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SOUND AND SENSE IN LYRIC POETRY

The role of sound in lyric poetry is one of the most fundamental and most discussed questions in theoretical and practical poetics, yet there is no sign of a consensus on this issue among those who write about poetry (including those who write poems themselves).This is not the place to attempt a summary of the long history of the debate about the contribution of the sound of words to sense, a debate whose beginnings lie at least as far back as Plato's Cratylus; instead, I want to examine two striking, and strikingly opposed, attempts by contemporary poets to establish solid ground in this swampy area, both carried out partly by attending closely to the findings of linguistic science. My hope is that this examination will both throw a little light on the problem and reveal some of the poetic consequences of holding a particular view of the relationship.

Contemporary British poetry is sometimes seen as consisting of two schools with very different aims and methods: on the one hand, 'mainstream' poetry— also termed, usually by its opponents, 'conservative', 'traditional', and 'populist', and sometimes given the synecdochic label 'Faber poets'—and on the other, 'innovative' or 'experimental' poetry— also known as 'Poundian', 'modernist', 'radical', or, rather more pejoratively, 'postmodernist', and sometimes referred to, again synecdochically, as 'Cambridge poets'. It is, of course, far too broad a categorization to be very profitable for anything but the crudest cultural history, but it will give us a starting point for our discussion because the two poetcritics who have written challengingly on our topic represent with particular transparency each of the two schools. Their representativeness cannot be doubted: Don Paterson has taken up the cudgels for Mainstream poets (his upper case) against the Postmoderns (ditto) in a very public manner,[1] and J. H. Prynne, though he would never stoop to the same kind of name-calling, has often been hailed by his followers as a standard-bearer of the innovators. To take one example of the way in which the two poets have been set in opposition, here is Ian Brinton, in his introduction to a collection of essays on Prynne:

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1 See, for example, Paterson's article 'Rhyme and Reason' and his testy Introduction to the poetry anthology he edited with Charles Simic, *New British Poetry*.

> *Randall Stevenson's suggestion in volume 12 of* The Oxford English Literary History *that Prynne's 'full significance for the period's poetry began to be realised only at the end of this century' seemed wildly at odds with Don Paterson's comment . . . : 'The Norwich phone book or a set of log tables would serve [readers] as well as their Prynne, in which they seem able to detect as many shades of mind-blowing confusion as Buddhists do the absolute'.*[2]

My purpose is not to weigh in on either side of this debate—there is good and not so good poetry in both camps, and much that doesn't fit easily into either—but to use the arguments of these two poets to further the discussion about poetic sound.

I

Don Paterson is primarily known as a poet: he is one of today's most lauded poets in English, the author of, among many other publications, four highly praised collections (*Nil Nil*, 1993; *God's Gift to Women*, 1997; *Landing Light*, 2003; and *Rain*, 2009) and an accomplished set of translations of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. He has won virtually all the important poetry prizes awarded in Britain, some of them twice.

Less well known is the fact that Paterson is also the author of two remarkable long double essays on the techniques of lyric poetry. The first, entitled 'The Lyric Principle', is on questions of sound and appeared as two articles in *Poetry Review* in 2007; it is also available in a slightly different form on Paterson's personal website.[3] The second, 'The Domain of the Poem', which examines the operation of meaning in lyric poetry, also appeared in *Poetry Review* in two parts, in 2010 and 2011. Some of the arguments in these two essays surface in the course of Paterson's commentary on all of Shakespeare's sonnets in a hefty—and controversial—volume, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*. (That they don't surface as often as one might expect in his commentary is no doubt owing to the embarrassed, and sometimes a little embarrassing, stance he adopts towards any technical matters that might be considered the province of the poetry 'anorak'—a category within which he apologetically includes himself.)

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2 Brinton, ed., *A Manner of Utterance*, 7–8; the comment by Paterson is quoted from the article mentioned in the previous note.

3 See <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/2.htm>. The two parts of the essay will be referred to here as 'I' and 'II'. Some of the points he makes in the essay are developments of ideas expressed in his T. S. Eliot Lecture of 2004, 'The Dark Art of Poetry', also available on his website.

It's not unusual to find a poet attempting to articulate in prose some aspects of the craft of poetry, but it *is* unusual to find it done with such thoroughness, exactingness, and forthrightness. It's also rare to read a poet's account of poetry that, for good or ill, is so willing to turn to the findings of science for evidence and support.[4]

It is the earlier essay, which has two parts entitled 'The Sense of Sound' and 'The Sound of Sense', that is relevant to our topic. In 'The Sense of Sound', Paterson, having discussed the role of silence and the importance of connotation in poetry, moves on to the familiar claim that sound and sense are inseparable; however, he is willing to go further than most recent and contemporary poetic theorists in interpreting this claim. He starts with a thoroughly Cratylist view of language: dismissing the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign—a 'monstrous dogma' 'which poets know to be sheer madness' (I, 67)—he asserts that there are two processes at work in creating the language-user's feeling that 'words sound like the things they name'. The first is the phenomenon of phonesthemes—a sound or soundcluster shared by a group of words linked also by meaning, such as *glisten*, *glare*, *glow*, *glint*, *gleam*, *glitter*, *glance*—and the second is a view of the origin of language which claims that 'the shapes of sounds in the mouth formed naturally as physical analogues to the shapes of real things and processes in the world' (I, 68).[5] The term was coined (as 'phonaestheme') by J. R. Firth in 1930, marking an advance, as Paterson notes, on older notions

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4 Paterson postpones a discussion of rhythm and metre to a later moment—perhaps the *Ars Poetica* in book form that he has promised. There is, however, a short note on metre at the end of the book on Shakespeare's sonnets which provides some background to an impassioned plea during the course of an earlier disagreement—one of many—with Helen Vendler over Sonnet 126. Vendler's claim is that the sonnet 'falls into trochaic and amphibrachic pattern, not iambic' (*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 535), and Paterson comments, 'this is the sort of nonsense that can arise when you proceed with a great ear but only a partial understanding of how metre actually functions. There are no feet in English verse, only metrical patterns. . . . Can everyone please stop marking in the feet, and imagining caesurae where there's no punctuation to indicate a pause? I know it's fun. But they're just not there, folks.' (*Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 377). I too will stay away from the topic of metre here, as it is discussed in several chapters of this book, though to separate questions of rhythm from questions of sound is, of course, entirely artificial.

