

Second Edition

Sound and Sense

An Introduction to Poetry

by LAURENCE PERRINE

Southern Methodist University



HARCOURT, BRACE & WORLD INC.
NEW YORK · BURLINGAME

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Contents

PART ONE: *The Elements of Poetry*

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

—*Alexander Pope from An Essay on Criticism*

1 WHAT IS POETRY? 3

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson* The Eagle 5
William Shakespeare Winter 6
Wilfred Owen Dulce et Decorum Est 8
. . . .
William Shakespeare Spring 11
Anonymous The Twa Corbies 12
Anonymous Two Rivers 13
John Manifold The Griesly Wife 13
Robert Frost Love and a Question 14
A. E. Housman Terence, this is stupid stuff 15

2 READING THE POEM 18

- Thomas Hardy* The Man He Killed 20
A. E. Housman Is my team ploughing 22
EXERCISE 24
. . . .
Ben Jonson It is not growing like a tree 25
Sir Philip Sidney It is most true that eyes are formed to serve
26
Frank O'Connor Devil, Maggot and Son 27
Thomas Hardy Hap 28
Thomas Hardy The Subalterns 29
Edwin Arlington Robinson John Gorham 30
Edwin Arlington Robinson Another Dark Lady 31

3 DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION 32

- Emily Dickinson* There is no frigate like a book 33
William Wordsworth The World Is Too Much with Us 34
Robert Graves The Naked and the Nude 35
EXERCISES 37
. . . .

Edwin Arlington Robinson Richard Cory 39
Franklin P. Adams The Rich Man 40
Henry Reed Naming of Parts 40
Henry Reed Judging Distances 41
Siegfried Sassoon Base Details 43
Samuel Hoffenstein Love Song 44
Anonymous The Written Word 44

4 IMAGERY 45

Robert Browning Meeting at Night 46
Robert Browning Parting at Morning 47
.
.
John Gould Fletcher The Groundswell 48
A. E. Housman On moonlit heath and lonesome bank 49
Gerard Manley Hopkins Spring 50
Jonathan Swift A Description of the Morning 51
John Keats To Autumn 51
Amy Lowell Wind and Silver 52

5 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE 1: METAPHOR, PERSONIFICATION,
METONYMY 53

Robert Frost A Hillside Thaw 54
Walter Savage Landor Death Stands Above Me 56
Ogden Nash The Sea-Gull 57
John Dryden Lines on a Paid Militia 58
EXERCISE 60
.
.

George Herbert Love 61
Richard Wilbur Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning 62
John Donne A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning 62
Andrew Marvell To His Coy Mistress 64
William Wordsworth London, 1802 65
Elinor Wylie Velvet Shoes 66
Anonymous On a Clergyman's Horse Biting Him 67
EXERCISE 67
Walt Whitman Cavalry Crossing a Ford 67
Herman Melville The Night-March 67

6 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE 2: SYMBOL, ALLEGORY 68

Robert Frost The Road Not Taken 68
John Boyle O'Reilly A White Rose 70
Robert Browning My Star 70
Archibald MacLeish You, Andrew Marvell 72
Robert Herrick To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time 76
Charlotte Mew Exspecto Resurrectionem 77
EXERCISE 77
.
.

Anonymous Western Wind 78
William Blake The Sick Rose 78
Alfred, Lord Tennyson Ulysses 79
Alastair Reid Curiosity 81
Amy Lowell Patterns 82
George Herbert Peace 85
William Butler Yeats The Second Coming 87
EXERCISES 87
Edwin Arlington Robinson The House on the Hill 88
Alfred, Lord Tennyson The Deserted House 88
Walter de la Mare The Horseman 89
Herman Melville The Tuft of Kelp 89
Robert Herrick The Coming of Good Luck 89
Adelaide Crapsey On Seeing Weather-Beaten Trees 89

7 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE 3: PARADOX, OVERSTATEMENT,
UNDERSTATEMENT, IRONY 90

Emily Dickinson My Life Closed Twice 91
Robert Burns A Red, Red Rose 92
Robert Frost The Rose Family 93
Anonymous Of Alphus 95
William Blake The Chimney Sweeper 96
Percy Bysshe Shelley Ozymandias 97
EXERCISE 98
.
.

