On “getting” poetry

by Adam Kirsch

On deriving pleasure from poetry.

A subscriber to this magazine writes with a problem: “Although I have advanced university degrees, I have never ‘gotten’ poetry.” He’s not alone; I hear the same thing regularly from people who love to read novels and biographies, who are undaunted by string quartets and abstract paintings, but find poetry a closed door. No one is more aware of this disconnect between poetry and the reading public than poets themselves. The debate over why poetry moved from the center of literary culture to the outskirts of the academy, and how it can regain its place in the sun, has been going on at least since Dana Gioia’s landmark essay “Can Poetry Matter?” appeared in The Atlantic in 1991. More recently, the poet and novelist Ben Lerner devoted a short book to explaining The Hatred of Poetry. The poet-critic Stephanie Burt, perhaps taking that hatred for granted, titled a book about how to read poems Don’t Read Poetry.

This situation is all the more embarrassing for poets because there is an undeniable public appetite for the things poetry is supposed to provide: verbal artistry and words of wisdom. Millions of people find the former in hip-hop lyrics, which can be as adroit within their strict generic conventions as a love poem by a medieval troubadour. Millions more find wisdom in the bite-sized inspirational poems of Rupi Kaur, written to be read on Instagram—e.g., “our backs/ tell stories/ no books have/ the spine/ to carry.” Kaur’s collection Milk and Honey has been on the New York Times bestseller list for 170 weeks and counting.

So why are so few of these readers turning to the Norton Anthology? The simplest reason may be that the Norton Anthology is a textbook, and no one reads textbooks for fun. Most Americans first encounter poetry as a classroom subject, and it never loses the associations of dutifulness and dullness. American adolescents make their way through “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “The Road Not Taken” the way Victorian schoolboys were made to construe Homer: the language may not be dead, but the context is equally remote from real life.

With a living art, by contrast, people seek it out because they want to. It’s the dessert, not the vegetables you have to finish. Philip Larkin observed (in 1957!) that poetry was losing readers
simply because they no longer liked it enough to pay for it: “The cash customers of poetry . . . who used to put down their money in the sure and certain hope of enjoyment as if at a theatre or concert hall, were quick to move elsewhere.” Larkin meant enjoyment, he clarified, “in the commonest of senses, the sense in which we leave a radio on or off.” The same is true in 2021. People happily pay to stream music and download novels onto their Kindles; meanwhile, the Poetry Foundation with its $200 million endowment looks for ways to cajole people into reading poems.

But the comparison isn’t entirely fair. Yes, poetry is meant to give pleasure; in his preface to Lyrical Ballads in 1802, Wordsworth said that the poet pays homage to “the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves.” But like many adult pleasures, poetry is an acquired taste. We don’t grow up surrounded by it, the way we do with pop music and movies, whose conventions become second nature. Rather, poetry is to our usual ways of reading and writing as classical music is to pop, or as ballet is to dancing at parties. The medium is the same—language, sound, and movement, respectively—but the conventions and values are very different and require some effort to get used to. What’s more, the history of English poetry stretches back seven hundred years, give or take, so reading some of the greatest poems means coming to grips with ways of thinking and uses of language that are opaque to a twenty-first-century American reader.

No wonder most people would rather read Instapoems, or listen to a spoken-word performance, than engage with traditional poetry: the barriers to entry are much lower. People who love traditional poetry might be tempted to say that such writing isn’t poetry at all. But the battle over nomenclature is a losing one. If millions of people think Rupi Kaur is a poet, comparing her to Wallace Stevens won’t convince them otherwise. It’s more useful to distinguish between “art poetry” and other kinds of writing that go under the name of poetry, just as music distinguishes between art songs and popular or folk songs.

Thinking about poetry in terms of music and painting may be useful for readers like our correspondent, who (I assume) wouldn’t be a subscriber if he weren’t interested in the arts regularly discussed in The New Criterion. Each of these arts has its own techniques for giving pleasure and communicating meaning, and no formal instruction is required to appreciate either of them. Some people visit a museum or listen to an opera for the first time and respond instinctively, before they can say what exactly they’re responding to. But most of the time it’s helpful to have a sense of what parts of the experience we’re supposed to be paying attention to—how a poem achieves its effects.
The essence of finding pleasure in art poetry is paying attention to language in a new way. In daily talk and in most writing, words are used to convey information: you’re not supposed to pay attention to the words themselves but to the message they deliver. The ultimate example is a stop sign, where the meaning resides just as much in the red octagon as in the word “stop.” A driver isn’t meant to read the word at all, just reflexively put a foot on the brake.