5 Interestingly, Paterson's first example of a phonestheme is also the combination of sounds made much of by Jacques Derrida in *Glas*. Leslie Hill summarizes Derrida's account of *gl*as follows: 'simultaneously a gurgling and a gargling, a gagging and a glugging, a clogging and a clearing, a clenching and an unclenching, a rocking to and from constriction to release and back again' (*Radical Indecision*, 297). In drawing attention to the movement of tongue and throat in the pronunciation of *gl-*, Derrida makes its association in English with light and sight seem to run counter to any possible natural analogy.

of onomatopoeia that focused on words like 'thump' and 'clatter', and the phenomenon has often been discussed in the literature on phonosemantics. The second process, sound-symbolism as the origin of language—what linguists since Max Müller in the nineteenth century have called the 'ding-dong theory'—has received less support than the theory of phonesthemes, which may well play a part in the way languages develop: as Paterson points out, new coinages often gravitate towards phonesthemic nodes. (He has an interesting discussion of the word *blog*.) Though Paterson's examples are from English, these observations on language are clearly meant to be universally applicable.

In stressing the close relation between sound and sense Paterson is not indulging in the kind of mystified view of language that poets sometimes fall into (and perhaps need to believe in order to do what they do); he's perfectly well aware of the arguments against motivation in language, but like Derrida in his analysis of Saussure's account of arbitrariness in *Of Grammatology*, he finds the refusal to accord any role to iconicity contrary to the evidence of our own linguistic habits and suppositions. The 'iconizing engine', as he calls it (I, 71), is clearly at work in a great deal of language-use, from slogans to speeches to song-lyrics.[6] It's possible to disagree with Paterson over his suggestions regarding the origin of language while finding his account of the way we *use* language, and the assumptions that govern that use (however mistaken we might be in those assumptions), compelling. We detect a certain appropriateness when close, front vowels (like [ɪ] in 'little') are used in the representation of small, high sounds and tiny objects, or open, back vowels (like [a:] in 'large') are used in the representation of deep sounds and vast objects—though there are plenty of counter-examples, like 'big' on the one hand and 'particle' on the other, that show this to be a rather weak correspondence.[7] More importantly, Paterson announces as a principle: 'Words are so *indivisibly* part-sound and part-sense that the patterning of sound alone can generate sense *as if it constituted a syntactic relation* (I, 71).' This is a version of Jakobson's famous assertion that 'the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination': sound-relations, which in non-poetic language function paradigmatically between a given sound and the other possible sounds in that position, take on meaning in poetry as a result of echoes and contrasts along the linear chain of language.[8]

Here then, according to Paterson, we have the linguistic resources from

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6 This phrase itself, with its alliteration and final increase in word-length, is an example of the preferences operative in language-use. I would have been less likely to write 'from song-lyrics to mottoes to speeches'.

7 See Jakobson and Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language*, chapter 4, 'The Spell of Speech Sounds'.

8 Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, 27.

which lyric poets draw their power to move and please through the medium of sound: a tendency in language towards an association between certain categories of sound and certain categories of meaning (I would say a weak tendency; Paterson would no doubt say a strong tendency), and a willingness, almost a wishfulness, on the part of speakers of the language, to believe that sound is not an arbitrary shell around meaning but an inherent part of meaning itself. The task of the lyric poet is to create a verbal artefact in which that desire is fulfilled, and meaning—and with it emotion—is made to emerge from the sounds of words as much as from their sense. This project may not be a feature of all poems in all languages, and we shall shortly examine an alternative view of the linguistic resources exploited by the poet; however, it is surely an animating principle in a great deal of poetry in many cultures.

It's in Part 2 of the double essay that Paterson's most original contributions to the discussion of sound and sense in poetry occur, and it's here that he appeals to the properties of sound as detected by acoustic science in order to ground poetic practice in something outside the vagaries of culture and history. Paterson borrows the term 'pink noise' to argue that both music and poetry, at their most effective, betray in their progress from one item to the next a relation analogous to that found in a category of noise called 'pink' to distinguish it from other types of noise given other colour names, most significantly 'white' noise and 'red' noise, the latter also given the adjective 'Brownian', or sometimes just 'brown'. I'm not competent to judge the accuracy of Paterson's scientific borrowings—samples of these different noises can easily be found on the internet, and they all sound rather similar, though pink noise, in which lower frequencies have more power, has a distinctive throatiness—and therefore his rather grandiose claim that the sounds of successful lyric poetry correspond in their mathematical relations to quasar emissions, river discharge, sunspot activity, and DNA sequences had better be left to one side.[9] What the argument boils down to, in its application to poetry, is that a completely *random* relation between one element and the next—or, putting it differently, one surprise after another—results in the dullness of constant novelty, whereas a completely *predictable* relation results in the dullness of total familiarity. The ideal balance

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9 The key paper for the argument that music from several cultures is characterized by pink noise appears to be Voss and Clarke, ' "1/f Noise" in Music'. A useful summary, with comments on the extension of pink noise to several other domains, can be found at <http://www.asmir.info/lib/Fractals_Chaos_Music.htm>. For samples, see the Wikipedia entry for 'colors of noise'. Pink noise is even more ubiquitous than Paterson indicates: other instances include almost all electronic components, all semi-conducting devices, all time standards from the most accurate atomic clock to quartz oscillators to the sand flow of an ancient hourglass, the speed of ocean currents, and the yearly flood levels of Nile (measured over the last 2,000 years). One suspects that this is just too familiar a phenomenon to be very useful in analysing poetry.

between randomness and predictability is right in the middle, just as pink noise, we are told by Paterson, is halfway between white noise and Brownian noise.[10]

Summarized in this way, it seems a rather straightforward and uncontroversial point. But it gets more interesting when Paterson applies it to one of his cardinal focuses in lyric sound: the contrast between vowels and consonants. He starts with a somewhat tendentious distinction between the way vowels and consonants work:

> *In the human voice, the vowel carries the bulk of the feeling in its complex tonal and quantitative discriminations, while the consonants which interrupt that breath make the bulk of the sense. … Vowel fills the word with its fairly uniform stuff, while the consonant carves it into recognizable shapes.* (II. 59)

We only have to turn to one of the phonetic charts provided as an appendix to the online version of Paterson's essay to raise doubts about this distinction: one chart, for example, includes the words *bead, bid, bayed, bed, bad, bard, bawd, bode, booed, bud, bird, bide, bowed*, and the name *Boyd*, demonstrating vividly that vowels are far from uniform and function just as importantly as do consonants in distinguishing between the series of sounds that constitute different words. A more satisfactory distinction could be made between the role of vowels and consonants in intonation and stress: much of the emotional (as well as some of the semantic) force of an utterance is conveyed by rises and falls in pitch and increases and decreases in stress (the two phenomena being in fact inseparable), and it is the vowels that carry these distinctions. (Strictly speaking, other voiced continuants—in English, the phonemes represented by *l*, *r*, *n*, and *m* in particular—can carry intonation and stress: think how many different ways '*m-m-m-m-m-m-m*' could be pronounced.) Paterson also suggests that speakers of a language carry an awareness—usually unconscious—of the grouping of consonants into various types, allowing poets to draw on connections between different members of the same group. Thus, for example, the English plosives, represented by the letters *p*, *b*, *k*, *t*, *d*, and the so-called 'hard' *g*, can substitute for one another 'for compositional purposes', as can the various fricatives, affricates, nasals, and approximants.

