meaning it articulates). At the same time, its ‘sense’ (the feel of its texture) is indistinguishable from, though perhaps not quite synonymous with, its auditory shape, its ‘sound’. In short, though the meaning and the auditory structure of a poem are conceptually distinguishable, in performance they are projected or received as one and the same — and this precariously balanced unity of sound and meaning is what makes good poems ring true while they are being experienced.

Yet poems can also contain senses that are not simultaneously audible, senses that will be conceptual condensations from multiple readings and reflection on

those experiences. Using the familiar ambiguity in English between the present participle and gerund forms of the verb, the subtitle offers two senses that are distinguished by different degrees of intonational emphasis on first one and then the other word. If the main stress falls on the adjectival gerundive 'Reading', then the implication of the phrase is that the study of 'The Sound Sense of Poetry' will simply offer techniques for reading poems. This is also, then, writing about how to read poetry, about the techniques that readers can use. However, if the emphasis is on the second word, 'Techniques', with the first word a present participle of the verb, then the suggestion is that readers are going to find out how to read the techniques that poets use. To appreciate the sound sense of poetry, in this aspect, is to be able to read the techniques that the poets are deploying in particular works. Though not perhaps quite simultaneously audible, these two understandings of the subtitle 'Reading Techniques' can be integrated into a more complex proposition such as that to appreciate the sound sense of poetry is to have techniques for reading the techniques that poets are using.

One of the reasons why these meanings can be sensibly integrated is because, for poets in the first place, they have to be aspects of the same process. Poets cannot intelligently hear the implications in and for a work underway of the techniques they are deploying if they are not themselves also readers of those techniques. Thus, the achievement named by the main title in a poem being composed will be dependent upon a poet's activating the reflexive processes of the subtitle. We can hear a trace of such reflexivity in a phrase of William Empson's when he writes in a letter that 'the poetry I hammered out' could 'strike me as unfit for publication.'¹ He hammers it, and it strikes him back. Similarly, for readers of poetry to enjoy as fully as possible when reading a particular poem the achievement named in the main title, they might best equip themselves with means for

1 William Empson, Letter to Christopher Ricks dated 19 Jan 1975, printed as Appendix 3 in *The Complete Poems* ed. John Haffenden (London: Allen Lane, 2000), pp.127-8.

hearing the contribution of the techniques evident in the structure of that particular work to the ensemble that is the poem's sound and sense. Reading poems, I would suggest, is not then different in kind from reading anything else. However, it is different in the degree to which the attention being paid to the written text is one that has benefited from a learned awareness of the habits and practices that have gone into making this kind of art. We teach ourselves how to enjoy poetry by familiarizing ourselves with what to expect, thus becoming more sensitive to the unexpected, and more adept at integrating expected and unexpected elements together into the experience of a poem freshly encountered.

Many issues remain to be explored which have been assumed in this brief synopsis of what I will be writing about; but one of them should be brought forward now — not because it can be laid to rest at the start, rather because it cannot be readily laid to rest at all. This is the relationship in poetry, of crucial importance for its cultural value, between the two senses that are combined in the title's use of the word 'sound'.² In itself, this word promises that a poem can 'sound sound' — it can be felt as true because of its auditory shape. Is this a form of primitive magic? Is it no more nor less than a super-subtle case of rhetorical persuasiveness? Why can an epigrammatic couplet sound so decisively true at the point where its rhymes join the two halves in an answering echo? Given that poetry in some languages doesn't rhyme at all, this clinching effect must be both culturally and linguistically specific. The importance of the issue touches upon the ancient debate between the poets and the philosophers. If the relationship between what a poem says and how it says it may be reduced to a level of conflicted interference, or can be effected by the addition of non-rational devices for rhetorical persuasiveness, then philosophers have a point when they say that the

2 Henry James deploys the metaphor in 'The Author of *Beltraffio*' when Mark Ambient comments on his own prose: 'When I rap it with my knuckles it doesn't give the right sound.' *Complete Stories 1874-1884* (New York: The Library of America, 1999), p.891.

musical methods of poetry prevent it from being wholly truthful.³ If, on the other side, it can be shown that all writing is subject to conflicted interference between sound and sense, or equally that all writing is constructed with non-rational devices of persuasion, then there is no necessary reason why, on this level playing field, poems have any less access to the truth of things. Not only is this the version of the case that my title asserts and hopes to justify by means of the promise in its subtitle, it is a version which has not abandoned the belief that if there is conflicted interference between sound and sense in all language use, then the conflict can either be resolved by attunement, or deployed to increase meaningfulness — poetry being one of the places where such attunements and deployments can be experienced as a way of learning to think, feel, and experience life more widely, deeply, and fully.

The sounds of particular words and their capacities to rhyme or not with other words are contingencies that have developed with the haphazard, but at the same time communally purposeful, evolution of a natural language. It seems so uncannily apt that in English ‘womb’ rhymes with ‘tomb’; but is it so apt that ‘love’ rhymes with ‘shove’? Yet I might also say it’s fairly useless for poets that ‘womb’ rhymes with ‘tomb’, because the familiar idea is too plainly stated by the rhyme itself. The French poet Malherbe said much the same about ‘amour’ and

3 Veronica Forrest-Thomson believed that poetic techniques were non-rational devices for producing ‘unrealism’. See *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978). Nietzsche expressed the idea — in *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), sec. 151, p. 82 — that poetry traffics in ‘unclear thinking’ thanks to its rhythmical effects. For a discussion of this issue in relation to Wordsworth’s use of ‘superadded’ in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, see my *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.160-1; and for a discussion of how Wordsworth’s theory of metrical addition might contribute to a particular work, see my ‘Reparation and “The Sailor’s Mother”’, *In the Circumstances: About Poems and Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.20-22.