Richard Lovelace To Lucasta, Going to the Wars 99
Richard Lovelace To Althea, from Prison 99
Hilaire Belloc Lines for a Christmas Card 101
Padraic Fallon Mary Hynes 101
Anonymous Fine Flowers in the Valley 104
Humbert Wolfe The Grey Squirrel 105
William Shakespeare No Longer Mourn for Me 105
W. H. Auden The Unknown Citizen 106
Robert Frost Departmental 107
Sir John Suckling The Constant Lover 108
Robert Browning My Last Duchess 109
Edwin Muir The Horses 111
John Hall Wheelock Earth 112

8 ALLUSION 113

Robert Frost "Out, Out—" 114
William Shakespeare From *Macbeth*: She should have died
hereafter 116
.
.
e. e. cummings in Just- 117
John Milton On His Blindness 118

Denotation and Connotation

A primary distinction between the practical use of language and the literary use is that in literature, especially in poetry, a *fuller* use is made of individual words. To understand this, we need to examine the composition of a word.

The average word has three component parts: sound, denotation, and connotation. It begins as a combination of tones and noises, uttered by the lips, tongue, and throat, for which the written word is a notation. But it differs from a musical tone or a noise in that it has a meaning attached to it. The basic part of this meaning is its DENOTATION or denotations: that is, the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word. Beyond its denotations, a word may also have connotations. The CONNOTATIONS are what it suggests beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning. It acquires these connotations by its past history and associations, by the way and the circumstances in which it has been used. The word *home*, for instance, by denotation means only a place where one lives, but by connotation it suggests security, love, comfort, and family. The words *childlike* and *childish* both mean "characteristic of a child," but *childlike* suggests meekness, innocence, and wide-eyed wonder, while *childish* suggests pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums. If we name over a series of coins: *nickel*, *peso*, *lira*, *shilling*, *sen*, *doubloon*—the word *doubloon*, to four out

of five readers, will immediately suggest pirates, though one will find nothing about pirates in looking up its meaning in the dictionary. Pirates are part of its connotation.

Connotation is very important to the poet, for it is one of the means by which he can concentrate or enrich his meaning—say more in fewer words. Consider, for instance, the following short poem:

THERE IS NO FRIGATE LIKE A BOOK

There is no frigate like a book
 To take us lands away,
 Nor any coursers like a page
 Of prancing poetry.
 This traverse may the poorest take
 Without oppress of toll;
 How frugal is the chariot
 That bears the human soul!

—Emily Dickinson [1830–1886]

In this poem Emily Dickinson is considering the power of a book or of poetry to carry us away, to let us escape from our immediate surroundings into a world of the imagination. To do this she has compared literature to various means of transportation: a boat, a team of horses, a wheeled land vehicle. But she has been careful to choose kinds of transportation and names for them that have romantic connotations. *Frigate* suggests exploration and adventure; *coursers*, beauty, spirit, and speed; *chariot*, speed and the ability to go through the air as well as on land. (Compare "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and the myth of Phaëthon, who tried to drive the chariot of Apollo, and the famous painting of Aurora with her horses, once hung in almost every school.) How much of the meaning of the poem comes from this selection of vehicles and words is apparent if we try to substitute for them, say, *steamship*, *horses*, and *streetcar*.

QUESTIONS

1. What is lost if *miles* is substituted for *lands* (2), or *cheap* for *frugal* (7)?
2. How is *prancing* (4) peculiarly appropriate to poetry as well as to coursers? Could the poet have without loss compared a book to coursers and poetry to a frigate?
3. Is this account appropriate to all kinds of poetry or just to certain kinds?

That is, was the poet thinking of poems like Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (page 8) or of poems like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (page 263) and Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners" (page 265)?