With these materials at hand, Paterson can state his basic rule, articulating the manner in which the poet achieves in the sounds of a poem the equivalent of pink noise, the ideal equilibrium between predictability and surprise, the fulfilment and the thwarting of expectation: 'In English poetry, the feeling that

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10 The association of Brownian noise with absolute predictability is somewhat puzzling, given that Brownian motion, after which it is named, is precisely the unpredictable motion of individual particles whose behaviour is subject only to statistical probabilities in a mass. My thanks to Dominic Lash for clarifying this in personal communication.

a piece of writing is 'musical' usually means that it quietly exhibits two kinds of phonetic bias. . . . The first is the deliberate variation of vowel-sounds; the second is consonantal patterning' (II, 58). Thus for Paterson a stretch of poetry perceived as 'beautiful' or 'musical' or perhaps 'lyrically effective' (these terms all raise further questions, of course) is likely to have, on the one hand, many different vowel-sounds and, on the other, frequently repeated consonants, or repetitions from within one of the consonant groups. By contrast, an equivalent stretch of workaday prose, or poetry of a different, non-lyrical, kind, will not display any significant relationship between variation and repetition of vowels and consonants. In order to achieve vowel variation, Paterson argues, poets also reduce the frequency of unstressed syllables, and especially of the vowel-sound schwa (the vowel used, for instance, in the first syllable of *above* or the last syllable of *sofa)*, a reduction that our habits of verse reading encourage as well. In handling consonants, by contrast, he suggests that poets tend to create what he calls a 'consonantal signature' for every line or group of lines. (Alliteration is the most obvious form of this consonantal patterning, but Paterson is dismissive of what he calls this 'loud' effect.) Of course, if this happens it does so without conscious deliberation; it's what is summed up in the notion of a poet's 'ear'—though one wonders whether Paterson's extraordinary awareness of the workings of phonetic detail is something that, when composing, he has to make an effort to expunge from his consciousness.

There's an obvious objection to Paterson's argument, and he neatly circumvents it. Rhyme, such a central element in so many poetic traditions, is based on *vowel* repetition combined with prior *consonant* variation: just the reverse of Paterson's fundamental principle. But it turns out that rhyme is all the more effective *because* it is an exception: 'A normative shift towards vowel heterophony and consonantal homophony creates the unconsciously experienced "lyric ground", above which the more consciously-registered saliences of rhyme, assonance, alliteration and anomalous consonants can cleanly stand' (II, 58–9). And then there is pararhyme, of which Paterson the poet is very fond (and the inventive use of which he greatly admires in Paul Muldoon's poetry): here we do have the required repetition of consonants and variation of vowel. Some examples from *Rain* are *tell-until*, *home-him*, *ship-shape*. (As Paterson points out, this is a principle on which some Semitic languages, such as Arabic and Hebrew, are built.) He also frequently uses weaker rhymes in which the vowel and its preceding consonant are varied but the final consonant is repeated, as in *dream-whim*, *apartdirt*, *trapeze-days*. However, we don't hear too much about rhyme in the essay, since, as Paterson notes, it would require another essay to accommodate it.

Paterson is discussing more than just the pleasing effects of sound here; we must not forget the guiding principle from Part I of his essay: sound and sense in poetry are inseparable. One way in which sense enters the poet's composition process is the resistance provided by the need to achieve the

appropriate disposition of vowels and consonants: our sensemaking must adapt to these demands, and 'this way we end up saying something better than the thing we intended' (65). Thus the subtle requirements of vowel variation and consonant patterning function, for Paterson, in the same way as the more overt requirements of rhyme and metre, taking the poet into realms of meaning and emotion that would otherwise be closed off. 'If writing a poem isn't a way of working out what you mean, then I don't know what it is', remarks Paterson in a telling footnote (II, 73 n. 27).

In the final section of his second essay, Paterson mounts a forceful challenge to the kind of advice frequently given to neophyte poets: make it concrete. Let me quote him again: 'We have—correctly—perceived a bored and dwindling audience, and have instituted a manic attempt to keep them awake through data-reward, through the brainsweets of image and anecdote. To get the air flowing in our poems again, we require the bravery of showing ourselves to be engaged in thought while in the *act* of writing' (II, 69). This 'over-concretization of the poetic voice' has been a musical disaster, he comments. Musical poetry, in the sense that Paterson expounds and applauds, is also the poetry of thinking aloud.

II

J. H. Prynne is also a poet with a considerable reputation, though of a very different kind from Paterson's, and his statements about poetry, including the role of sound in poetry, are equally uncompromising. Although Prynne hasn't won the big prizes, and chooses to publish with small presses dedicated to innovative poetry (whereas Paterson publishes with Faber),[11] he is regarded by many as Britain's most important living poet; it's not unusual to find statements such as Rod Mengham and John Kinsella's in their short introduction to his poetry: 'J. H. Prynne is possibly the most significant English poet of the late twentieth century.'

Prynne has not published critical or theoretical writing of any substantial length, but his shorter essays, letters, and other prose works amount to a considerable body of commentary, no less challenging and thoughtprovoking than Paterson's.[12] In many respects, his views on poetry and the process of

11 In 1999, however, Prynne published an almost complete collection with a rather more visible poetry publisher, Bloodaxe Books, and followed this with an updated collection in 2005. Bloodaxe was only the secondary publisher, however; the primary publisher, in keeping with Prynne's support for small operations, was the Australian Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

12 See the remarkably thorough *Bibliography of J. H. Prynne*, compiled by Nate Dorward and Michael Tencer, prynnebibliography.wordpress.com/>, which lists over eighty

poetic composition chime with Paterson's, though his language is very different. Here, for instance, is a comment on the way formal constraints are productive for the poet, all of which except the very last phrase would surely meet with Paterson's approval: 'the focus of poetic composition, as a text takes shape in the struggle of the poet to separate from it, projects into the textual arena an intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself ' ('Poetic thought', 596). And Paterson's emphasis on thinking in verse has some affinities with Prynne's notion of poetic thought, though it lacks the latter's insistence on the non-subjective nature of the thinking process.