'toujours'. Similarly, while a poet today might have great difficulties with the rhyme of 'love' and 'dove', because again the romantic picture of the nestling birds has been worked to death and the rhyme automatically triggers the too-familiar idea, so the less superficially promising rhyme of 'love' and 'shove' might stimulate a poet's art. Clearly, what is to be understood by the soundness of a poem is no more evident than the promise in the title that such soundness will be in a necessary relationship with the poem's sounds. To make an approach to what is further involved in these issues and their interrelatedness, it would be as well to look carefully at particular cases of what a possible truth may sound like in a specific poem.

II

There are a bewildering number of guides to reading and writing poems. These guides, in their different ways, set out to give their readers a sense of poetry's forms and patterns and possibilities, past and present. Such surveys are offered at an un-scary level of helpful-sounding generalization with relatively straightforward examples to illustrate the kinds of poetic forms and the points being made about them. They tend to promote a craft-directed conception of the poetic art, because they necessarily separate the individual performance from the type of poem that it exemplifies. Thus Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' is a sonnet, and one in the Italian style. Among the most enjoyable and

4 John Hollander, *Rhymes Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, 3rd edn. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). See also, for just a few of the many possible, Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), James Fenton, *An Introduction to English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003), Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (London: Vintage, 2004), Jeffrey Wainwright, *Poetry: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2004), and John Redmond, *How to Write a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

bravura of these performances is John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason*, a book which exemplifies its observations by performing them in like verse, and it can be warmly recommended to people who want to 'find their feet' in poetry.⁴ There is also the slightly more technically abstract *Meter and Meaning: An Introduction to Rhythm in Poetry* by Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge, a practical textbook for improving our ability to hear a poem.⁵ If I draw attention to a couple of problems with the approach in this guide it is not because, again, it won't be of use to those starting out in poetry.

Reading and writing poems are activities like swimming, riding a bicycle, or playing a musical instrument. You can graduate from not having the knack, to being able to do it; and you can be better or worse at it depending on how much you practise and how seriously you take it. There will also be limits to how well or badly you can manage it, about which there may be little you can do. You can practise the movements on the edge of the pool; someone can hold the bike while you pretend to balance or steer or back-pedal; you can scrape at, or blow into, or hit the instrument in the fashion recommended by the teacher. However, when it comes to the activity itself, you're either doing it or you're not — and doing it means making all the aspects of the activity work for you, in a way that is also convincing to others, in a coordinated fashion and at the same time. Your children wobbling around the yard are coordinating the same key actions and awareness as a Tour de France winner when they pedal and balance and steer and brake. There is the ever-present danger with guidebooks that by describing and discussing the parts of poetry they will allow the thought that practising the actions on the edge of the pool is swimming, or even better than swimming — because the water may be cold, and you'll neither get wet nor risk drowning. Yet in order to find your feet in poetry you must first lose them.

⁵ Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge, *Meter and Meaning: An Introduction to Rhythm in Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2003).

This study's very beginnings can be traced back to a feeling that I may have been witnessing or taking part in a form of unjustified one-upmanship. When teaching classes of what is still sometimes called practical criticism, or close reading, I would be faced with a group of what appeared to be mildly resentful faces. Why was it, they seemed to be saying, were they always in the wrong? Last week you showed us a poem in which the rhymed stanzas were like a cage that fails to protect the poet from danger ('On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch' by William Cowper) and this week you're telling us how rhymed stanzas are like a vast villa in which to play a lifetime of hide-and-seek ('Love in a Life' by Robert Browning). The students wanted to be given firm ground to stand on, whereas all I could offer were different ways in which specific poems deployed particular techniques to mean more complexly what those same poems could be understood to be broadly about from a paraphrase of their sentences. It seemed like a trick; and I felt suspicious of what was happening. So if part of me is seeking to demystify poetic techniques and how we read their contributions to a poem's meanings, another is also trying to avoid denaturing them by separation from their ensemble roles — to the extent that the demystified version is not what the poem could have meant, or how it could have meant it, at all.

To begin with a small example, Carper and Attridge state that 'Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats' They print the phrase in bold type, and then add in less bold: 'so it will be useful as we begin looking into (and listening to) the way metrical poetry creates its rhythm, and the ways we hear those rhythms.'⁶ Their premise is thus offered as a best foot forward, so to speak, in experiencing the rhythm of poetry — and they go on to illustrate the ways in which this rhythm influences the meaning. Yet already I'm confused, because they seem to be treating meter and rhythm as, for present purposes, syn-

6 Carper and Attridge, *Meter and Meaning*, p.1. The proposition is reiterated without the qualification on p.34.

onyms. There is a trace of this implication in the tacit relation of their title and subtitle as well. Yet the alternation of beats and off beats will, at best, give you a sense of some of the meters. It will not get you very far towards the rhythm of the poem. What's more, if this is so, then rhythm in English poetry is precisely not realized by the alternation of beats and off beats. Poets produce it by hearing and articulating sequences of variously attuned, complexly stress-pitched and timed phrasings. Further, I suspect that if you are hearing and responding to the rhythm, you are not also registering the meter as something distinct — a sort of bass under the treble of the speaking voice. There is, after all, only the one instrument playing: a single stream of human phonemes. This is why poems in regular, or regularly varying, meters often place — like a theme and its variations in music — guide versions of the metrical shape next to distinctively discrepant lines. To hear and experience the rhythm you have to read the poem out loud, or attentively listen to it being read, in as natural a way as can be managed, monitoring while you do what it is you are hearing and feeling in your mind and body.⁷

The rhythm of a poem is the sound it makes when read aloud; the alternation of beats and off beats is its meter. The meter is an abstract patterning that can be, to varying degrees, identified by analyzing a particular poem's lines and phras-

7 Richard Wollheim has observed that: 'A person knows a language because he has learned it, an artist has a style because he has formed it. Another difference is that, though both knowledge of a language and possession of a style are inconceivable except in an embodied creature, style reaches deeper into the body to find its moorings. It modifies — something we have already seen with thematization — innervations to the limbs and muscles, and it imposes discriminations upon the eye. Individual style has not only psychological reality, it has psycho-motor reality. Though this is true to some degree, it is true to a lesser degree, of knowledge of a language.' What Wollheim asserts may possibly be true of day-to-day speech, though experience of the styles of domestic quarrels might start doubts; it will definitely not be true of language formally disposed in rhythmic structures — in, for example, calls and responses, chants, songs, poems — because these too have culturally and individually formed styles. See Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.27.

