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Conversation Through the Poetic “Song”: Music and Poetry as Formal Perseverance

Riley Halpern

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Poets have managed to remain in conversation with each other across time and space—a feat few art forms can claim, at least to the same extent. This is, in part, due to the accepted, and even encouraged, notion that poets borrow from and reimagine the works of their contemporaries and predecessors in order to attain the highest possible level of universal specificity in their own poems. Poets who live decades and thousands of miles apart echo each other so directly that it has to be something other than an eerie coincidence or mere instance of borrowed language. What follows will be an exploration of the use of musical language (“music,” “song,” “singing,” etc. and their variations) across different poets’ works along with the musical capability of the poetic form itself. For it is poetry’s musical capability that allows and invites these conversations between poets that transcend time and space, and it is the conventional use of musical language as a flexible symbol for poetry itself that, together, work toward the ultimate perseverance and preservation of universally specific poetic language.

The historical relationship of music to poetry traces at least as far back as Sappho (c. 610 – c. 570 BCE) in ancient Greece who wrote in quantitative meter. Rather than simply counting syllables, true quantitative

meter relies on measuring the duration of each syllable, and rhythm is determined by the amount of time it takes to utter each line (“Quantitative Meter”).

Quantitative meter was especially popular among Classical Greek and Italian poets, and the sapphic structure itself—any number of four-line stanzas in quantitative meter—was used widely by Roman and European poets to later evolve into a verse form for hymns in the Middle Ages (“Sapphic”). The form’s reliance on poetry’s oral tradition has caused it to fall largely out of use, and it never quite caught on in the English language as English pronunciation makes it more difficult to distinguish between long and short syllables (“Quantitative Meter”). However, just as the form evolved throughout the 5th century AD, the modern sapphic is “rendered in accentual meter determined instead by the stress and intensity of a syllable,” approximating the original form “by equating long syllables with stressed ones, and short syllables with unstressed ones” (“Sapphic”).

The sapphic’s rigid structure and strict meter has allowed for its evolution while maintaining a connection to music and song, whether explicitly in its ties to hymns in the Middle Ages or implicitly in modern poets’ knowledge of its origin.

Writers tend to recognize the intrinsic connection between poetry and music and attempt to somehow put words to that connection. In his discussion of “The Poetic Principle”—in his essay by the same name—as “the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty,” Edgar Allan Poe uses the words “Poetry” and “Music”

interchangeably (198). He describes music as “the most entrancing of the Poetic moods,” explaining that the “Poetic Sentiment [...] may develop itself in various modes [...] very especially in music,” landing on the assertion that “it is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired with the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal Beauty” (184). “And thus,” he concludes the section, “there can be little doubt that in the union of Poetry with Music in its popular sense, we shall find the widest field for the Poetic development” (184). For Poe, if the poet hopes to spark the manifestation of the Principle, to excite “by elevating the soul,” then music and poetry are not just connected—they are inseparable. “Song,” Jahan Ramazani writes, “is poetry’s *arche* and its *telos*, what it is and what it might aspire to be” (719).

Whether or not she was conscious of it, Emily Dickinson appeared to understand this relationship of poetry to music. She wrote primarily in common meter, a structure also referred to as “hymnal meter,” its alternating unstressed-stressed rhythm paralleling that of “Amazing Grace” and “House of the Rising Sun” among countless other songs. Comparable to the evolution of the sapphic poem, Dickinson allowed for exceptions to the common meter in her poems. Thus, even her poems that stray from a more metered, hymn like recitation are still reminiscent of the music from which they originate.

To effectively illuminate how poetic syntax and language transcend time and space, an important link

lies in Emily Dickinson's 372 ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes –") and Robert Hass' "Faint Music." The last line of Dickinson's poem reads, "First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –" (Dickinson 170). The last line of Hass' reads, "First an ego, and then pain, and then the singing" (Hass). These lines are so similar in syntax, tone, language, and theme that it is more than likely that Hass intentionally remembered Dickinson's last line from a poem on a subject similar to his—emotional pain, its lingering effects over time, and how we try to move past it. But the work these last lines do when considered together is far more significant than a conscious choice made by Hass. If the human soul is in a constant struggle for "the creation of supernal Beauty," and if it is music "inspired with the Poetic Sentiment" that allows for the creation of this type of beauty, and, finally, if Hass recognized that Dickinson—in her unparalleled use of language and rhythm—created this sort of "supernal Beauty" in #372, then why should he not borrow and reimagine "the best" instance of language and syntax to create his own version of "supernal Beauty?" (Poe 184). There is only so much language and so many combinations of words that exist. It is inevitable poets will borrow from each other. On the other hand, there is also *so* much language and near-infinite combinations of words that if one poet somehow manages to write "the best" line for a given situation, other poets *should* honor that first poet by borrowing their language and aiding its perseverance. Dickinson wrote #372 in Amherst in 1862; Hass wrote "Faint Music" in California in 1996; the two poems came into