Prynne's most important engagement with the question of poetic sound is a talk entitled 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work' given at the University of Chicago in 2009 and subsequently published in the *Chicago Review*. The concept of 'mental ears' is designed to counter the dominant understanding of poetry, and lyric poetry in particular, as having to do with the work of real ears. A footnote establishes clearly this opposition: having asserted that the domain of the poem is 'textuality', Prynne adds:

> *It is indifference to the alterative effect of textuality that causes Derek Attridge to write, following the consensus, that 'Poems are made out of spoken language' (*Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction *(Cambridge, 1995), 2). I believe this statement to be decisively not true, unless it is also to be believed that tables and chairs are made out of living trees.* (144)[13]

The comment about wood is, I suppose, intended to emphasize the series of transformations that lie between the growing plant and the finished article of furniture, just as the spoken language is transformed when used in a poem, a proposition with which it would be hard to disagree. But the rhetorical force of the note is clear: Prynne wishes to distance himself from a way of talking about poetry that takes vocal utterance as central. In the following footnote he takes issue with Gerald Bruns's statement that a poet 'plays' the uses of language 'by ear in the literal sense that the poet's position with respect to language is no longer simply that of the speaking subject but also, and perhaps mainly, that of one who listens' (*The Material of Poetry*, 30). Prynne comments: 'this "literal sense" is instructive by being almost entirely alternative to the argument about "mental ears" that is advanced here' (144).

Prynne's account of poetic textuality is presented in his characteristic dense

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items of published prose. The bibliography of secondary materials runs to two or three hundred items, providing a clear indication of the extent of the 'Prynne industry'.

13 The term 'alterative' is a puzzle: commonly used of medicines that alter bodily processes, it presumably suggests that textuality produces changes in the way language functions.

and mannered style. It proposes two 'reductions' of the actual speech of human utterances (128–30). The first involves the use of the 'specialized audition' he has named 'mental ears' to effect the disintegration of 'the real-time sounds of speech and vocalized utterance' into 'sublexical acoustic noise'; this is then 'transposed into a textual constellation in which compositional purpose begins to remake the anecdotal variety of human speech'.[14] In this way 'the sociology of utterance-occasions is part-replaced by the textuality of a language domain'. In other words, linguistic sound in poetry leaves behind the utilitarian functions it serves as the material of the sentences we use in our daily lives and becomes available as sound, 'by analogy with the striking clatter of real work in the material world'. Prynne quotes a comment by Bruns which he is willing to accept as 'somewhat comparable' to his own position; for the reader wrestling with the essay's prose, Bruns offers a much more accessible version:

> *Poetry is made of language but is not a use of it—that is, poetry is made of words but not of what we use words to produce: meanings, concepts, propositions, descriptions, narratives, expressions of feeling, and so on. . . . Poetry is language in excess of the functions of language.* (144)

Bruns's comments here help to make clear that what is at stake not sheer sound as material phenomenon, but sound which, though it is still the sound of language, is no longer that of the quotidian employment of language, the merely 'anecdotal' use of words we familiarly engage in all the time.

The second reduction made by the mental ears of the poet is described as the imposition of 'selection constraints with the purpose to define and empower the mode of a distinct and distinctive poetic textuality'. These constraints 'are not only or primarily those of prosody or versification; they comprise a re-modelled schedule of speech-sounds and performance features within the constrained language itself' (129). The word 'schedule' is somewhat perplexing here: it's evident that prosody and versification impose constraints on the language being used (including line-breaks and disposition on the page, which are very important in Prynne's own poetry), but this statement gestures towards other, unspecified, constraints, perhaps patterns of assonance or echoing syllabic units, though how these constraints operate 'within the constrained language' is not easy to fathom.

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14 Prynne, like Paterson, sees composition as happening *between* a human agent and an external mechanism or power, hence 'compositional purpose' rather than 'poet'. ('Textuality' he defines in an earlier note as 'the conceptual manifold of writerly script in production format of projection beyond the confines of compositional selfhood'.) 'Anecdotal variety', it would seem, is a dismissive way of referring to the merely human, occasional uses to which we put language in talking to one another.

More importantly for the discussion that follows, Prynne adds the following extension to his account: 'Mental ears also permit reconstruction of raw phonetic data, in particular across precedent historical eras, so that the alert poet as reader can "tune in" to earlier schedules [that word again] of poetic composition.' thus mental ears are, we are told, 'evolutionary by retroflexive recognizance'. After acknowledging that there may be something in the common idea that it is 'the rhythmical deployment of sense carried into sound' that 'gives poetic discourse its special power', he offers his own approach as an 'alternative (if also complementary) mode of reckoning'; an approach via 'the methods of descriptive and historical phonology'. These are the tools whereby the reader or critic is able to analyse 'the language-use of actual poems'. The appropriate methodology, argues Prynne, is that of phonology, not phonetics, since 'the sounds poems make' are to be treated not as straightforwardly acoustic phenomena that a machine might record but as 'semi-abstract representations of relations and orderings between and across sounds, within a textual domain'. What Jakobson called the 'delivery instance', therefore, the specific performance of a poem (by its author or someone else), is of no interest to Prynne. What he is after is what he calls 'base-level rule patterns and their historical evolutionary forms': mental ears allow the reader to achieve a kind of hearing by means of which 'the mere anecdotalism of sonic variety in speech sounds and phrasal accent-contours is brought into diagnostically understood formalization' (132). Once again, poetry is regarded as a means of giving substance to the ephemeral sounds of quotidian experience—a highly traditional view, of course, even if the means of achieving it are unfamiliar.

This account of the importance of historical phonology in 'hearing' the words poets use is intriguing but, until Prynne turns to an example, it is hard to deduce what it might mean in poetic or critical practice. Awareness of earlier meanings of words can, of course, play an important part in poetic understanding, but awareness of earlier *pronunciations* is perhaps another matter. The example Prynne chooses is a passage from Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', and the first line he examines closely is the familiar:

> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.

In a flamboyant display of philological scholarship (the notes to this essay are longer than the essay itself), Prynne draws attention to the 'word-final stops, plosive (*t* and *d*) and nasal (*ng*)' (*felt*, *blood*, *felt*, *along*, and *heart*) and 'reverse-traces' the morphology of the verb and nouns, finding that felt is derived from *feel* and *blood* from *bleed*, and that *heart* goes back, via Middle and Old English, to proto-Germanic **hertan-*. This enables him to conclude that these words 'demonstrate conditions originally continuing, chiefly in tense structure systems, that have been clipped or stopped and thus marked as concluded, so that they shift out of immediately present knowledge into recognition by retrospect' (135).