Just as a word has a variety of connotations, so also it may have more than one denotation. If we look up the word *spring* in the dictionary, for instance, we will find that it has between twenty-five and thirty distinguishable meanings: It may mean (1) a pounce or leap, (2) a season of the year, (3) a natural source of water, (4) a coiled elastic wire, etc. This variety of denotation, complicated by additional tones of connotation, makes language confusing and difficult to use. Any person using words must be careful to define by context precisely the meanings that he wishes. But the difference between the writer using language to communicate information and the poet is this: the practical writer will always attempt to confine his words to one meaning at a time; the poet will often take advantage of the fact that the word has more than one meaning by using it to mean more than one thing at the same time. Thus when Edith Sitwell in one of her poems writes, "This is the time of the wild spring and the mating of tigers," she uses the word *spring* to denote both a season of the year and a sudden leap, and she uses *tigers* rather than *lambs* or *birds* because it has a connotation of fierceness and wildness that the other two lack. In the following sonnet the word *wreathèd* (line 14) means "twisted or convoluted," but it may also mean "hung with seaweed." Both meanings are appropriate to the image of Triton.

THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon; 5
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; 10
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

—William Wordsworth [1770–1850]

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *boon* (4), *Proteus* (13), *Triton* (14).
2. Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *earth* for *world* (1), *buying and selling* for *getting and spending* (2), *exposes* for *bares* (5), *back* for *bosom* (5), *dozing* for *sleeping* (7), *posies* for *flowers* (7), *nourished* for *suckled* (10), *visions* for *glimpses* (12), *sound* for *blow* (14).
3. Should *Great God!* (9) be considered as a vocative (term of address) or an expletive (exclamation)? Or something of both?
4. State the theme of the poem in a sentence.

A frequent misconception of poetic language is that the poet seeks always the most beautiful or noble-sounding words. What he really seeks are the most *meaningful* words, and these vary from one context to another. Language has many levels and varieties, and the poet may choose from them all. His words may be grandiose or humble, fanciful or matter of fact, romantic or realistic, archaic or modern, technical or everyday, monosyllabic or polysyllabic. Usually his poem will be pitched pretty much in one key. The words in Emily Dickinson's "There is no frigate like a book" and those in Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed" (page 20) are chosen from quite different areas of language, but each poet has chosen the words most meaningful for his own poetic context. Sometimes a poet may import a word from one level or area of language into a poem composed mostly of words from a different level or area. If he does this clumsily, the result will be incongruous and sloppy. If he does it skillfully, the result will be a shock of surprise and an increment of meaning for the reader. In fact, the many varieties of language open to the poet provide his richest resource. His task is one of constant exploration and discovery. He searches always for the secret affinities of words which allow them to be brought together with soft explosions of meaning.

THE NAKED AND THE NUDE¹

For me, the naked and the nude
 (By lexicographers construed
 As synonyms that should express
 The same deficiency of dress
 Or shelter) stand as wide apart 5
 As love from lies, or truth from art.

¹ Mr. Graves has recorded "The Naked and the Nude" (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).

Lovers without reproach will gaze
 On bodies naked and ablaze;
 The hippocratic eye will see
 In nakedness, anatomy; 10
 And naked shines the Goddess when
 She mounts her lion among men.

The nude are bold, the nude are sly
 To hold each treasonable eye.
 While draping by a showman's trick 15
 Their dishabille in rhetoric,
 They grin a mock-religious grin
 Of scorn at those of naked skin.

The naked, therefore, who compete
 Against the nude may know defeat; 20
 Yet when they both together tread
 The briary pastures of the dead,
 By Gorgons with long whips pursued,
 How naked go the sometime nude!

—Robert Graves [1895-]

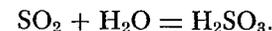
QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *lexicographers* (2), *construed* (2), *hippocratic* (9), *dishabille* (16), *Gorgons* (23).
2. What kind of language is used in lines 2–5? Why? (For example, why is *deficiency* used in preference to *lack*? Purely because of meter?)
3. What is meant by *rhetoric* (16)? Why is the word *dishabille* used in this line instead of some less fancy word?
4. Explain why the poet chose his wording instead of the following alternatives: *brave* for *bold* (13), *clever* for *sly* (13), *clothing* for *draping* (15), *smile* for *grin* (17).
5. What, for the poet, is the difference in connotation between *naked* and *nude*? Try to explain reasons for the difference. If your own sense of the two words differs from that of Graves, state the difference, and give reasons to support your sense of them.
6. Explain the reversal in the last line.