es. In all but the crudest of jingles the meter and the rhythm are by no means the same pattern. Hearing the meter may well be necessary; but it cannot be sufficient to hearing the poem. This is because to read a poem out loud in a natural and plausible way you can't divide the syllables into two types of beat. There are innumerable degrees of emphasis. The voice also rises and falls with the pitch contour of the phrase. There are minute and longer pauses, elisions of syllables and elongations of vowels. There are tiny increases and decreases of volume and speed. All of these things happening together, and being determined — though not exclusively — by the words in the lines of the poem, constitute its rhythm. This is why the rhythm of a poem is not distinguishable from its meaning. The latter is manifested in the former; but, equally, the former could not be realized without the shaping purpose of the latter. It's why poets adjust the rhythm of their lines so as to get the poem nearer to what they imagine it should be meaning at that point. One source of weakness in a poem is when the poet has compromised either the sound for the sense or vice versa.

Certainly, the authors of *Meter and Meaning* are being helpful; and what they say is by no means entirely untrue. Yet again, in the course of their book they offer examples of poems, and, as is customary in such works, they annotate the lines with marks for the beats and others for the off beats. Yet in their examples frequently there are instances with more than one 'off beat' syllable between the beats. In Wordsworth's line 'Fresh as a rose in June',⁸ they annotate 'as a' as a double off beat.⁹ Again, I'm confused. How am I supposed to appreciate the weight of two syllables as one, however doubled, off beat? Further, are 'as' and

8 William Wordsworth, 'Strange fits of passion,' *Poetical Works* ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.86. In *Selected Poems* ed. Damian Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), p. 134, an edition edited from the first published texts, the line reads 'And like a rose in June'. Wordsworth's first inspiration was to use an iambic beat and put a strong stress on 'like'.

9 Carper and Attridge, *Meter and Meaning*, p.58.

'a' equally 'off'? The traditional way to describe this would be as an iambic trimeter with the stress pattern of its first foot reversed into a trochee.¹⁰ It's a standard variation on a very familiar pattern. Yet even that description doesn't take any note of the difference in weight and duration between 'as' and 'a'. After all, in other lines by Wordsworth the first can be placed in a stressed position; but the indefinite article before a consonant is very hard to attribute with stress in a poem without affectation. In what follows you will find no stress or beat or accent marks of any kind — no dots and dashes or blobs and slashes. The only slash-marks are those used conventionally to indicate a line break when two or three lines of poetry are quoted inside a passage of continuous text. In my view, attempts to indicate the sound or rhythm of a poetic line by means of ancillary squiggles or fancy typefaces are inevitably far too crudely emphatic; or, elaborated, they become an irrelevantly parallel and personalized algebra — with the drawbacks such a private language must willy-nilly display. Nor can they ever give an accurate description of how the line can sound; and frequently they will mislead. At worst, they simply display the cloth ears of the commentator. In what follows, I will attempt to describe and discuss rhythms, meters, and how they are manifestations of meanings, in natural language. In short, I'll try to talk about them.

By way of an example, both Wainwright and Carper & Attridge have things to say about the first line to Wordsworth's poem sometimes called 'The Daffodils', the only too familiar: 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. Wainwright draws upon the interesting detail that the poet's wife, Mary Hutchinson, once mis-transcribed the line as 'I wandered like a lonely cloud', then noticed and crossed it out. Wainwright comments:

10 Though he misses out the spondee, and other more arcane patterns such as the pyrrhic or amphibrac, Wainwright in *Poetry: The Basics* usefully describes the most common metrical feet and gives their names, p. 63.

In these two versions the sentiment expressed is the same, the image used to convey it is the same, the number of *syllables* and even the placing of the *beats* is the same. Nonetheless, and not only because of familiarity, ‘*I wandered like a lonely cloud . . .*’ sounds wrong. Analytically, the reason must be that *like*, though a vital part of speech, is too weak a word to bear a stress at this point in the impetus of the line. Putting it there delays the important idea of loneliness, especially as associated with the *I*, whereas the stresses placed in ‘*I wandered lonely . . .*’ enable the line to gather its meaning into the long and important syllable *lone*- so that the line pivots upon it in both rhythm and meaning. But ‘*I wandered like a lonely cloud*’ simply sags in the mouth.¹¹

In Wainwright’s first sentence the one strictly correct point is that the number of syllables is the same, while, if we accept the binary code of ‘beats’ and ‘off beats’, then we may grant that the beats are sort of the same. However, when Carper & Attridge add their annotated meter to Wordsworth’s line, they are obliged to indicate with a little bold ‘**b**’ instead of a big ‘**B**’ that ‘as’ is rather a weak word to be in an even-numbered position in an iambic line. They note that this weak stress ‘adds to a sense of relaxed ease.’¹² But are lonely people usually relaxed and at ease? Is this a special characteristic of poets, or especially of Wordsworth? The opening line of the poem, which we know is economical with the truth of the occasioning situation, serves to sketch in the poet’s device of being surprised when encountering joy-giving or reflection-causing flora and fauna. He’s ‘lonely as a cloud’, not the most desolating kind of loneliness then, when ‘all at once’ he sees ‘a crowd, / A host of golden daffodils.’¹³ The preference for solitude is underlined in that explanatory adjustment — as if we would expect the word ‘crowd’ to

11 Wainwright, *The Basics*, pp.56-7.

12 Carper & Attridge, *Meter and Meaning*, p.47.

13 Wordsworth, ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’, citing the four-stanza 1815 version, *Poetical Works*, 149.

prompt the thought of people. When he first saw the daffodils he wasn't wandering on his own. He was walking home from Eusemere to Grasmere with his sister, as Dorothy recounts in her journal for 15 April 1802.¹⁴ Wordsworth's deleting the purposeful walking and the company in his encounter with the flowers stages the contrast; if the poet weren't 'lonely' it wouldn't occasion the benefits of, and reflections on, that host of daffodils. Yet if he were actually missing people, perhaps daffodils wouldn't be enough. The nuanced and poised nature of his being relevantly 'lonely' is thus crucial to the workings of the poem.