Unfortunately, Prynne does not clarify his phonological terminology, making it rather difficult to follow the argument. In phonological description, the term 'stop' is usually used as an alternative for 'plosive'; that is, as both names suggest, it refers to consonants produced by blocking the flow of air and suddenly releasing it. Thus *t* and *d* are alveolar stops, made by placing the tongue against the ridge behind the teeth, allowing pressure to build up, and then removing it. The sound indicated by *ng*, however, is a nasal continuant rather than a stop, as the sound continues until the speaker ceases to produce it.[15] When Prynne says that *feel* is not 'end-stopped', somewhat confusingly borrowing a term from versification, he must mean that the ending on *l* (a lateral rather than a plosive or a nasal) has a different quality for the hearer, that it is somehow more 'open', although why this should be so (for him, at least) remains mysterious. Also mysterious is the assertion that *heart* has been 'word-final endstopped throughout its evolutionary history', when the Old English and Middle English forms given by Prynne both end in *e*. The claim that Wordsworth's line conveys, through the history of its significant words, a shift from 'immediately present knowledge' to 'recognition by retrospect' is unproven, to say the least.[16]

A similar commentary is applied to the words *trust*, *mind*, *gift*, *burthen*, and *blessed* in the passage from which this line comes, all of which, apart from 'burthen', are, in Prynne's idiosyncratic terminology, 'end-stopped'. The puzzle as to what 'end-stopping' means only deepens, as one might have expected *burthen* to be included, ending as it does on a nasal, like *along*. (That it's not a matter of stress is made clear by the inclusion of *blesséd*, indisputably disyllabic and stressed on the initial syllable, among the end-stopped words.) *Gift*, as the 'finite outcome of open giving', is, it appears, end-stopped where *give* is not (so ending on a fricative is not end-stopping); *sublime* has a 'word-medial stop' (this is presumably *b*; but why is the nasal *m* not an end-stop?); *blessing* is 'unstopped' in spite of the earlier end-stopping of *among*.[17]

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15 Phonologists are not unanimous in the classification of these sounds, however, and nasals are sometimes called 'nasal stops'; they are also sometimes regarded as non-continuant, because the mouth cavity is blocked. See, for example, Skandera and Burleigh, *A Manual of English Phonetics and Phonology*, 20–5.

16 This view of the role of sound in poetry is summarized by Prynne in 'Poetic thought': among what he calls the 'fingertip energies of a language' is the 'sonorous echo-function from auditory cross-talk and the history of embedded sound values in the philological development of a language system' (598). He appends a page-long note with a somewhat scattershot list of phonetic and phonological studies, from reconstructions of Indo-European and handbooks of phonology to studies of ancient and modern Chinese and accounts of rhyme (604–5).

17 In another commentary on the poem, 'Tintern Abbey, Once Again', Prynne offers an account of the operation of sound that sounds more like Paterson, referring to 'the lapping sound-plays across "oft/soft/tuft" and the dispersed presence of "oft" and "soft"

In a further brief study—a booklet entitled *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words*—Prynne, in order to demonstrate that Saussure's principle of the arbitrariness of the relation between sounds and meanings doesn't hold for poetry (a demonstration with which Paterson would be wholly in sympathy) examines the workings of phonemes and syllables in the nursery rhyme 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' and in Blake's 'Tyger'. Here, although there are scholarly notes tracing etymological connections, it is less the history of the words that is foregrounded, since Prynne is imagining a child reader or listener, than their divisibility and polysemy. Thus *twinkle* is said to contain the word *ink* and in this way to suggest 'the dark blue of the sky' even before the sky is named; and before we reach the word *light* in the second stanza we have been given its past participle in ***lit***-*tle*. (Saussure's work on anagrams in Latin poetry is called on as supporting evidence for this procedure.) When Prynne turns to Blake's poem, it is the *letters* on which he focuses his attention. His main claim is that the words *tiger* and *bright* at the start and finish of the first line present reversed forms: *t—g—r/r—g—t*; and that the first three letters of the first word are contained within the letters of the last word. (Bafflingly, given his historical scrupulousness, Prynne uses the modern spelling of *tiger* with an *i* rather than Blake's spelling with a *y*, which would have undermined the argument.) Since the *g* of bright is not a sound that is heard, it seems that we are dealing only with the printed or written word here—though we are also told that the /r/ of *bright* can be equated with the /r/ of *tiger* if the latter is a 'vocalic /r/' (as in an American accent and many regional British accents), so sound does appear to matter after all. (Prynne uses the conventional slashes to indicate a phoneme rather than a letter.)

In both these discussions of linguistic detail in poetry, what Prynne seems to be aiming at is an account of the working of sound that ascribes to it a significant contribution to the richness and effectiveness of poems *without* making use of the traditional arguments about musicality or iconicity.[18] The astute poet will exploit the history of words, the patterning of phonemes, and the embedding of shorter words within longer words to enrich and complicate the semantic and referential dimension of the poem, and the alert reader—working as much with the poem on the page as the poem in the ear—will respond accordingly.

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within the letters of "frost" itself '. The use of 'letters' rather than 'sounds' or 'phonemes' suggests, however, that mental ears, or perhaps eyes, are at work here too.

18 In his longest critical work, *Field Notes*, a 134-page analysis of Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper', Prynne barely mentions sound or letter effects. One mention is in a traditional mould—the word *overflow* as containing a 'sonic self-echo', like *murmur* as used in 'Tintern Abbey' (43)—while others are more fanciful, like those in *Stars, Tigers—single* is 'latently' *singing*, *alone* is 'latently' *all one*, *lass* is 'maybe' 'part-way to *last*, even to *alasth*' (26), and, in a bilingual visual pun that Joyce would have liked, *vale* 'is by latent play of meaning a place of tacit, ancient leave-taking (Latin *vale* = farewell)' (76).

Where Paterson, and most other commentators on sound in poetry, examine the operation of the sonic dimension of words in a purely synchronic manner, then, Prynne sees it as inseparable from the history that has produced the words; they are apprehended, therefore, not simply as sounds but as dense sedimentations of historical processes. 'these features', Prynne states,

> *are by no means instances of adventitious sound symbolism, or association of semantic values with surface features; they are within the structure and history of English as an evolved system, and furthermore they are selected here for a mutually reinforcing, if latent, prominence: in other words, they are* motivated. (137–8)

The account of the temporality of 'Tintern Abbey' that Prynne derives from this somewhat suspect phonological analysis is compelling, even if Prynne's most radical suggestion, concerning the morphological history of words, remains unconvincing. Words don't carry their former incarnations with them, and neither poets nor readers can be expected to possess the kind of philological knowledge that Prynne displays in his analysis. The broader argument that poetry involves a special kind of hearing, using 'mental ears' rather than just bodily ears, alert to sound patterns that operate independently of the language's quotidian uses, carries more weight—but is not, of course, a position with which Paterson would be likely to disagree. Both poets would take issue with the view that sound in poetry is purely mimetic of the sounds of ordinary speech or the sounds of the world, and both are attempting to make explicit the unconscious rules that have governed the writing and reception of poetry for centuries. That reception, for Paterson, is primarily a matter of an ear sensitive to the patterns of linguistic sound, whereas for Prynne it is a matter of a mind furnished with philological knowledge and attuned to the letters on the page as much as it is to the sounds in the air.