In poetry, the opposite is true: the emphasis is on the words themselves, as much as or even more than what they mean. Instead of being a transparent window we look through to see what’s on the other side, poetic language is a stained-glass window that captures our attention for itself. The most important way it does this is through its music—how the words sound when you read them aloud. You don’t necessarily have to vocalize the words to hear their music, just as a musician doesn’t have to play a score to understand it, but it helps. In a sense, a poem, too, is a score for performance. Search online for the historic recording of W. B. Yeats reading his poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”: he practically sings it, luxuriating in the vowel tones. Compared to the way we usually talk, Yeats’s recitation may sound pretentious and artificial—even poets don’t read that way nowadays—but the same is true of any fine art when it’s regarded unsympathetically.

To hear a poem’s music, it helps to know a few basic things about how poems are organized. The most important verse form in English is iambic pentameter, which was used by just about every poet in English from Geoffrey Chaucer in the fourteenth century to Robert Frost in the twentieth. An iamb is a pair of syllables in which the first is unstressed and the second stressed; five iambs in a row make an iambic pentameter line. The form feels very natural in English because our everyday speech rhythms often fall into this pattern: “I wish that I could have a cup of tea” is iambic pentameter.

So is most of Shakespeare—for instance, “To be or not to be, that is the question.” But as you can hear if you say it aloud, Hamlet’s line isn’t a perfectly regular iambic pentameter. Instead of ending on the fifth stressed syllable, it adds a last unstressed one, bringing the total to eleven syllables. Again, if the line were a strict iambic pentameter, the third stress would fall on the word “be”: “To be or not to be.” But reading it that way sounds wrong, because the phrase “not to be” demands to be accented on the first word only. As a result, we instinctively move the stress to the syllable after “be,” which ends up making perfect dramatic and rhetorical sense. “that is the question,” Hamlet says, drawing attention to the dilemma he has posed in the first half of the line: to be or not to be?

The exercise of identifying metrical patterns in a poem is called scansion, and it’s not very interesting in itself; like diagramming sentences, it’s only done in classrooms (if there). Poets don’t think consciously about scansion when they write, any more than novelists plan their subordinate clauses in advance. Scansion can be useful when learning to read poetry, however, because it helps focus attention on the central element in poetry’s music: the tension between the pattern of the verse and the patterns of speech and meaning.
Poets have invented many ways of playing these patterns off against one another. Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter is often subtle and naturalistic, which is why it takes a good actor to make the structure of the verse audible, rather than allowing the speech to collapse into prose. Other poets use iambic pentameter much more ostentatiously, as in this description of a woman, Belinda, preparing to put on makeup, from Alexander Pope’s 1717 poem “The Rape of the Lock”:

And now, unveil’d, the toilet stands display’d,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
First, rob’d in white, the nymph intent adores
With head uncover’d, the cosmetic pow’rs.
A heav’nly image in the glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
Th’ inferior priestess, at her altar’s side,
Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.

Instead of heightening the tension between meter and meaning, Pope uses various techniques to harmonize them. Each line ends where a clause or sentence ends, giving the sense that every thought has been neatly and fully expressed, with no margin of meaning left over. The effect is heightened by the use of heroic couplets, in which every pair of lines rhymes, creating another regular pattern. (When iambic pentameter doesn’t rhyme, as in most of Shakespeare, it’s called blank verse.) The poet’s virtuosity is displayed in his ability to find frequent rhymes while still making the sentences flow smoothly. It helps that he has the freedom to depart from prose syntax and word order: “Each silver vase in mystic order laid,” rather than “Each silver vase laid in mystic order.”

These are all hallmarks of the early eighteenth-century style known as Augustan, which foregrounds its artificiality. Like the paintings of his contemporary Antoine Watteau, Pope’s poems can be described as rococo. In this passage from “The Rape of the Lock,” Pope doubles down on this quality by using an artificial style to describe a scene of artifice—a woman applying makeup to fit a conventional pattern of beauty. Then he adds another level of artificiality by hyperbolically comparing the scene to a religious rite: the cosmetics are divine “powers,” and Belinda serves as a “priestess” to her own image, which she idolizes.