Wainwright's passage gets much better as he starts to explain that the word 'lonely' has to be associated with the 'I'; but this also underlines why the sentiment and the image are not the same. It's rather a different thing to be 'lonely as a cloud' than to be 'like a lonely cloud'. As pathetic fallacies go, the second is decidedly more pathetic. Carper & Attridge effectively point out, in passing, that Wordsworth was perfectly willing to foreground 'as' as a stressed syllable, and, lacking the consonantal frame of 'like', it is, in any case, distinctly weaker than the other word used to access a simile. There's also the issue of the apposite or inapposite alliteration in 'like a lonely', or the problem of singsong iambics also noted by Carper & Attridge. Perhaps the mistaken line doesn't so much sag as divide sharply into two parts with the over-emphatic hinge word 'like'. Yet by the time Wainwright writes that the correct line can 'gather it's meaning' he's making perfect sense. The meaning of the two lines is different, and that's why the sentiment is different, and, since in the correct version the cloud is not directly described as being 'lonely', so is the image. By the by, it's unlikely that the 'sentiment' in a line of poetry precedes the words with which it is supposedly expressed, as Wainwright's word 'convey' implies. The sentiment (a feeling with

14 See, for example, Pamela Woof and Madeline Harley *The Wordsworths and the Daffodils* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2002), pp.7-35. The details of Mary Wordsworth's mis-transcription are given on p.32.

attitude) will be understood — by the composing or rereading poet too — from the trial words composed. This is the way to go about evaluating the poem you have written, to try and avoid being misled by the prior feeling or idea that you suppose yourself to have been expressing.

In the course of this work, I approach the relations of meter to rhythm and form, and all three to meaning, by listening to the sounds of poems for the ways that meaning guides form as much as form manifests meaning. I will also address the issues around what aspects of poetic technique can be understood to come trailing clouds of implicit meaning, built up over the centuries in which poems have been written, and those aspects which can be said to arrive as relatively meaning-free devices — so that they are deployable to generate meaning, as from scratch, by the poet. The sonnet might be thought to exemplify the first of these, while a caesura or an enjambment could be seen as examples of the latter. It makes sense to ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’;¹⁵ but it would be odder to hear a poet scorning not the enjambment, or the stanza-break. Yet in both these cases, there are qualifications to observe. One complexity of the relation between tradition and talent — whether at the level of highly visible forms like the sonnet, or microscopic ones like the pause at a caesura — is that very little can ever be done ‘from scratch’ in art; equally, individual ways of doing things can reconfigure even the most deeply ingrained of traditional presumptions about what a certain form or style might be assumed to mean in the abstract.

Further, I will attempt to show how readers can pick up from the meanings of words in poems how their rhythms and forms are being thematized. What is meant by this is that all the identifiable facets of a potential poem — the beginnings of its lines, the pauses in the middle, the pauses and jumps at the ends of lines, the longer pauses between verses, or paragraphs of verse, and so on — have

15 Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, p.206.

to be customized with significance for each poem. Though they bring with them expectations about how they can mean, they are, in the case of the potential poem, entirely latent, available to be drawn upon or relatively disregarded; and the poet's techniques are largely characterized by the kinds of relationships that are built up with these highly significant, but before composition effectively 'blank', points of attention in the text. This may be one of the reasons why when poets begin to compose, they may start not with a prose phrase, but with one that is already rhythmically understood as turning around a future line ending. Similarly, they may not only have a phrase, but an answering phrase or a rhyme sound to use either earlier or later. In other words, the inspiring and 'given' phrases do not arrive in a void, but tacitly as parts, and formally disposed parts, of an as yet unwritten poem.

Thematization will then, necessarily, be adding levels of implicit meaning and commentary to the completed poem. Experienced readers of poetry may well pick up these levels of implicit meaning and commentary without consciously noting that this is what they do. The action of meaning on form and form on meaning is felt as simultaneous and subliminal. The process of rationalizing it into conceptualized assertions is a way of enjoying poetry by talking about it. So we can learn much from seeing what is happening at such subliminal moments, and then monitor this process as it takes place. Noticing this may also help to fine-tune sensitivity to poetry — a benefit, I would hope, for poets and readers, and for future poems. Much of the radical fervour in poetry circles during the twentieth century involved the idea of abandoning worn-out ways of doing things, usually in favour of a more gimmicky, personalized set of techniques — e.e. cummings replaces Edwin Arlington Robinson, as it were. There have been many counter-polemics arguing for a return to traditional means. Yet, again, neither of these alternatives seems adequate to the problems facing a poet conscious of both the unique global situation in which we find ourselves, and the relation of that uniqueness to the

need for a new cultural, as well as environmental, protectionism. The best poems are going to be both highly skilled and uniquely individual. They are unlikely to be interested in trashing the history of their art.

III

If someone asks you how to read a poem, the simple, and simply evasive, answer is to read it out loud. This, it turns out, is easier said than done. Here then are some reflections on what is involved in reading a poem in English out loud, so as to draw attention to matters that native speakers may understandably take for granted — ones which become only too evident when you listen to a person who is not a native speaker trying to read out loud, in a convincing fashion, a poem in English. Please don't misunderstand me. This is only uniquely a question about poems in English because that is my subject here. Related, though significantly different, problems would arise if we were discussing how to read e.g. French, Italian, Chinese, or Japanese poems out loud — problems that native English speakers would have to address from the perspectives of their particular in-bred competences. So here we are about to start. There are other people present. You're a bit nervous. They are waiting for you to begin. Reading a poem is always a kind of performance, and this is no more evident than when it is being read even to a small circle of friendly poetry enthusiasts or fellow students in a seminar.

