

LISTENING TO POETRY – ‘the ear is the best reader’.

From an article by Andrew Motion, Poet Laureate, and a Director of The Poetry Archive

When Frost said ‘the ear is the best reader’ he didn’t mean to say that he preferred the fleeting voice to the substantial page, but to give them both equal value, and to remind us how they depended on one another. The point can be proved very easily. A poem creates its effects not simply by sharing an explicable meaning with its reader, but by dramatizing that meaning and making it intimate – by the musicality (or not) of the words, by rhythm, by rhyme, by recurring patterns of sound, by disruptions, and by the movement and evolution of tone through a whole piece of work. It is a demonstration of harmonies, in all sorts of ways. More than that, even, the sound of a poem can actually become its meaning, as our ear supplies us with insights packed with difficult references, learned allusions, and clever compressions. A person reading it on the page for the first time is bound to feel they’re missing things – perhaps even to the extent of feeling they ‘don’t understand it’. But when the poem is read aloud, the play of sounds creates an unforgettably powerful effect, expounding sense by other means. It’s the effect Frost wrote about again and again (though he was hardly on Eliot’s Modernist team). ‘The living part of a poem’, Frost explained, ‘is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax, idiom and meaning of a sentence. It is only there for those who have heard it previously in conversation? It goes and the language becomes a dead language, the poetry dead poetry. With it go the accents, the stresses, the delays that are not the property of vowels and syllables but that are shifted at will with the sense. Vowels have length there is no denying. But the accent of sense supersedes all other accent, overrides and sweeps it away.

Dissolving obscurities

To value poetry aloud in this way can seem a bit highfalutin. So it’s worth saying at once that spoken poetry has much more fundamental interests as well. Does the poet go for a big effect or speak confidently? What sort of accent do they have? (Another false impression created by the comparatively-silent mid-c20 was that all poets spoke in RP: they never did and they still don’t. If only we could have recorded Keats, we’d probably have heard him ‘chanting’ like a Cockney. There are many other kinds of practical justification as well. It can, for instance, be useful simply as a way of dissolving obscurities. There’s a passage in Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’, for instance, which I found confusing when

I first read it as a schoolboy: 'But o photograph!' Larkin says, 'As no art is, Faithful and disappointing!' It was only when I heard the recording of him reading the poem, and stressing 'art' (to show that in his Larkin-like way he didn't think photography was an art), that I saw what he was getting at. In the same sort of way, the stresses of a voice can be heard giving their tacit explanations on virtually every page of the Archive. As can the pauses, the implied severities, the swallowed smiles, the tones of tenderness or anger.

Poets reading their own work

This is why the Archive contains recordings of poets reading their own work, rather than handing the job over to actors. It's not just that actors (by and large) tend to go at poems as though they're trying to reach the back row of the stalls. It's more that poets know their own work in a way and to a depth that is unique. (This is not the same as saying they know everything about them.) In this respect, it's difficult to say a poet ever reads their work entirely 'badly.' Even if they mumble a bit, or read ponderously, or at too great a lick, their delivery will still have important things to tell us about the links and separations between the speaking voice and the character in the poem, about its mood, about how the poet thought that sense would be communicated, and about how he or she hears it inside their own head.