The person using language to convey information is largely indifferent to the sound of his words and is hampered by their connotations and multiple denotations. He tries to confine each word to a single exact meaning. He uses, one might say, a fraction of the word and throws the rest away. The poet, on the other hand, tries to use as much of the word as he can. He is interested in sound and

uses it to reinforce meaning (see Chapter 13). He is interested in connotation and uses it to enrich and convey meaning. And he may use more than one denotation.

The purest form of practical language is scientific language. The scientist needs a precise language for conveying information precisely. The fact that words have multiple denotations and various overtones of meaning is a hindrance to him in accomplishing his purpose. His ideal language would be a language with a one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning; that is, every word would have one meaning only, and for every meaning there would be only one word. Since ordinary language does not fulfill these conditions, he has invented one that does. A statement in his language looks something like this:



In such a statement the symbols are entirely unambiguous; they have been stripped of all connotation and of all denotations but one. The word *sulfurous*, if it occurred in poetry, might have all kinds of connotations: fire, smoke, brimstone, hell, damnation. But H_2SO_3 means one thing and one thing only: sulfurous acid.

The ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings that words have, then, are an obstacle to the scientist but a resource to the poet. Where the scientist wants singleness of meaning, the poet wants richness of meaning. Where the scientist needs and has invented a strictly one-dimensional language, in which every word is confined to one denotation, the poet needs a multi-dimensional language, and creates it partly by using a multi-dimensional vocabulary, in which, to the dimension of denotation, he adds the dimensions of connotation and of sound.

The poet, we may say, plays on a many-stringed instrument. And he sounds more than one note at a time.

The first problem in reading poetry, therefore, or in reading any kind of literature, is to develop a sense of language, a feeling for words. One needs to become acquainted with their shape, their color, and their flavor. There are two ways of doing this: extensive use of the dictionary and extensive reading.

EXERCISES

1. Robert Frost has said that "Poetry is what evaporates from all translations." On the basis of this chapter, can you explain why this statement is true? How much of a word can be translated?

2. Which of the following words have the most "romantic" connotations?
 a. horse () steed () equine quadruped ()
 b. China () Cathay ()
 Which of the following is the most emotionally connotative?
 c. mother () female parent () dam ()
 Which of the following have the more favorable connotations?
 d. average () mediocre ()
 e. secret agent () spy ()
 f. adventurer () adventuress ()

3. Fill each blank with the word richest in meaning in the given context. Explain.

- a. I still had hopes, my latest hours to crown,
 Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;
 To husband out life's _____ at the close,
 And keep the flame from wasting by repose.
candle, taper
 —*Goldsmith*
- b. She was a _____ of delight.
 When first she gleamed upon my sight.
ghost, phantom,
spectre, spook
 —*Wordsworth*
- c. His sumptuous watch-case, though concealed it lies,
 Like a good conscience, _____ joy supplies.
perfect, solid,
thorough
 —*Edward Young*
- d. Charmed magic _____ opening on the foam
 Of _____ seas, in faery lands forlorn.—*Keats*
casements, windows
dangerous, perilous
- e. Thou _____ unravished bride of quietness.
 —*Keats*
still, yet
- f. I'll _____ the guts into the neighbor room.
 —*Shakespeare*
bear, carry, convey,
lug
- g. The iron tongue of midnight hath _____
 twelve.
 —*Shakespeare*
said, struck, told
- h. In poetry each word reverberates like the note of
 a well-tuned _____ and always leaves be-
 hind it a multitude of vibrations. —*Joubert*
banjo, guitar, lyre
- i. I think that with this _____ new alliance
 I may ensure the public, and defy
 All other magazines of art or science. —*Byron*
holy, sacred
- j. Care on thy maiden brow shall put
 A wreath of wrinkles, and thy foot
 Be shod with pain: not silken dress
 But toil shall _____ thy loveliness.
 —*C. Day Lewis*
clothe, tire, weary

charged a better word in Pound's definition? What do its associations with storage batteries, guns, and dynamite suggest about poetry?