English is a stress-timed language. In order to read a poem in English successfully you have to know, with an uncanny accuracy, how to differentiate the syllables so as to bring some variously forward, and have others sit variously back. That's the 'stress'. At the same time, you have to say the syllables in groups with a regulated tempo, so that there is a paced arrival of elements for the listener to process. Unusually long or unexpectedly hurried syllables will upset the comprehension of the listener and likely cause a rising irritation. That's what is meant

in effect by 'timed'. When teaching second-language learners to pronounce English so that it's comprehensible it is necessary to encourage them to produce the phrases in a kind of 'singsong', with a stronger beat for important syllables, and with a rising or falling pitch to indicate both the important emphases and, related, the syntax. No sooner have you started to do this, than you notice how even the slightest oddities of stress generate implications for the meaning of what's being said which may well not have been intended by the speaker. If, for instance, you stress the first-person pronoun more than would be expected, as in 'I think', you inevitably suggest that others either don't, or are not expected to, agree.

To read guidebooks on poetry and its meters, you'd think that there were just two types of syllable in English — ones that are stressed and ones that aren't. Yet as soon as you try to apply this sort of rule to any decent line of poetry you start to find syllables that you can't clearly and routinely drop into category one or two — the 'as' in 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' or in 'Fair as a star when only one / Is shining in the sky',¹⁶ for instance. Thus, you find that many monosyllabic words (like the pronoun 'I') can, in their very nature, either be stressed or not stressed. Thomas Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush', for example, begins with an unstressed 'I' in 'I leant', and ends its second stanza with the stressed pronoun, 'fervourless as I'. In the final verse, both first-person pronouns are stressed to indicate the contrast between the poet's view of life and that, apparently, of the thrush:

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,

16 Wordsworth, 'Song', *Selected Poems*, p.135.

That I could think there trembled through
 His happy good-night air
 Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
 And I was unaware.¹⁷

If the first stressed 'I' emphasizes the poet's singularity and the situational precariousness of his thought, the second contrastively underlines an inability that he states himself to have been consciously unconscious of. The doubling of implications in such first-person denials is yet another source of lyric poetry's complexities. Furthermore, when monosyllabic adjectives and nouns are placed together, as in 'bleak twigs',¹⁸ there is a distinguishable degree of stress on each word, but it's by no means clear that one word is stressed and the other isn't. The relative weight and stress of monosyllables is not determined by a pronunciation rule — the kind of rule that tells you to stress the first syllable of 'record' if it's a noun and the second if it's a verb. With monosyllabic words, the stress is determined by the context, by the kinds of words around the monosyllable, and the role they are playing in the phrase where they're found.

I read that a theorist of meter has distinguished eight degrees of stress in the English pronunciation of an eight-syllable word.¹⁹ Yet no native speaker is going to go around distinguishing the stresses in such a way; and to try and teach non-native speakers to do eight different levels of stress would be counterproductively over-formulated. In practice, stress is not a ladder; it's a slide. You can't say how many rungs there are on it. This is not least the case because stress is contextually relative. The important thing is to deploy distinguishing and distinguishable

17 Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, Variorum Edition ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1978), p.150.

18 Hardy, 'The Darkling Thrush', line 18, *ibid.*

19 Peter Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.337-43. The eight degrees of stress passage is on p.337.

degrees of stress among the bundle of syllables that make up the phrase you're saying. By the time you are three or four phrases further on, the listener will be concentrating on the next group of syllables, and so on to the end of the sentence or poem. This doesn't mean that by the third stanza those lines no longer matter, but that the cumulative effect of the poem is achieved line after line and phrase by phrase. Indeed, it's a relevant source of speculation to consider the short-term auditory memory being deployed in the reading and appreciating of a poem. How far away can a rhyme word be before you no longer hear its echo as a rhyme? This will vary from person to person, culture to culture, and naturally between people who have trained themselves to be sensitive in this way, and those who haven't.

There are at least two further misleading assumptions that derive from the stressed-unstressed idea of meter in English. The first is the supposition that with the so-called unstressed syllables we don't do anything. We put the stress on the stressed ones and leave the unstressed ones to look after themselves. This is as misleading for both of the false alternatives. A majority of 'unstressed' syllables are 'weak forms'. These are monosyllabic pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, parts of the verb 'to be' and so on, which have to be pronounced with a reduced vowel—as in the second syllable of my first name, where the vowel 'e' looks the same, but the pronunciation is not. Saying *and* as 'n, we don't merely let it look after itself, we actively reduce it. Being able unreflectively to produce these weakened and shortened monosyllables is one of the key requirements for pronouncing intelligible English.

When it comes to the stressed syllables, the natural assumption is that you get stress by coming down hard and loud on the relevant syllables: 'She SEEMED a THING that COULD NOT FEEL / The TOUCH of EARTHLY YEARS.' Say the third and fourth lines of Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal'²⁰ like that and you'll sound

20 Wordsworth, 'A slumber did my spirit seal', *Selected Poems*, p.135.

like Mr. Podsnap talking to a foreigner.²¹ Yet even when we are whispering, or speaking very quietly, it's still not just possible but necessary to differentiate stress. We do this naturally by lengthening the vowel and raising the pitch. Let's take my first name again. 'Peter' is a two-syllable word with a falling cadence; that's to say, the first syllable is longer and voiced higher in the register than the shorter and lower second. So, curiously enough, the syllables that need stress sound lighter; and they're launched into more sustained flight than those that don't. This is partly because lengthened vowel syllables are sounded in the head and neck, whereas the weak form syllable sounds more like a grunt from the chest. So, for example, in the short phrase 'the base line' (or 'the bass line', if you prefer), it's the definite article which marks the bottom of the pitch contour, with the weakest amount of stress, while the adjective flies up the register with a high pitch and lengthened vowel, and then the noun receives an equally lengthened vowel, but the pitch drops sharply but slightly — though not as low as the 'the' — so as to mark the end of the phrase.