If Pope makes iambic pentameter sound civilized and urbane, the late-nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins practically explodes it with sheer energy, as in his 1880 poem “Felix Randal”:
Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended,
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

These lines would have sounded very wrong to Pope, and Hopkins’s first readers had trouble figuring out how his poems should sound; he sometimes added accent marks as a guide. “Felix Randal” is a kind of sonnet, a form that traditionally uses iambic pentameter in a fixed rhyme scheme. But Hopkins eschews the balance and wit that define Shakespeare’s sonnets. Using a home-brewed technique he called “sprung rhythm,” he preserves the five stresses in each line but permits himself to add extra unstressed syllables as needed. He switches around the pattern of the stresses: “Pining, pining” are iambs in reverse, or trochees, with the stressed syllable coming first. The rhymes are gauche and unskillful by traditional standards; “handsome” doesn’t really rhyme with “and some,” since their stress patterns don’t match.

Crucially, however, Hopkins didn’t break with traditional verse altogether, the way many modernist poets would do in the next generation. The outlines of the traditional sonnet still haunt “Felix Randal,” creating a sense of continual strain as the reader tries to reconcile Hopkins’s verbal melody with the expected pattern. If Pope can be compared to Watteau, Hopkins is something like his contemporary Vincent van Gogh, whose idiosyncratic way of seeing stretched representation to its limits. Notably, both Hopkins and van Gogh were unappreciated during their lifetimes but became very influential after they died.

The contrast between Pope and Hopkins also helps to reveal another important source of poetry’s music: the valences of individual words. For poetry, there are no true synonyms; every word has a unique weight, determined as much by connotation as denotation. A “lie” is weightier than a “prevarication”; a “blue” sky is homelier than an “azure” one. As these examples suggest, the weight of a word often has to do with its etymology, especially in English, with its double heritage of Latinate and Germanic words. In England after the Norman Conquest, the wealthy and powerful spoke French while the commoners spoke Anglo-Saxon, and these associations continue to shape the language a thousand years later.
In the lines from “The Rape of the Lock,” polysyllabic words derived from Greek and Latin—“mystic,” “cosmetic,” “inferior”—reinforce the sense that we are in a sophisticated milieu. By contrast, “Felix Randal” makes prominent use of words with Anglo-Saxon roots, which tend to sound simple and primal—“mould,” “big-boned,” “hardy.” Together with the use of alliteration, a staple technique of Anglo-Saxon poetry that largely disappeared in modern English, these words contribute to the sense that Felix Randal was an archetypal man of the soil, not one of the million interchangeable people you meet in a big city. (Ironically, Hopkins himself was a professor of Latin, which must have helped him appreciate the stark sound of Anglo-Saxon.)

Even if a reader isn’t conscious of these etymologies, they help explain the subliminal connection between how words sound and what they mean. This is a source of pleasure and meaning that poetry doesn’t share with nonverbal arts. Music, too, holds different sonic patterns together—as in counterpoint—and plays with expectations, as when a piece in sonata form begins in one key, modulates to another, and resolves by returning to the tonic. Such musical patterns can be highly expressive, sounding hopeful or defiant, melancholy or serene; but part of the mystery of music is that it manages to communicate complex feelings without being “about” anything. Musical notes express, but they don’t signify in the way language does.

Words, on the other hand, always signify something, no matter how musically they are used. The closest a word can come to pure sound is an unfamiliar name, which we hear without knowing to what or whom it refers. John Milton, who may be the most purely musical of the great English poets, took advantage of this in his 1666 epic Paradise Lost, building majestic verse out of exotic names whose meaning is almost irrelevant to the effect. Take, for instance, the passage in Book I that compares Satan’s army of rebel angels to other fabled armies:

though all the Giant brood
Of Phlegra with th’ Heroic Race were joyn’d
That fought at Thebes and Ilium, on each side
Mixt with auxiliar Gods; and what resounds
In Fable or Romance of Uther’s Son
Begirt with British and Armoric Knights;
And all who since, Baptiz’d or Infidel
Jousted in Aspramont or Montalban,
Damasco, or Marocco, or Trebisond,
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore
When Charlemain with all his Peerage fell
By Fontarabbia.

You don’t have to grasp all the references to Greek myth, British legend, and medieval romance to feel the impressiveness of the way the verse sounds and moves—above all, the way the end of the sentence is continually postponed, creating a momentous tension, like the soaring arches of a Gothic church. Even here, however, the reader knows that these names are names—that they refer to stories Milton knows, even if we need footnotes.