RICHARD CORY

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
 We people on the pavement looked at him:
 He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
 Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
 And he was always human when he talked;
 But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
 "Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
 And admirably schooled in every grace:
 In fine, we thought that he was everything
 To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
 And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
 Went home and put a bullet through his head.

—*Edwin Arlington Robinson [1869–1935]*

QUESTIONS

1. In how many senses is Richard Cory a gentleman?
2. The word *crown*, meaning the top of the head, is familiar to you from "Jack and Jill"; but why does Robinson use the unusual phrase "from sole to crown" instead of the common "from head to foot" or "from top to toe"?
3. List the words in the poem which express or suggest the idea of aristocracy or royalty.
4. Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the following alternatives: *sidewalk* for *pavement* (2), *good-looking* for *clean favored* (4), *thin* for *slim* (4), *dressed* for *arrayed* (5), *courteous* for *human* (6), *wonderfully* for *admirably* (10), *trained* for *schooled* (10), *manners* for *every grace* (10), *in short* for *in fine* (11). What other examples of effective diction do you find in the poem?
5. Why is *Richard Cory* a good name for the character in this poem?
6. This poem is a good example of how ironic contrast (see Chapter 7) generates meaning. The poem makes no direct statement about life; it simply relates an incident. What larger meanings about life does it suggest?

7. A leading American critic has said of this poem: "In 'Richard Cory' . . . we have a superficially neat portrait of the elegant man of mystery; the poem builds up deliberately to a very cheap surprise ending; but all surprise endings are cheap in poetry, if not, indeed, elsewhere, for poetry is written to be read not once but many times."² Do you agree with this evaluation of the poem? Discuss.

THE RICH MAN

The rich man has his motor-car,
His country and his town estate.
He smokes a fifty-cent cigar
And jeers at Fate.

He frivols through the livelong day, 5
He knows not Poverty her pinch.
His lot seems light, his heart seems gay,
He has a cinch.

Yet though my lamp burns low and dim,
Though I must slave for livelihood— 10
Think you that I would change with him?
You bet I would!

—Franklin P. Adams [1881–1960]

QUESTIONS

1. What meanings has *lot* (7)?
2. Bearing in mind the criticism cited of Robinson's "Richard Cory," state whether you think that poem or this has more poetic value. Which poem is merely clever? Which is something more?

NAMING OF PARTS³

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica 5
Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,

² Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, Norfolk, Conn., New Directions, 1946, p. 52.

³ Mr. Reed has recorded "Naming of Parts" (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).

When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches 10
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy 15
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it 20
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy 25
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For to-day we have naming of parts. 30

—Henry Reed [1914–]

QUESTIONS

1. What basic contrasts are represented by the trainees and the gardens?
2. What is it that the trainees "have not got"?
3. How many senses have the phrases "easing the Spring" (stanza 4) and "point of balance" (27)?
4. What differences of language and rhythm do you find between those lines concerning "naming of parts" and those describing the gardens?
5. Does the repetition of certain phrases throughout the poem have any special function, or is it only a kind of refrain?

JUDGING DISTANCES⁴

Not only how far away, but the way that you say it
Is very important. Perhaps you may never get
The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to report on a landscape: the central sector,
The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday, 5
And at least you know

⁴ Mr. Reed has recorded "Judging Distances" (LP, Library of Congress, PL 20).

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army
 Happens to be concerned—the reason being,
 Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know
 There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and
 the poplar, 10
 And those which have bushy tops to; and lastly
 That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly,
 Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.
 You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting: 15
 At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen
 Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,
 Don't call the bleeders *sheep*.

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of
 example,
 The one at the end, asleep, endeavors to tell us 20
 What he sees over there to the west, and how far away,
 After first having come to attention. There to the west,
 On the fields of summer the sun and the shadows bestow
 Vestments of purple and gold.