III

Both Paterson and Prynne are, to my mind, fine poets. Although I have expressed reservations about both their accounts of sound in poetry, it would be a cheap shot to say that they write better poems than they do poetic theory: I don't mean to suggest that their theoretical accounts are anything other than bold, original, thought-provoking, and well worth the effort of engaging with. Now I want to ask what happens when we turn to examples of their poetry with these theoretical accounts in mind. Short specimens will be most useful. Here is a poem by Paterson from his collection *Rain*:

Correctives
The shudder in my son's left hand

he cures with one touch from his right,
two fingertips laid feather-light
to still his pen. He understands
the whole man must be his own brother
for no man is himself alone;
though some of us have never known
the one hand's kindness to the other. (16)

Although the subject is a serious one—the otherness of the self to the self, the body's self-healing capacity, the surprising benefits of physical frailty— the poem comes across as light and deft. This is partly due to the metre and stanza form—Tennyson's *In Memoriam* stanza (a form praised by Paterson in his essay on lyric)—but that is not our topic. It's also partly due to the transparently clear progression, from specific description in the first stanza to generalization in the opening of the second to an unexpected coda, but that is not our topic either. Nor are we concerned here with the diction—for instance, that menacing word 'shudder' right at the beginning of the poem, which is drained of its threat by everything that follows—or with the effects of syntax—notably the inversion that highlights the object of the poem's first verb—or with the tone—the sense of intimacy that begins with 'my son' and runs through to the end, where it is seen to exist between one part of the body and another. We are concerned only with the organization of sound.

The first stanza in particular, I think most readers would agree, possesses the quality of lyric musicality; we would probably also agree that the third line is especially effective in its articulation of sound: 'two fingertips laid feather-light'. And here is exactly the kind of 'consonantal signature' that Paterson identifies with the lyric at its most winning: three consonants dominate the line, and are deployed in a subtle pattern: *t—f—t—l—f— l—t*.[19] And these are the three consonants of a word in the poem's first line that plays a central role in its semantic unfolding, the word for what is most often the weaker side of the body: 'left'.

If we examine the stanza as a whole, though, it's not evident that consonantal repetition is particularly marked. There are slightly more plosives than fricatives, with a sprinkling of nasals and liquids (I'm using Paterson's terminology here), and one affricate (*ch*). If we turn to the vowels, on the other hand, we find just what Paterson says we *shouldn't* find: striking patterns of repetition and echo. That potent word *shudder* starts us off, its short *u* sound ([ʌ] in the IPA alphabet) almost immediately echoed in *son's*, and then doubled

19 One might be tempted to add to the three *t*'s the 'th' of 'feather', though this belongs to the fricative group rather than the plosive *t* and is thus closer to the *f*'s. Paterson is very alert to the misleading properties of English orthography.

in the next line in *one touch*— successive stresses taking two of the line's four beats, thus coming across as rhythmically as well as semantically salient. The sound then seems to disappear, but returns once more in the last line of the stanza, in *understands*. Playing against this sound is the short *i* ([ɪ]), first heard unremarkably in *in* in line 1, then picked up in the first and last syllables of *fingertips*, and finally in the important verb *still*. (I'm examining only the vowels that take a beat, since the others are much less prominent; the further instances of [ɪ] in the two occurrences of *his*, for example, don't carry much weight.) the stressed [ʌ] and [ɪ] words (leaving out *in,* which is an unstressed syllable carrying a beat through promotion) constitute a kind of skeleton for the stanza: *shudder—son's—touch—fingertips— still—understand*. Then there are the rhymes *hand* and *understands* [æ] and *right* and *light* [aɪ], and one other pair in *feath* and *pen* [ɛ]. Only one vowel carrying the beat has no partner, the vowel (or glide-plus-vowel) in *cure*; perhaps it receives some emphasis from this fact. (Interestingly, it begins with a consonant whose only echo is in the crucial word of the poem's last line, *kindness*.) If we include demoted stressed vowels—i.e. those that don't carry a beat—we have another short *e* ([ɛ]) in *left*, the vowel [u:] in *two*, and the diphthong [eɪ] in *laid*. They play a much less prominent part in the sonic texture of the stanza.

The feeling that sound plays an important role in our response to this stanza, then, is a product of the patterning of *both* vowels and consonants. Paterson is correct to the extent that the effect of vowel repetition and patterning is different from that of consonants; the second stanza seems to me less musical in sound, and this is probably because the consonants are more varied. There is a certain musicality about it, though, which we can ascribe largely to the vowels: listen to the sequence *whole—own—no—alone—known*, which introduces a new sound into the poem, played against a continuation of the [ʌ] sound of the first stanza in *must* (though it's not clear if this takes a beat), *brother*, *some*, and, at the climax, *other*. Although this is one very small example, it does suggest that the simple formula of vowel variation and consonant patterning is insufficient to account for lyrical beauty in language. The equivalent of pink noise in poetry is perhaps a degree of patterning in both consonants *and* vowels that is not so great as to overwhelm the sense and emotional quality of the poem.

There is no space to examine any other whole poems, but here are a number of endings—the final two, three, or four lines—of poems in *Rain*. These are examples of the heightened lyricism with which Paterson's shorter poems often end (as is the case with a significant proportion of the lyric poems in the tradition). Vowel-sounds occurring more than once in syllables that take the metrical beat are shown in bold type:

> They were tr**ee**s, and tr**ee**s don't w**ee**p or ache or sh**ou**t.
> And tr**ee**s are all this poem is ab**ou**t.
>
> ('Two Trees', 3)

and th**i**s is wh**y** we f**i**nd
however deep we l**i**sten
that the sk**ie**s are s**i**lent.
('The Error', 4)

I g**a**ve the empty s**ea**t a push
and n**o**thing m**a**de a s**ou**nd
and sw**u**ng betw**ee**n two skies to br**u**sh
her f**ee**t upon the gr**ou**nd
('The Swing', 7)

look at the l**i**ttle avat**a**r
of your m**u**ddy water-j**a**r
f**i**lling with the perfect r**i**ng
s**i**nging **u**nder everyth**i**ng
('The Circle', 11)

I turned and shut my eyes and l**a**y
my h**ea**d ag**ai**nst the growling gl**a**ss
and w**ai**ted for the tr**ai**n to p**a**ss.
('The Rain at Sea', 13)

S**o** the wh**o**le world bl**oo**ms cont**i**nuall**y**
with**i**n its tr**ue** and h**i**dden **e**lement,
a s**ea**, a b**eau**tiful and l**u**cid s**ea**
through wh**i**ch it p**i**lots, r**i**sing w**i**thout **e**nd.
('The Bathysphere', 35)

In all these examples, two or more vowel-sounds are interlaced to produce a pattern of assonance that, whether the reader or listener is consciously aware of it or not, contributes to any sense of concluding rightness that may be experienced.