existence over a century apart, an entire country between them. Yet 160 years after she wrote it, Dickinson's poem is still a fresh explanation of how we continue to move through the world even when bogged down by pain. And Hass' poem, regardless of how much he borrowed from Dickinson, is equally as fresh. For though the themes are similar, and the only way—besides familiarity—to discern which last line belongs to which poet is Dickinson's use of dashes, both poets employ drastically different specificity in image and narrative to convey their own impressions of what is, perhaps, the most universally discussed theme in poetry: emotional pain and what in the world we do about it.

And then there exists an entire conversation among three poets, one that spans two decades and 2,300 miles. Written in 2016 in Lexington, Kentucky, Ada Limón's poem "The Leash" asks, "Isn't there still / something singing?" (Limón). And though the speaker follows immediately with, "The truth is: I don't know," Jack Gilbert's poem "A Brief for the Defense"—2005, Tennessee—answers Limón's question, saying, "We must admit there will be music despite everything" (Gilbert). Hass ends this brief conversation with a line toward the end of "Faint Music"—1996, California—by expanding on Gilbert's contribution and explaining what this music might be: "I had the idea that the world's so full of pain / it must sometimes make a kind of singing" (Hass). What is crucial to note about this conversation is that it moves backward through time, which means the explanation for its existence is not as simple as saying Hass intentionally answered Gilbert who intentionally

answered Limón. Something else is at work here. Two somethings, actually.

First, it is possible that I am perceiving a conversation where there is none—that I am grasping at straws, looking for some truth (or capital-T Truth) that will help me move through this devastating, chaotic world a bit easier. Poe addresses this, writing, “And in regard to Truth— if, to be sure, through the attainment of a truth, we are led to perceive a harmony where none was apparent before, we experience, at once, the true potential effect” of the Poetic Principle (198). If we are too eager, too searching, we will create truth (or Truth) out of what is really just harmony. But this does not make the emotional effects of the perceived harmony any less valid; the point is the perception rather than the truth—truth that, according to Poe, is overvalued in poetry when

we should really be looking for that “supernal Beauty,” that elevation of the soul instead. “The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement,” not in any “truth” it might reveal (Poe 178).

Second, it is likely that I am looking too far outward, too much at the universal and external forces, when I should be looking inward. Poe continues to debunk the notion that poems have to be written and exist for elaborate reasons:

The simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should immediately discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than

this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake (182).

There was no intentional conversation or interaction between these three exceedingly different poets who each wrote a decade removed from the next. Rather, all three simply wrote for the sake of writing, unintentionally creating harmony that certain discerning readers perceive as a capital-T Truth. And if what Poe says is true, that poems are written as manifestations of what is in the poet’s soul, then these poets’ souls contain the same stuff. And each reader who recognizes this particular harmony, their soul holds the same stuff as each poet’s and we are holding on to this harmony for all it is worth, trying to force it into the same mold of some capital-T Truth.

Poetry and music—as forms—are inherently, inescapably intertwined. But the question becomes, what is this singing, this music that Limón, Gilbert, and Hass are going on about? Unsurprisingly, we find this final answer in the work of two other poets—Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Dickinson and Whitman harness the flexibility of musical language as a symbol and synonym for poetry, specifically the act of writing poems. And what quickly becomes clear is that the inciting incident for their use of musical language—Limón, Gilbert, and Hass included—is intense emotional pain.

The first line of Dickinson’s #372 is most telling: “After great pain, a formal feeling comes –” This “formal feeling” Dickinson’s speaker names is,

explicitly, the shock and numbness that sets in after whatever “great pain” a person experiences—grief, heartbreak, etc. But the word “formal” is particularly important to note; though it explicitly applies to emotional pain, it implies a poem’s form as well. #372 goes on to say, “The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs – / The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’ / And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before?’” And while these three lines are an elaboration of that “formal feeling,” they are, in fact, in form as well; each line of the first stanza is ten syllables, and the rhyme scheme is in couplets—AABB. But then the poem falls out of any form it held initially, the next seven lines neither in any exact rhyme scheme nor made up of ten syllables. It is as if Dickinson *wanted* to write a poem in form in order to work through the pain she named in the first line, to try to make it “formal,” but she ends up failing due to the intensity of that pain. Yet in the last two lines, Dickinson returns to the ten-syllable line and rhyming couplet: “As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –” Dickinson seems to take a breath after the preceding line, collecting herself before she returns to writing in the form in which she started. And though #372 is not in consistent common meter, rhythm is not lost on Dickinson as she starts in and returns to a loose version of iambic pentameter.