The still white dwellings are like a mirage in the heat, 25
 And under the swaying elms a man and a woman
 Lie gently together. Which is, perhaps, only to say
 That there is a row of houses to the left of arc,
 And that under some poplars a pair of what appear to be humans
 Appear to be loving. 30

Well that, for an answer, is what we might rightly call
 Moderately satisfactory only, the reason being,
 Is that two things have been omitted, and those are important.
 The human beings, now: in what direction are they,
 And how far away, would you say? And do not forget 35
 There may be dead ground in between.

There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got
 The knack of judging a distance; I will only venture
 A guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers,
 (Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished,) 40
 At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
 Of about one year and a half.

—Henry Reed [1914-]

QUESTIONS

1. In what respect are maps "of time, not place" in the army?
2. Though they may be construed as belonging to the same speaker, there are two speaking voices in this poem. Identify each, and put quotation marks around the lines spoken by the second voice.
3. Two kinds of language are used in this poem—army "officialese," and the language of human experience. What are the characteristics of each? What is the purpose of each? Which is more precise?
4. The word *bleeders* (18)—i.e., "bloody creatures"—is British profanity. To which of the two kinds of language does it belong? Or is it perhaps a third kind of language?
5. As in "Naming of Parts" (these two poems are part of a series of three with the general title "Lessons of War") the two kinds of language used might possibly be called "unpoetic" and "poetic." Is the "unpoetic" language really unpoetic? In other words, is its use inappropriate in these two poems? Explain.
6. The phrase "dead ground" (36) takes on symbolic meaning in the last stanza. What is its literal meaning? What is its symbolic meaning? What does the second speaker mean by saying that the distance between himself and the lovers is "about one year and a half"? In what respect is the contrast between the recruits and the lovers similar to that between the recruits and the gardens in "Naming of Parts"? What meanings are generated by the former contrast?

BASE DETAILS

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
 I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
 And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
 You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
 Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel, 5
 Reading the Roll of Honor. "Poor young chap,"
 I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
 Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
 And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
 I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed. 10

—Siegfried Sassoon [1886-]

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *petulant* (4).
2. In what two ways may the title be interpreted? (Both words have two pertinent meanings.) What applications has *scarlet* (2)? What is the force of *fierce* (1)? Try to explain why the poet chose his wording rather than the

following alternatives: *fleshy* for *puffy* (4), *eating and drinking* for *guzzling and gulping* (5), *battle* for *scrap* (8), *totter* for *toddle* (10).

3. Who evidently is the speaker? (The poet, a British captain in World War I, was decorated for bravery on the battlefield.) Does he mean what he says? What is the purpose of the poem?

LOVE SONG

Your little hands,
Your little feet,
Your little mouth—
Oh, God, how sweet!

Your little nose,
Your little ears,
Your eyes, that shed
Such little tears!

Your little voice,
So soft and kind;
Your little soul,
Your little mind!

—Samuel Hoffenstein [1890–1947]

QUESTION

1. The connotations of a word, like its denotations, are controlled by context, and are thus subject to change. What are the connotations of *little* in lines 1–10? in lines 11–12?

THE WRITTEN WORD

A

The spoken or written word
Should be as clean as a bone,
As clear as is the light,
As firm as is a stone.
Two words will never serve
As well as one alone.

B

The written word
Should be clean as bone,
Clear as light,
Firm as stone.
Two words are not
As good as one.

QUESTION

1. Which of the above versions of a poem, by an anonymous writer, is the better? Why?

4

Imagery

Experience comes to us largely through the senses. My experience of a spring day, for instance, may consist partly of certain emotions I feel and partly of certain thoughts I think, but most of it will be a cluster of sense impressions. It will consist of *seeing* blue sky and white clouds, budding leaves and daffodils; of *hearing* robins and bluebirds singing in the early morning; of *smelling* damp earth and blossoming hyacinths; and of *feeling* a fresh wind against my cheek. The poet seeking to express his experience of a spring day must therefore provide a selection of the sense impressions he has. Like Shakespeare (page 11), he must give the reader “daisies pied” and “lady-smocks all silver-white” and “merry larks” and the song of the cuckoo and maidens bleaching their summer smocks. Without doing so he will probably fail in evoking the emotions which accompanied his sensations. His language, therefore, must be more *sensuous* than ordinary language. It must be more full of imagery.