Critics and commentators on poetry may use the word 'rhythm' to indicate the actual sound a line of verse makes when said naturally ('She seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years') and they use the word 'meter' to indicate the kind of exaggerated pronunciation, as typed out above, that reveals an underlying pattern of weak and strong stresses — an iambic tetrameter followed by an iambic tri-meter, in that case. Yet it's not difficult to see from another line in the same poem that meter is too crude and undifferentiating a tool when it comes either to the sound or the meaning of poetry (and as my title implies, the sound and the meaning are both separably and inseparably the issue in reading a poem). Wordsworth's last line is an iambic tri-meter — as his adopted ballad stanza promises. Yet it would have that meter if it were either 'With rocks 'n stones

21 Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* ed. Adrian Poole (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp.135-7.

'n trees' or, as he published it, 'With rocks, and stones, and trees.' If you go into a takeaway restaurant and ask for 'a fish 'n chips' there's a good chance that they'll come together in the same paper bag. If you ask for 'a fish, and chips' you've got grounds for expecting that they'll come wrapped separately. In Wordsworth's phrase, it's not just that the commas slow the line down, but that marking the pauses with your voice by stopping momentarily, you won't link the 'a' of the conjunction onto the back of the previous noun. That little bit of extra 'a' will add stress to the word, indicating that these three types of thing are not to be understood as a lumped together 'Nature', but as instances of distinct items. So the 'she' who is 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course' doesn't exactly become 'one with Nature' at the end of the poem; she is to be found as one among the many and various distinct things that go to make up the revolving earth.

So the music of a poem can never be shown by giving an account of its meter, because a poem is — not only, but at the very least — a pattern performed in and made of naturally pronounced words. An individual poem will necessarily also customize its meter, and its other formal devices, so a description of the abstract pattern which it is playing a variation upon may provide a beginning but could by no means be an end of the poem's meaning. The formal devices that a poem deploys will be a necessary part of describing the poem, though they can never be sufficient. There are innumerable poems in the ballad stanza; then there is Wordsworth's use of that stanza; and then, most importantly, there is his use of the stanza twice, with variation, in 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. All the techniques in poetry are customized for the compositional and thematic occasion of the individual poem. Being able to hear these forms and techniques offers useful guidelines to approaching the poem, but reading a poem involves the exercising of skills, not the application of mechanical formulas. Iambic tetrameters, in themselves, don't necessarily signify anything — so you can't say that Wordsworth's poem has a certain meaning because its odd numbered lines are in that meter.

What I'm writing about is not only how we can draw useful conclusions from reading the techniques in a poem, but also — since each poem is a unique deployment of its techniques — how the poem is signaling to readers ways in which to take its shapes. Once again, this will vary from poem to poem, and the degree of emphasis given to the signals will also vary. Some poets write more self-consciously than others. Tipping the wink to the reader too obviously might be thought bad art. Skilled readers are deploying techniques of interpretation and understanding, getting the point without even noticing sometimes, and certainly not looking out for mechanical triggers to tell them what they ought invariably to think or feel.

IV

This, then, is a study of form as thematic meaning in poems in English. There are broadly two kinds of relationship possible between form and theme, and there are infinite numbers of conceivable mixtures of the two possibilities. The two are: (1) that the form enacts or underlines the thematic sense; and (2) that the form contrasts with the sense, producing a counter-sense. Poems can be made of both possibilities at different points, and even at the same point seen in different aspects. I will explore ways in which a poem's form doesn't passively reflect the work's apparent sense, but is thematically charged at all points of the text to be part of its implicit meaning. As well as examining this idea with examples from six centuries of poetry in English, I will be looking at how meaning that is sensed formally can elaborate, contrast with, or differently qualify the apparent meaning offered by the paraphrased prose sense of a poem. This combination of 'apparent' and 'implicit' meanings is then an account of 'what the poem means'. A distinguished critic recently remarked of the structural aspects of poetry: 'The "formalist" analysis that such structures prompt is often associated with the New Critics,

although their interest was primarily in thematic, rather than in formal or structural coherence.’²² Here, as too often in critical writing, Marjorie Perloff’s ‘rather than’ lets the side down. If what she says is true, the New Critics couldn’t have been really interested in poetry, but then neither could the Formalists. What was more likely to be happening is that both were tacitly filching hints from the other side of that conveniently self-serving artificial divide.

One of the first promptings for this book was Richard Wolheim’s *Painting as an Art*, already cited in a note above, and, in particular, his commentary on how painters thematize the formal conditions and constraints of their medium: he was thinking about the frame or edge, the picture format, the ground or surface, the density and tactility of the medium, and so on.²³ I simply wondered what would be the equivalent processes if poets were doing an analogous sort of thing. The key insight, it seemed to me, in Wolheim’s description of a painter’s approach to the task of making art, was that the formal devices are themselves thematized. It suggests a way beyond the dichotomy of ‘themes’ and ‘forms’ — by learning to appreciate how the themes are necessarily shaped and commented on by the forms, and how the forms are themselves only significant thanks to the thematic materials that they are serving to shape, mobilize, and overtly or tacitly comment on. One of the reasons why I believe that this must be the way poetry works is because the commentaries of critics who describe structural coherence in splendid isolation from meaning sound oddly pointless, while those which describe the themes without the forms need not be discussing poetry. Those who enjoy reading good poems experience processes that are altogether more stimulating than either of these versions of not really swimming.

22 Marjorie Perloff, *Differential: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama, 2004), p.8.

23 Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1987), chapter 1.

In this book I explore and describe ways that 'thematic' signals point to the relevant interpretations of techniques, while technical understandings point to how the thematic materials are being relevantly modulated and turned. So I am not adding a long footnote to the proposal that 'A poem should not mean / But be',²⁴ in Archibald MacLeish's immortal formulation; but rather, if a poem can't be understood 'to mean', you won't be able to appreciate the point of its 'being', and vice-versa. In poetry 'ontology' and 'thematics' are in complexly dialogic and indissoluble relationships. The aim of this study is to show how these relationships may be articulated and signaled, how the signals are marked, and how readers can sensitize themselves to pick up such signals intuitively.