Dickinson’s #270 works beyond the formal implications of music and poetry, diving deeply into the aforementioned explicit musical language. The first line simply says, “I shall keep singing!” As with “formal” in #372, the notable word in the first line of #270 is

“keep.” It implies that the speaker was singing before and that she will continue to sing despite whatever just happened or whatever she anticipates will happen. The exclamation point is also significant as the rest of the poem’s lines end with dashes or no punctuation at all—the speaker is wholly determined to keep singing. The rest of the poem reads as follows:

Birds will pass me
On their way to Yellower Climes –
Each – with a Robin’s expectation –
I – with my Redbreast –
And my Rhymes –

Late – when I take my place in summer –
But – I shall bring a fuller tune –
Vespers – are sweeter than matins – Signor
Morning – only the seed of noon – (121).

Time will go on; Dickinson’s speaker is saying. The birds will fly south for the winter, but I will wait patiently for summer and continue to sing in the meantime. For it is later times that will be sweeter, and I am just waiting for summer to bloom. And although Dickinson writes that she will “bring a fuller tune” when she takes her place in summer, she will keep singing until then in order to get through the winter, through months which, though lacking hope, are not entirely useless. Rather, they are seeds she can use as inspiration for her work. Dickinson could have left her readers with mystery, forcing us to look closely to understand that

“singing” refers to writing poetry, but she chooses instead to include the word “Rhymes” in the sixth line, not leaving anything to chance. It is important that we are certain of the fact that Dickinson is using “singing” as a stand-in for writing poems. And in the melancholic tone of the first stanza, it is evident that Dickinson is not looking forward to when the birds leave and nature temporarily dies; the changing of the seasons means she will not be able to garden as she usually does, so she will be leaving her home even less frequently. But she again uses poetry and musical language to examine and understand that pain, ultimately ending on a hopeful note, resolved to keep singing and writing despite the emotional pain she is about to experience.

Whitman’s “Sometimes with One I Love” makes even greater use of musical language as it relates to pain:

Sometimes with one I love I fill myself
with rage for fear I effuse unreturn’d love,
But now I think there is no unreturn’d love,
the pay is certain one way or another, (I
loved a certain person ardently and my love
was not return’d,
Yet out of that I have written these songs) (114).

In the first line, Whitman describes the pain—manifesting in rage and fear—of knowing the person he loves does not love him in return. But in the last three lines, he comes to understand that there is no such thing as truly unreturned love; even the pain of heartbreak is a gift, paying Whitman in poems he wrote after the fact.

Like Dickinson, Whitman uses “songs” to refer to his poems, specifically the poems he writes that are inspired by pain. Whitman wrote this final version of “Sometimes with One I Love” in 1867 in Washington D.C.; Dickinson wrote #372 and #270 in 1862 and 1861, respectively, both in Amherst.

While they lived and wrote at the same time and relatively close to each other, geographically speaking, Whitman and Dickinson never met, nor did they read each other’s work. Yet both understood the significance of using musical language as a synonym for poetry and poem writing to explore how they might process their pain through poetry. And a century and-a-half later—on both sides of the country—we see Limón, Gilbert, and Hass doing the same thing. “The Leash” is based around the central question the speaker asks: “How can / you not fear humanity?” Limón is searching for something still singing amid the pain and fear so prevalent in the world—pain and fear sparked by other humans. “A Brief for the Defense” starts similarly, acknowledging the horrific reality of humans lacking humanity: “Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere.” But Gilbert is more certain than Limón, certain that there will be music despite all of the sorrow and slaughter. And when Hass explores the effect of heartbreak, he sees it nearly driving a person to suicide. Still, his ultimate conclusion is, perhaps, even more hopeful than Gilbert’s: the singing *is* the pain. If it is true that there is sorrow and slaughter everywhere, that the fear of humanity spans across seven billion people on seven different continents, then everyone’s pain must come

together to create this haunting harmony. So at least no one is truly alone in their pain. It is the most universal thing. And what all three poets—whether intentionally or unintentionally—imply is what Dickinson and Whitman said explicitly in their work: the poems themselves *are* the singing, the music despite everything. For neither Limón nor Gilbert nor Hass would have written their specific poems about their personal relationships with pain had some “great pain” not sparked this “formal feeling” in the first place. Decades apart—centuries apart—countries apart—poets are searching for how best to write about individual pain. And the connecting factors across the board are musical language and poetry’s musical capability that allow poets to achieve the universal aspect of “universal specificity” and ultimately remember and recall the poets who came before them.