IMAGERY may be defined as the representation through language of sense experience. Poetry appeals directly to our senses, of course, through its music and rhythm, which we actually hear when it is read aloud. But indirectly it appeals to our senses through imagery, the representation to the imagination of sense experience. The word *image* perhaps most often suggests a mental picture,

Man He Killed, The 20, 21-22
Man Who Thinks He Can, The 220
MANIFOLD, JOHN
The Criesly Wife 13, 123-24
MARVELL, ANDREW
The Garden 284
To His Coy Mistress 64
 Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table 233
Mary Hynes 101, 150
 May all my enemies go to hell 101
Meeting at Night 46, 46-48, 56, 59
MELVILLE, HERMAN
The Bench of Boors 195
The Night-March 67
The Tuff of Kelp 89
MEREDITH, GEORGE
Lucifer in Starlight 286
METCALFE, JAMES J.
Pray in May 221
Metrical Feet 179
MEW, CHARLOTTE
Especto Resurrectionem 77
The Changeling 159
MILLAY, EDNA ST. VINCENT
Counting-Out Rhyme 158
MILTON, JOHN
On His Blindness 118
On the Late Massacre in Piemont 193
MOORE, MARIANNE
A Carriage from Sweden 287
Morning Song from "Sentin" 251
Mr. Flood's Party 292
Mr. Heath-Stubbs as you must understand 142, 150
 Much have I travelled in the realms of gold 201
MUIR, EDWIN
The Horses 111
 My clumsiest dear, whose hands shipwreck vases 289
My Last Duchess 109, 124
 My life closed twice before its close 91
 My life had stood, a loaded gun 266
 My little Son, who looked from thoughtful eyes 227
 My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun 297
 My son, my executioner 223
 My soul, there is a country 305
My Star 70, 71-72, 75
 Mysterious Night! when our first parent knew 306

Naked and the Nude, The 35, 57
Naming of Parts 40
NASH, OGDEN
The Sea-Gull 57
The Turtle 148, 148-49
NASHE, THOMAS
Spring 288
 Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night 119
Night-March, The 67
NIMS, JOHN FREDERICK
Love Poem 289
 No egg on Friday Alph will eat 95
 No longer mourn for me when I am dead 105

No, no, go not to Lethe 281
No Platonic Love 261
No Second Troy 118
Noiseless Patient Spider, A 306
 Not only how far away, but the way that you say it 41
 Not that the pines were darker there 228
 Nothing is so beautiful as spring 50
 Now hardly here and there a hackney-coach 51
NOYES, ALFRED
The Barrel-Organ 176

 O, my luvve is like a red, red rose 92
 O Rose, thou art sick 78
 O Western wind, when wilt thou blow 78, 124
 "O where are you going?" said reader to rider 199
 O where ha' you been, Lord Randal, my son 150, 211
 O who is that young sinner 174
Oak, The 171, 218
O'CONNOR, FRANK
Devil, Maggot and Son 27
Ode on a Grecian Urn 279
Ode on Melancholy 281
Of a Contented Mind 130
Of Alphas 95
 Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today 221
 Oh! King Who hast the key 77
 Old Adam, the carrion crow 259
On a Clergyman's Horse Biting Him 67
On a Girdle 305
 On a starred night Prince Lucifer arose 286
On First Looking into Chapman's Homer 201
On His Blindness 118
On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday 282
 On moonlit heath and lonesome bank 49
On Seeing Weather-Beaten Trees 89
On the Late Massacre in Piemont 193
 Once I am sure there's nothing going on 282
 Once more the storm is howling 321
 Once riding in old Baltimore 265
 Only a baby small 224
O'REILLY, JOHN BOYLE
A White Rose 70, 71-72
 Out of the cradle endlessly rocking 308
 "Out, Out—" 114, 115-16
 Out upon it! I have loved 107
OWEN, WILFRED
Dulce et Decorum Est 8, 59
The Parable of the Old Men and the Young 121
The Send-Off 224
Ozymandias 97

Parable of the Old Men and the Young, The 121
Parting at Morning 47
Parting, Without a Sequel 157
 Passing through huddled and ugly walls 156
PATMORE, COVENTRY
The Toys 227
Patterns 82