In *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* Paterson comments as follows on a line of Sonnet 18: 'Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May': 'the vowels are fat, which inflates the line, but also carefully varied, which means it's great fun to wrap your mouth round, and enact the distinct shape and sense of each word in turn' (57). This is one of the rare moments in the book where he alludes to his principle of vowel variation. 'Fat vowels' are presumably low, back vowels ('winds' is the exception); by 'inflates the line' I guess he means that these vowels are, as we've noted, suggestive of largeness, in an appropriate context. But one might want to argue that the sense of the line's phonetic rightness comes also from the assonance that marks the conclusion of the two parts of the line: *shake* and *May*. (Paterson would insist, rightly, that there's no caesura here, but one

of the most common rhythmic articulations of the pentameter, as I've argued elsewhere, is into a two-beat, slower section, and a faster three-beat section.[20]) There is also the chiming of *rough* and *buds*—although the former word doesn't carry a beat, it is surely as strongly stressed as any of the other words of the line. By contrast, there is relatively little consonantal patterning; apart from a repeated /d/ the consonants are marked by their variability. Once again, the sense of an effective marriage of sound and sense is due at least as much to vowel repetition as it is to consonantal repetition.

IV

For comparison I've chosen a poem by Prynne that is also in two four-line stanzas with rhyme (though not, in this case, the *In Memoriam* stanza). It is untitled, and is from the 1993 collection *Not-You*:

Their catch-up is slow and careful
        to limit levels in thick shade
fallen there but untouched yet
        by the hot slants which fade

Both coming and going. On a stair
        or quickly the defined
several inlays make a breath
        of so much ascent, in mind.
                (*Poems*, 396)

Of course, this can't be claimed to be a 'representative' Prynne poem, just as 'Correctives' can't be said to be a 'representative' Paterson poem; but it will enable us to examine the workings of a small sample of his work that is surely not untypical.

It's not my purpose to examine the fitfulness with which sense gleams through the resistance to sense here—we're in a different poetic world from that of Paterson, whose poems, though often oblique and allusive, read as if we *ought* to be able to extract some paraphrasable content—but to focus on the sounds of the poem. (John Wilkinson, in 'Counterfactual Prynne', has undertaken a heroic analysis of the sequence from which this poem comes, though the meaning which he succeeds in extracting is less interesting than the struggle to elicit it: like all poems, this one is not a paraphrasable statement

20 See *the Rhythms of English Poetry*, 142–3 and 352–3.

but an event.) Paterson, in the online version of 'The Lyric Principle', makes a strong claim about the sounds of Prynne's poetry after having carried out his own analysis:

> *Prynne's default music runs* directly counter *to all the norms of the English lyric tradition. In every aspect we find him doing what we might caricature as 'the opposite of Heaney': lots of schwa—partly a result of his love of jargon and polysyllabic words—lots of 'bound' words with the vowel firmly opened and closed, often by unrelated plosives, and so on. However the impressive thing was that these features occurred with far more frequency than normal conversational speech would ever exhibit; in other words, the verse appeared to work on a deliberately anti-lyric principle. It was interesting to discover a project was so rigorously defined in the negative. Which made me think rather better of it, as a) at least it had a clear signature music, however ugly I might have found it, and b) its brutal rejection of even conversation-level lyric patterning made the sense even more jaggedly discontinuous that it would have been: as we know, Prynne's poetry is notoriously discontinuous. <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/2.htm>*

Let us look again just at the first stanza, testing it against Paterson's comments. The alliteration in the opening line—*catch* and *careful*—invites us to listen for further consonantal echoes, and there is one, at the end of *thick*; the final sound of *catch*, too, is echoed in *untouched* and *which*. The other phoneme repeated in the first line is /l/—*slow* and *careful*—and this is even more fully echoed in *limit levels* in the second line, and again in *fallen* and *slants* in the following lines. Meanwhile, the fricatives (/ð/ and /θ/—*th* voiced and unvoiced—/s/, /ʃ/—sh—/f/, and/h/) have been prominent: two in the first line, three in the second, two in the third, and five in the last. (This is far less than in 'Correctives', though, where the count is 6, 5, 4, and 5.) The rhyme, of course, provides another consonantal echo. Turning to the vowels, we find something closer to the Patersonian ideal of constant variation than in his own poem's first stanza: there are ten different stressed vowels, only three of them repeated, including the rhyme, and only one of those more than twice (*care-*, *lev-*, *there*, and *yet*—and to many ears, there would be two different vowelsounds here). It seems that in this stanza at least, Prynne is following, rather than countering, what Paterson presents as the lyric norm.[21]

If we turn to the endings of Prynne's poems, we again find a degree of vocalic and consonantal patterning, in many cases no different from what we

21 The second stanza is somewhat less Patersonian: seven different stressed vowels, and four of them repeated; not so much consonantal patterning, though it is perhaps noteworthy that there are eleven nasals, two of them in the last word.

would expect from a specimen of prose, though there are occasional marked repetitions of one or other type. There is no clear evidence of a resistance to the Patersonian model of patterned consonants and varied vowels. The following are the final sentences of the poems in the sequence 'The Kirghiz Disasters'[22] from *Brass* (a 1971 collection often taken to be the turning point in Prynne's poetic career to a more radical poetics); I have again indicated repeated stressed vowels by bold, and given some examples of chains of repeated constants (or related consonants) after each quotation:[23]

The f**i**re is an **u**nr**ea**l
m**i**xture of sm**o**ke & damp; the r**ea**son for
th**i**s is **u**nmusical, in st**o**ic s**i**lence by the door.
n—m—m—m—n—n—m—n; z—s—s—z—s—s—z—z—s—s—s

(Although there is an approximation of rhyme between *for* and *door*, the lack of stress on the first of these words means that the sonic echo is not pronounced.)

Otherwise the r**e**st is j**u**st
absolute; r**i**ght down at the foot of the b**u**ttress a m**a**rk
of wasted aff**e**ction l**ie**s awr**y**, **a**ll f**a**lling ap**a**rt.
t—t—t—t—t—t—t—t; last line: f—f; l—l—l
The continent w**i**ll of
course embrace us: we wound only, reluctant to k**i**ll.
k—k—k; l—l—l.

What **e**lse is th**e**re: the c**a**ptain orders the s**i**ght
of l**a**nd to be erased from the log, as w**e**ll he m**i**ght.
t—t—t—t—t; l—l—l—l
Sw**ea**r at the l**ea**ther by the knee-joint
shouts Jerome, crumbs r**ea**dy as a favoured bribe.
n—m—m

The
tribe inflates and each m**u**scle sh**u**ts.
No significant consonantal patterning.

How c**ou**ld it b**e**

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22 Prynne, *Poems*, 155–8.