The possible connections between themes and forms are not unidirectional; there is no one-to-one fit between forms and meanings, and especially between one type of poetry and any political or cultural programme. It has been asserted that free verse is more democratic than regular form, and William Blake or Walt Whitman can be marshaled to exemplify the proposal, while Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence will differently have to be shuffled out of sight during the conversation. It has been asserted that regular closed forms are more democratic because more populist, and you could bring on Tony Harrison to back your case, but you'd also have to keep Rudyard Kipling and W. B. Yeats out of sight while you did. Those students of mine had their problem with being offered an exploration of reading techniques, because there are no one-size-fits-all matches in poetry and art. So we have to keep minds open about what contribution the shape makes to the meaning in each case, how a certain technique in one particular poem can appear to figure its meaning and in another a diametrically opposite one. In looking at examples it will be possible to show how the thematization of technique

24 Archibald MacLeish, *Collected Poems 1917-1982* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), p. 107.

works, how forms are never independent of meanings in practice, and how words in the poem cue the thematic contributions of forms. The difficulty that this presents for students and others lies in the ways in which each poem is a unique instance of thematization, so that it is only by picking up the clues — on the basis of a familiarity with the kinds of fit which are possible and likely — that the reader can construct a convincing sense of how the dialogue between form and theme plays out in any individual case.

These relationships are also modulated by at least one further dialogic relationship — that between the evolution of the art of poetry and the evolution of the social and cultural situation in which this art is made. The temptation of formalists of various shades is to keep these two evolutions either apart or in an attenuated relationship. The temptation of materialist, historicist, or political critics is to collapse the one into the other. Neither, alone, will be sufficiently flexible to articulate what may be happening in the particular poem, and how that work can be understood in relation to the wider culture. Formalism in itself can never be enough, because the forms that poets use are themselves subject to historical evolution, and the cultural matters that they can be used to thematize will be equally subject to the changes brought about by alterations in expectation and behaviour. With the various kinds of cultural critic who have had their day in recent years, the relative lack of interest in poetry suggests that they neither have the techniques to show how their promulgated stories apply to this art, nor, in many cases, are they sufficiently committed to the art as such.²⁵

Furthermore, as readers, we have to be sensible enough to see ourselves as situated too. This is why good readers of poetry will, in any case, be historically

25 There have been essays in a 'materialist' criticism of poetry; see, for example, Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1983) and *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992). For my view of Easthope's approach to the art of poetry and political stances, see 'Donald Davie and "the exam of future life"', *PN Review* 140 vol. 27 no. 6, July-Aug 2001, pp.18-22.

and politically well informed and imaginatively sensitive to the cultural conditions pertaining both when the work was produced — and when it is being read. What's more, poems will appear to change with us as we change. Part of this is simply that we grow up and old; but also our life experiences will inevitably place us in different relations to texts. And yet further, as with dialogues between equals, this relationship will never be a fixed and final conclusion, but a balancing of emphases — and the way that the balancing is understood leaves plenty of room for that further balancing between an experience and its interpretation. A proper interest in an art will last a lifetime. The ancients had a point; and even in our days of longer life expectancy, *ars longa vita brevis*. In addition, nowadays there are further centuries of poetry with which to develop relationships.

V

So: if all poems are customized instances of relations between techniques and themes, how does this customization signal itself to an individual reader encountering the poem for the first time? The formal language of poetry is itself already thematized. When poets and critics talk about 'stress' and 'pitch' or 'tone', when they mention a 'verse' or a 'stanza', a 'caesura' or an 'enjambment', when they discuss a 'line', a 'text', or a 'context', they are activating buried metaphors connected with, in the above cases, ploughing, housing, cutting, leaping, threading, and weaving. Not surprisingly, many of these metaphors are associated with the body and with physical movement, or with ancient skills and handicrafts; for it will be in such corporeal action that our sense of rhythm both starts and first feels at home. Some poets are more self-reflexive than others; they will provide more overt examples of such signaling. A glance at Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems produced the following examples: the word 'stress' is used twice in the sixth stanza of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'; 'scan' appears in line

6 of 'Carrion Comfort'; 'pitch' finds a place in 'No Worst' and 'form' in 'To what serves Mortal Beauty?'²⁶

Poets are not, of course, averse to punning; and they are only too likely to pun in their poems on words that are also used in technical descriptions of the art. William Blake may appear to be asking if the feet of Jesus trod on English ground in the opening line of the poem now conventionally called 'Jerusalem' ('And did those feet in ancient time'²⁷); but he can also be heard to be framing an analogy with his own verse and its 'feet' in the 'ancient time' of its quantitative meter. It is perhaps not merely a coincidence that the poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt which contains the phrase 'with naked fote stalking in my chambre'²⁸ should have suffered from editorial intervention to smooth out its feet, and then been the occasion for critical debate about what its meters actually are and why. Similarly, when Sir Philip Sidney adds 'And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way'²⁹ to a poem about trying to convince his love of his love by writing poetry, we may not be wrong to suspect that the strangers' feet are the formal devices of poetry in languages other than English. Anne Bradstreet, describing the first unauthorized edition of her book, writes that her poems were made 'in rags, halting, to the press to trudge', while, for the second edition, she has 'stretched thy joints to make thee even feet, / Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet'.³⁰ Emily

26 Catherine Phillips (ed.), *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 111, 168, and 167.

27 William Blake, *The Complete Poems* ed. Alice Ostriker (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 514. Blake's analogy between an ancient era and an antique meter is made by the use of a singular 'time' instead of the more predictable 'times'.

28 Sir Thomas Wyatt, 'They fle from me that sometyme did me seke', *Collected Poems* ed. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), p. 27.

29 Sir Philip Sidney, 'Astrophil and Stella' (1), *Selected Poems* ed. Catherine Bates (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 99.

30 Anne Bradstreet, 'The Author to her Book', cited from X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, *An Introduction to Poetry* 10th edn. (New York: Longman, 2002), pp.23, 24.