Art poetry sets itself the challenge of making language’s sound and meaning reinforce one another. For Pope, this means creating an air of sophistication by handling a highly constrained poetic form with apparent ease—as his contemporaries did when they danced while wearing a wig and corset. With Hopkins, by contrast, the intensity of the poet’s grief for Felix Randal can be measured by how far he has violated the rules of verse to express it. The more familiar the reader becomes with the history of English poetry and its evolving styles, the easier it is to see how a poetic rhythm or word choice can reveal the assumptions of a whole culture.

In the twentieth century, however, the dialectical evolution of poetic styles gave way to a more dramatic and irreparable kind of breach. With modernism and postmodernism, each of the arts turned against what had long been considered its defining technique. Just as composers rejected tonality and painters rejected representation, poets stopped writing in verse—the regular patterns of rhythm and rhyme that had been the essence of poetry in every culture since ancient times. In each genre, this rejection was initially experienced as a liberation that made new kinds of beauty possible. The first generation of modernists, and their audiences, knew the conventions that were being dispensed with, so they could appreciate the extent and purpose of the transgression. The American poet William Carlos Williams, a devotee of modern painting, used free verse to parallel the hard-edged, angular abstractions of Cubism, as in this passage from his 1923 book, Spring and All:

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air—The edge
cuts without cutting
meets—nothing—renews
itself in metal or porcelain . . .

These lines violate the rules of verse in much the same way that Cubism violates the rules of perspective. There is no consistent line length or pattern of stresses, leaving the reader with little guidance about how to harmonize the line and the sentence. Instead, Williams forces them to interfere by breaking the line at places where the syntax strongly urges continuity—between subject and verb (“The edge/ cuts”), between preposition and noun (“in/ an edge”). The result is characterful and astringent, like the brief atonal pieces Anton Webern was composing in Vienna at the same time Williams was writing in Paterson, New Jersey.

The difficult glory of high modernism lasted about a generation—say, from 1910 to 1940. But once modernism itself became the canon, artists and audiences gradually lost the ability to extend or even fully appreciate its achievements, because they never mastered the conventions that modernism overthrew. This great deskilling, combined with the rise of mass media and the democratization of culture, resulted in a fracturing of the arts after World War II. In different ways, music, painting, and poetry each split into two: a cerebral, avant-garde version devoted to extending the modernist experiment; and a popular version that appealed to mass audiences without knowledge of the art’s traditions and conventions. The “serious” artists made a Tantalean bargain with the academy, which gave them a secure living and a measure of prestige while cutting them off from what any artist wants most—an actual audience. The popular artists won a level of fame and fortune that would have been unimaginable in the past, but what they do is not really art—or, better, not the same art. Compare Mick Jagger’s lifestyle with Mozart’s, or Andy Warhol’s with van Gogh’s, and then compare their work.

A similar division exists in poetry, but it is more muted. The most popular poet—Rupi Kaur, perhaps—is nowhere near as famous as a popular musician, or as wealthy as a name-brand artist. Conversely, even a “difficult” poet is more accessible to the common reader than a serialist composer is to the common concertgoer. John Ashbery, who died in 2017 at the age of ninety, was by general consensus the greatest American poet of the late-twentieth century; his work often makes no sense, but it is still quite likeable. Take these lines from “And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name,” a poem from Ashbery’s 1987 book *Houseboat Days*:

She approached me

About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was

Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.

Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head

Locked into mine. We were a seesaw. Something
Ought to be written about how this affects you when you write poetry:

The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind

Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate

Something . . .

The first half of this passage, up to the word “seesaw,” is confusing, because there seems to be no logical connection between one sentence and the next. But on its own, each sentence is perfectly clear and even appealing: “Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments” is exotically evocative, “humdrum testaments” is an unlikely, thought-provoking collision of words. And when you get to the second part of the passage, starting “Something/ Ought to be written,” the dislocations of the first part start to come into focus. These colorful bits of language are examples of how the poet’s “desire to communicate something” is frustrated, issuing in “lush” fragments instead of coherent meanings.

As these lines from Ashbery suggest, deriving pleasure from contemporary poetry requires a different set of skills and expectations than poetry written before, say, 1950. The same thing is true of painting and music. You don’t generally go to the Whitney Museum expecting to find great traditional draftsmanship, though you might find other things there to admire. Similarly, few contemporary poets, and perhaps none of the most rewarded, will gratify a taste for complex verbal music of the kind that Milton, Pope, and Hopkins coaxed from traditional verse forms. Fortunately, The New Criterion offers a home for poets who aspire to work in that tradition—and our correspondent is already a subscriber.

Adam Kirsch’s most recent book is Who Wants to Be a Jewish Writer?: Essays (Yale).