But it is not just poetry’s musical capability or music inspired by “the Poetic Sentiment” that aids language’s perseverance across time and space. There is a “thirst” in humans, more than a “mere appreciation of the Beauty before us”; it is “a wild effort to reach the Beauty above,” to find “those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses” (Poe 184). There is a reason we go searching and probing more aggressively than we should for those harmonies within or between poems that we mistake for truths. All of human life revolves around the pursuit of and longing for connection. The universal specificity of poetry gets us as close to that connection— “those divine

and rapturous joys”—as anything else. But the music and singing are necessary to achieve this ultimate goal, and Whitman understood this more than most. In his 1865 poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman embarks on a journey to find the language he lost amid the death and destruction of the Civil War and President Lincoln’s assassination. His search for language also implies a search for music; he says at the end of section four of the lilac elegy, “If thou wast not granted to sing thou woud’st surely die” (277). Because if Whitman loses language, he loses singing, music, song, all intimately tied to the way he conceives of his poems. (“These songs,” he calls them in “Sometimes with One I Love.”)

Whitman understands that he must rediscover language if he is to survive in his world. Otherwise, what good is all of the pain he experiences, if not to serve as inspiration for his poems—his songs? He, of course, discovers language again in the singing of the thrush after pain and grief render him speechless. The thrush is hidden, withdrawn at the beginning of the lilac elegy. It is singing, but its throat is bleeding, and Whitman has not yet found it. After sections five through eight, after Whitman watches Lincoln’s funeral procession and begins to process his grief, to remind himself of the regenerative power of nature in the spring, he focuses back in on the thrush. “Sing on there in the swamp, / O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call, / I hear, I come presently, I understand you”—but Whitman is still detained (279). He can hear the song more clearly now, but he still cannot see the

thrush. He still does not know how to construct sufficient language to honor Lincoln. By section thirteen, Whitman is encouraging the thrush, urging it to continue singing. It is only after he enters the swamp where the thrush is hiding and familiarizes himself with “the knowledge of death” and “the thought of death” that he is finally able to find the thrush halfway through section fourteen: “And the singer so shy to the rest receiv’d me, / The gray-brown bird I know receiv’d us comrades three, / And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love” (281). Here, Whitman himself begins to sing with the thrush. It is only then—with this infusion of music into poetry and poetry into music—that Whitman finds the language he needs to speak about his pain and work through his grief.

It is significant that the music Whitman turns to is *natural* music. In his poem “The Eolian Harp”—written across the sea in the U.K. and 70 years before Whitman’s lilac elegy—Samuel Taylor Coleridge similarly finds music inspired by “the Poetic Sentiment” in nature:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o’er them
sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?
(Coleridge).

As Poe would say, Coleridge “recognizes the ambrosia which nourishes the soul” in nature (198). And if this

“intellectual breeze” that is ever-present in nature is simultaneously the soul of each person, and if *all* of nature is “organic Harps diversely framed”—if all of nature is *music*— then this music must be in the soul of each person. So when this concept of nature takes the form of the thrush in Whitman’s lilac elegy, the bird is not simply Whitman’s source for his renewal of language; its song serves as a vehicle for past poets’ language from which Whitman can draw to achieve that elevated level of universal specificity.

Poetry’s origin in music—and the long-lasting relationship between the two before their paths diverged ever so slightly—allows it to hold and speak universal pain over centuries and thousands of miles due to both musically-related form and the use of musical language. Poets whose paths never cross write on the same themes with near-identical language and/or syntax, and poets and readers desperate to make more sense of the world (i.e. myself) discover these similarities, these harmonies, and internalize them as capital-T Truths. But these Truths are mere instances of universal specificity. In the case of the half-dozen poets referenced in this essay, the universal concept they address is the emotional pain of moving through the world.

The specificity comes in with each poet’s particular poem in which they write about their own relationship with that universal pain. As readers, we find comfort in knowing someone else is also experiencing such intense pain—so much so that they’ve created a beautiful piece of art out of it—and from knowing how they perceive it so we can consider and understand our own pain in the

context of theirs. And for poets, the discovery of these universally specific poems that manage to connect and harmonize means more work and ideas from which we can draw to help illuminate our own work, as in the case of Hass likely borrowing from Dickinson. And when this “borrowing” does not happen chronologically—as in the case of Limón to Gilbert to Hass—it only adds to the relief of knowing one’s pain has been, is, and will continue to be felt in similar capacities across time and space.

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