Dickinson similarly puns in a poem consciously located at the intersection of experience, feeling, and technique (‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes —’) when she writes that ‘The Feet, mechanical, go round’.³¹

There are many further examples of thematized words and phrases to which we will return. There appear to be so many examples, in fact, that we might perhaps put away the idea that occasionally poets such as Ted Hughes write a stunt-poem about the writing of poetry — a poem like his ‘Thought Fox’.³² Poets are themselves fascinated by the ways in which the material nature of their art, embodied words, can figure a wide range of human experiences, beginning from the muscular experiences of the human body, of its spatial existence, and its vicissitudes within the elapsing of time. There is nothing especially or fussily self-reflexive about this proposition. Rather, poetry is an art; and this is what writing any poem is all but bound to involve.

Take, for example, Wordsworth in ‘Was it for this’, his blank-verse sketch that was to grow into *The Prelude*:

A child, I held unconscious intercourse
 With the eternal beauty, drinking in
 A pure organic pleasure from the lines
 Of curling mist, or from the smooth expanse
 Of waters coloured by the cloudless moon.³³

In the enjambments of the second and third lines of this passage, Wordsworth allows the thought to cross a reader’s mind that he is talking about ‘lines’ of poetry when he writes of ‘drinking in / A pure organic pleasure from the lines’ before

31 R. W. Franklin (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Reading Edition (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.170.

32 Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p.3.

33 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), p.6.

associating his own kind of flowing blank-verse — by means of that ambiguous line end — with the enjoyment of natural phenomena: ‘lines / Of curling mist’.

Hopkins could pun on the word ‘stress’ to manifest a Christian spirit believed to be in created existence and realize it in a poetic text by means of contiguous emphasized monosyllables: ‘the stress felt’.³⁴ It may be that formal compulsions obliged Thomas Hood to rhyme ‘stitch’ with ‘pitch’ in one of his great poems: ‘And still with a voice of dolorous pitch / She sang the “Song of the Shirt”!’³⁵ Yet it seems not merely fortuitous, but also skilful that the word ‘pitch’, referring to the scale of a human voice, should be placed at a point where the voice speaking the poem is suspended at a verse’s penultimate line ending, before the turn to the resolving drop in pitch on ‘shirt’. Both John Donne and Robert Browning knew that the Italian word ‘stanza’ means ‘room’ and put that knowledge to work in writing of making ‘in sonnets pretty rooms’³⁶ or beginning a two-verse poem with the phrase ‘Room after room’.³⁷ More complexly, Samuel Johnson would appear to be joking with the white spaces of poetry in his line from ‘On the Death of Dr Robert Levet’ when he notes how his old house-guest ‘Nor made a pause, nor left a void’³⁸ — leaving a ‘pause’ at the mid-line caesura, and a ‘void’ of white space at the line-end. In such cases as this, it feels urgent that readers can sense, and, if necessary, explain to themselves what is happening in such a superficially self-contradictory line.

The relation of poets’ intentions to this issue of thematization is itself use-

34 Gerard Manley Hopkins, p.111.

35 Thomas Hood, ‘The Song of the Shirt’, *Selected Poems of Thomas Hood*, Winthrop Mackworth Praed and Thomas Lovell Beddoes ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p.141.

36 John Donne, ‘The Canonization’, *The Complete English Poems* ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 48.

37 Adam Roberts (ed.), *Robert Browning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 238.

38 Donald Greene (ed.), *Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 36.

fully illuminating. It is by no means necessary for the poets to ‘know what they are doing’, although the idea of someone writing a poem by sheer accident goes against shared assumption about what it means to practise an art. Indeed, the description of how thematization works above helps to explain the ways in which the finished work can mean complexities beyond what the poet could have wholly consciously ‘intended’. Part of the problems surrounding artistic intention derives from a confusion of two types of intending: (1) intending to do something, and (2) intending, or having intention attributed to, what you have done. The first seems absolutely necessary for writers; but the second is by no means a necessity — indeed, one excitement of writing arises precisely in this difference. So, for example, Christina Rossetti’s ‘Promises like Piecrust’, in its contrast between the extremely regular form and the rejecting theme may be understood as more complexly wise and troubled about promissory behaviour than the commonsensical suspicion expressed about promises in the poem’s title and its paraphrase. The self-forgetfulness necessary for thoroughly engaged activities is also relevant here. The composing poet may well be concentrating on techniques so as to encourage full expression to escape self-censorship: ‘The trick is to combine knowing what I am doing with not thinking about it’, as Bernard Williams succinctly put it.³⁹

Nevertheless, the creative outcome is something that a writer can and will usually shape. Wollheim elsewhere points out that, for the artist, evaluation ‘functions regulatively, and it controls how and whether the artist should go on.’⁴⁰ The revising poet makes decisions about aspects of the work that can be controlled; but the ramifications of these decisions on the entire structure and character of the poem are not wholly subject to will or judgment. The results produced could

39 Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Incapacity’, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 49.

40 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 229.

never be omnipotently intended. As I say, one reward in writing and revising is being happily surprised by what you find you have been able to do. Nevertheless, Wollheim's sense of evaluation comes in once more, for the final decision to stop revising may involve appreciating that the work should be left as it is, and can now be offered for the enjoyment and evaluation of others. You can, of course, abandon a work — in which case, the decision to allow it into print, if made by the author, constitutes an equivalent point of conclusion. Then the poem's self-consciously deployed techniques, and the ways in which they are related to its thematic topic, allowing the poem's full sense to appear to exceed any clearly directed end, are placed at the disposal of readers to make of the ensemble what they can or will. It is not true in poetry that, as Coleridge wrote about responses to nature, 'we receive but what we give'.⁴¹ With the best will in the world, readers can't make silk purses out of sows' ears. Still, it is true that good poems may suffer the fate of being pearls before swine. We won't receive what a poem has to offer if we aren't able to give of ourselves so as to activate with our reading techniques as much as we can of its sound sense. That's why, in the end, I have to leave it to you.

41 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode', *The Complete Poems* ed. William Keach (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997), p.308.