Peace (George Herbert) 85
Peace (Henry Vaughan) 305
 Pease porridge hot 180
Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning 62
Piazza Piece 292
 Picture and book remain 130
Pied Beauty 222
 Pious Selinda goes to prayers 264
Poem in October 150, 206
 Poetry is the supreme fiction 301
 "Poor wanderer," said the leaden sky 29, 57
POPE, ALEXANDER
Epistle to a Young Lady 290
Epitaph on Newton 119
Sound and Sense 190
PRAED, WINTHROP MACKWORTH
Song 158
Pray in May 221
Prayer for My Daughter, A 321
Prayer in Spring, A 221
PROKOSCH, FREDERICK
Sunburned Ulysses 291

 Quatrain 122

RANSOM, JOHN CROWE
Parting, Without a Sequel 157
Piazza Piece 292
Redemption 274
REED, HENRY
Judging Distances 41
Naming of Parts 40
REID, ALASTAIR
Curiosity 81
Red, Red Rose, A 92
Resolution and Independence 316
Rich Man, The 40
Richard Cory 39, 47, 97
Road Not Taken, The 68, 69-70, 71, 75, 92
ROBINSON, EDWIN ARLINGTON
Another Dark Lady 31, 56, 59
John Gorham 30, 175
Mr. Flood's Party 292
Richard Cory 39, 47, 97
The Dark Hills 192
The House on the Hill 88, 203
ROETHKE, THEODORE
I Knew a Woman 294
Romeo and Juliet, from 209
Rose Family, The 93
ROSSETTI, DANTE GABRIEL
Silent Noon 295
The Sonnet 208
 Rough wind, that moanest loud 127
 Round the cape of a sudden came the sea 47

 Said the circus man, Oh what do you like 299
Sailing to Byzantium 323
SANDBURG, CARL
Splinter 182
The Harbor 147
SASSOON, SIEGFRIED
Base Details 43
Satire on Women, Two Passages from 324
Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General, A 302

Say not the struggle naught availeth 220
 Says Tweed to Till 13
SCOTT, SIR WALTER
Breathes There the Man 228
Sea-Gull, The 57
Sea-Shell Murmurs 284
 Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness 51, 56
Second Coming, The 87
Send-Off, The 224
SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM
Fear No More 295
from Macbeth 59-60, 116
from Romeo and Juliet, 209
 Let me not to the marriage of true minds 296
 My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun 297
No Longer Mourn for Me 105
Since Brass, nor Stone, nor Earth 296
Song 181
Spring 11, 45, 54, 57, 185-86
That Time of Year 202, 231-32
Winter 6, 7-8
SHAPIRO, KARL
Boy-Man 229
 Doctor, doctor, a little of your love 297
 She has finished and sealed the letter 157
 She is as in a field a silken tent 271
 She looked over his shoulder 257
 She sat down below a thorn 104
 She should have died hereafter 59-60, 116
SHELLEY, PERCY BYSSHE
Dirge 127
England in 1819 191
Ozymandias 97
Shield of Achilles, The 257
SHIRLEY, JAMES
 The glories of our blood and state 298
Sick Rose, The 78
SIDNEY, SIR PHILIP
 It is most true that eyes are formed to serve 26
Leave Me, O Love 299
With How Sad Steps, O Moon 299
Silken Tent, The 271
Silent Noon 295
 Silver bark of beech, and sawlow 158
Silver Swan, The 253
 Since brass, nor stone, nor earth 296
 Since there's no help 140
Sir Patrick Spence 254
Six Poets in Search of a Lawyer 272
 Slow, slow, fresh fount 279
 So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went 121
 So Good Luck came, and on my roof did light 89
 So smooth, so sweet, so silv'ry is thy voice 183, 184
 So we'll go no more a-roving 261
Solitary Reaper, The 319
Song: Go and catch a falling star 269
Song: Hark, hark! 181
Song: Old Adam, the carrion crow 259
Song: Pious Selinda goes to prayers 264
Song: The pints and the pistols 158
Song: The year's at the spring 127