23 My aim, I should stress, is not to make any statistical claims about Paterson's or Prynne's poetry; it is to ask, by means of a few examples, how sonic patterning relates to the reader's perception of 'musicality'.

as we turn quickly round and l**oo**k at what you s**ee**.
k—k—k—k

She n**e**xt stuffs her l**i**ttle crown **i**nto a
bag and runs daintily upst**ai**rs, she nauseates **e**veryone.
n—n—n—n—n—n—n; st [in –xt]—st—st—ts

What can we conclude from these examples? If Prynne's poetry seems to lack the quality of musicality or lyric beauty that much of Paterson's writing possesses—and I suspect most readers (or listeners) would agree that this is the case, whether or not this is seen as a failing—the reason is not that it is wholly lacking in the kind of vocalic and consonantal patterning that the other body of poetry manifests.[24] The perceptible difference between the experience of sound provided by the two poets must derive from the inseparability of sound and sense. To the degree that the sense is faint and flickering, the sound effects—unless they are produced by extreme phonetic patterning—will be muted. In Prynne's poem from *Not-You*, the phrase that strikes me as having greater salience and memorability than much of its surrounding language is 'hot slants'; I could say that this is due to the consonantal patterning (it contains an almost chiasmic sequence of *fricative—plosive—fricative—liquid—nasal—plosive—fricative*), the vowel variation, and the successive stressed monosyllables, or I could say it is due to the semantic suggestiveness of the two words in combination and the unusual use of *slants*, apparently as a noun (rays of the sun, perhaps?). But I would prefer to say that it is both: that the patterned sounds invite attention to the meaning, and the semantic surprise invites us to savour the sound. Returning to the line of 'Correctives' I drew particular attention to, 'two fingertips laid feather-light', we might ask how much work the sounds alone would do without the semantic suggestiveness of *fingertips* (not just fingers), of *laid* (with its connotations of gentleness, as in the laying on of hands), and of *feather-ligh*t, which underlines powerfully all the suggestions that have come before. Perhaps not a great deal. The indivisibility of sound and meaning can be understood as implying that the former alone can convey little, rather than suggesting that sound by itself possesses semantic properties.

If we are to assess Prynne's 'Their catch-up is slow and careful' according to

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24 Prynne's poetry has been praised for its sound-textures: thus one of his best critics, John Wilkinson, points out the 'skilful vowel and consonant patterning' ('Counterfactual Prynne', 7) of the first poem of *Not-You*, and states that the whole collection is 'bound strongly by sound-patterning' (20). While Wilkinson makes no claims about musicality, Nigel Wheale asserts that 'there is a specific kind of music, of poetic beauty, to Prynne's lyricism'—though he goes on to suggest that it may be 'pointless to continue thinking of it as "lyric" at all' ('Crosswording', 169), so it is clear he's not thinking of music, beauty, or lyricism in a traditional manner.

his own critical practice, we should not, as I have been doing, concern ourselves with the ways in which sounds might be thought to contribute to the experience of musicality or to activate, echo, emphasize, or counter meanings; we should attend to the complex history that underlies the words, whose sounds are the outcome of a long process of change, and we should look for patternings of phonemes that, through repetition, reversal, or embedding, work semantically by linking distant words. To explain the salience of the phrase *hot slants* we could follow up the word *slant* in the *OED* to find that it can mean 'a slight breeze, or spell *of* wind, etc.'—thus giving us a more fitting sense—and that *slant* used in this way is a late form of *slent*, which comes originally from Old Norse *sletta*, 'to dash, throw, etc.' Perhaps here, too, the loss of the final vowel gives the sound of *slant* a feeling of abbreviation, of cutting off. Then there is the inversion of many of the sounds of *slant* in *inlays*, *s—l—n* becoming *n—l—s*, and the repetition of the *s—n—t* of *slant* in *ascent*. Thus, perhaps, the sliding down of *slant* is reversed in an upward motion, on inlaid stairs.

I can't say I have convinced myself with this analysis, and I'm not sure that readers without the *OED* to hand or a Saussurean interest in anagrams would be convinced either. In a sense, both Paterson's and Prynne's approaches provide tools that are too powerful to offer any kind of reliable guide to the reader: many a passage of dead prose could be shown to possess the types of repetition and variation preferred by Paterson or the etymological and literal cross-referencing espoused by Prynne.

V

Where does this leave the question of sound and sense in lyric poetry? Many years ago, in a discussion of Joyce's *Ulysses*, I tried to formulate an account of the working of onomatopoeia: we experience this effect, I asserted, 'when a more than usually powerful semantic evocation of a suitable physical property is achieved in words that constitute a more than usually patterned phonetic sequence (whether or not that patterning involves anything that could be deemed specifically appropriate to the properties in question)' (*Peculiar Language*, 151). In other words, there's very little inherent in the sounds of *f*, *l*, and *t* that makes them appropriate to the action of gently placing two fingers of one hand on the other; but the vividly evoked meanings of this line enhance and are enhanced by the patterning of the consonants. (The principle may hold beyond the fairly limited realm of onomatopoeia, in which case it would not be a matter only of a 'suitable physical property' but any property, emotional or intellectual.) As Paterson shows in his essay, the operation of phonesthemes may require some modification of this account, since they provide, within a given language, a certain degree of existing sound–meaning connectivity that may be exploited by the poet (though the suggestiveness of phonesthemes can

always be annulled by the sense—there's no hint of light in, for instance, *gloom* and *glum*). And poets can, and do, exploit the weak correspondences between some categories of sounds and some categories of meaning I alluded to earlier. A further possibility is that a kind of nonce-phonestheme may be set up by a poem: an example would be the combination of the sounds of *l*, *f*, and *t* in the line we have looked at, which create the temporary impression that these words, and the way they relate to the earlier word *left*, represent a genuine cluster in the language highly appropriate to the meanings of the words in which they occur.

This account of the working of sound in poetry does not represent, any more than Paterson's or Prynne's theoretical claims, an algorithm which would enable us to program a computer to produce, or identify, poetry of the highest quality—if only because the notion of 'quality' is inseparable from the specific cultural context within which it is formed. Each of us brings to the poems we read a complex of information, memories, habits, expectations, fears, associations, prejudices, emotional tendencies, and physical inclinations that we have inherited and absorbed from the culture or cultures we have lived in as well as from the specific encounters that have shaped us, and our experience of the words we read takes place in, and makes a difference to, that internal complex. What we find worth attending to in a poem, what delights and moves us, will depend in part on what we have imbibed from those whose theories and judgements we trust and learn from; both Paterson and Prynne, as teachers in print and in speech, have undoubtedly enriched the poetic experiences of many readers of their own and others' work—and have done so in part because of their intolerance of opposing views. The danger in such intolerance is that, while enhancing the enjoyment and understanding of one kind of poetry, it will limit the appreciation of other kinds. I'm not suggesting that an all-embracing universal appreciativeness is possible, but I am suggesting that, as poetry readers (and perhaps as poetry writers too), we can benefit from attending carefully and generously to the many voices in the continuing conversation, including those that make what we feel to be exaggerated and one-sided claims.

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