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ANALYSIS OF THE RHYTHM EFFECTS IN ALFRED TENNYSON'S POEM 'CROSSING THE BAR'

Samuel Kostomlatský

George Sampson, author of *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (edition of 1946), concluded towards the close of his discussion of Tennyson's literary merits that Tennyson at the age of eighty, the poet of 'Tears, idle tears', was able to write 'Crossing the Bar', perfect in music and in feeling.¹

The poem was first printed in 1889 in the last slim collection of verse published in Tennyson's life-time, three years before his death. The volume bore the title 'Demeter and other poems'.

This short paper will try to demonstrate the features of the poem which made Sampson characterize it as 'perfect in music', and at the same time it will briefly dwell upon the capability of the English language to charm the listener's phonetic ear by stirring and unique musical effects, particularly rhythmical ones, in recited English verse. It means that three actors will be invited to perform this music of spoken words: a poet equipped with sensitive and imaginative rhythmical ear, a reciter and listener gifted alike.

The present commentary upon this highly interesting acoustic phenomenon will naturally just attempt to present a description of this process of verbal music, that is all. The charm in question may be transmitted only by an inspired performance of the score for a listener who can appreciate it.

Before undertaking the analysis of the rhythmical effects in our chosen poem let us point out the main effect-producing factors in spoken English. The English language abounds in monosyllabic words to such an extent that poetry not only has to take this fact into account, but also tries to make the best use of it by transforming it into one of the foundation stones in the edifice of its rhythmical beauty.

But this profusion is not all than can be put to the credit of the mono-

¹ *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (1946, p. 704).

syllabic effect-producers. The combination of sounds determining the syllable results in many of them in a special phonetic peculiarity, marvellously characteristic of English. When a word like that is given an appropriate emphasis in the sentence intonation and is uttered by native English lips, it produces a similar sound as a string or a metallic plate after striking. The sound rings for a while, first asserting duration, and then it gradually fades away. These gradually fading sounds are effective means in the hands of masters of the rhythmical charm in poetry.

But such a monosyllabic sound duration and fading has another most significant rhythmical effect. It often makes a pause of silence an inevitable intonation sequel of a stressed syllable. And these pauses impress the listener's rhythmical ear just as powerfully as the vocalizing stress put on words or syllables, the leaps and bounds of pitch, or the slide of the fading sounds. The above-mentioned phenomena appear strikingly prominent and also variable in speech delivery or recitation.

English speech intonation is a curve of comparatively rapid and contrasted ascents and falls of voice, manifested both in force and pitch. And the syllabic as well as word stress in a sentence transforms, vocalizes, or reduces the sound of the sign into innumerable shades of variation degrees and pitch. This rhythmical vividness imparts powerful impressiveness to speech delivery, especially if the latter is temperamental — but the effect turns out positively enchanting in as inspired recitation of verse.

Professor Francis B. Gummerle of Haverford College remarked in his *Handbook of Poetics* as early as in 1890 that “in spoken language there are infinite degrees of length of stress, of pitch” and “that rhythm lies at the heart of things and in it the noblest emotions find their noblest expression”.²

The tendency of living poetry to modify and individualize rhythm, to liberate it from mechanization and conform it to the inspiration of the verse-liver whether by minor formal deviations or just by creative recitation was commented upon by Professor J. Hrabák of the Brno university in his *Úvod do teorie verše* [*Introduction to the Theory of Verse*, Prague 1958] approximately as follows: “Metre is abstracted from the rhythm of verses as an ideal norm, which, to be sure, is observed in the single verses, but this need not be done with strict consistence. It is just this incompleteness in the application of this norm, resulting in a certain conflict between rhythm and metre, which actualizes the rhythm. If we stuck to the norm in every detail, we should have a mechanical rhythm and not a living rhythm of the poem.”³

And now let us try to unmask and get hold of the rhythmical enchantress of ‘Crossing the Bar’. We have been having a delightful dance with her, but we thought her rather elusive. Let us subject her to a cut and dry test of identification. The investigation will employ the following more or less traditional system of marks:

² Francis B. Gummerle, *Handbook of Poetics* (1890).

³ J. Hrabák, *Úvod do teorie verše* (1958).

- v for unaccented syllables
- for short accented syllables
- for long accented syllables
- = for strongly accented syllables
- for an average time interval of pause of silence
- > for fading of sounds

Crossing the bar

Sunset and evening star, ..
 = v • v -- v > --> • •

And one clear call for me, ..
 - = > == > == v --> • •

And may there be no moaning of the bar
 v -> v -> = > --> v > - v -->

When I put out to sea ..
 - -> v -> v --> • •

But such a tide as moving seems asleep, ..
 v - v --> v -- v > -- v --> • •

Too full for sound and foam ..
 == = > - --> • v --> • •

When that which drew from out the boundless deep
 v - • v --> v - v == > v -->

Turns again home. ..
 -- v - --> • •

Twilight and evening bell ..
 = -> • v --> v > -> • •

And after that the dark ..
 v --v - v --> • •

And may there be no sadness of farewell ..
 v - v -- = - v - v -> • •

When I embark. ..
 - • - v --> • •

For though from our bourne of time and place
 v -- v -v - v --> v -->

The flood may bear me far ..
 v - v --> - --> •

I hope to see my Pilot face to face ..
 = > v --> - = v == > v == > •

When I have crossed the bar.
 - • -> v - v -->

The poem consists of 91 words, 87 of which are monosyllabic and only 14 two-syllabic. I believe that we may distinguish 42 more or less fading sounds, most of them monosyllabic words and a few syllables of two-syllabic parts of speech. In the underlying scheme they are marked. I have inserted some of the marks of pauses because I was imagining myself to be the reciter. I admit that every reciter would not feel induced to detach these words by pauses of silence from their surrounding. In a word, the offered scheme simply wants to tell the reader how my own imagination was impressed and stimulated by the poem, i.e. it presents my own rhythmical and emotional interpretation of this verse perfect in music.

The reader will have to subject my attitude to a test, and find for himself, after reciting the poem aloud according to the offered scheme, whether the recitation has spoken to his imagination and emotionality with similar intimacy as it has to mine.

An experience of beauty in general — and that means also of rhythmical and poetic beauty — is perhaps more liable to be investigated by psychology than by any of the philological and literary scholarly disciplines, but even the most acute theoretical vivisection of the phenomenon is unfortunately not capable of imparting the charm. It only describes it.

Assisted by the underlying scheme and resorting to such an inspired and spirited recital as we ourselves or our neighbours can transmit to our hearing, we can follow the magical soaring and cadences of "Crossing the Bar".

And now it is necessary to point out another trait in the rhythmical physiognomy of this poem.

Read the verses once more, in stillness, without diversion, and let them work on you. The exceptionally numerous fading words and syllables and the inevitable pauses give you the impression of a music with a charming and soothing touch of melancholy about it. It is as if you heard the evening scenery sing the melody of the dying day. And you find yourself commenting involuntarily upon the rhythm of the poem with words of the second strophe: "But such a tide as moving seems asleep, too full for sound and foam," while the soul of the moment listens deeply moved and bewitched along with your rhythmical ear to the music of the poet's meditation.

And this brings us to the second part of Sampson's comment: "perfect in feeling". 'Crossing the Bar' arrests not only your rhythmical ear but also your soul. Poetry — if it is real poetry and not a mere word show, no matter how masterly — is a witchcraft transferring the author's thrill of feeling and imagining to that of the reader. And a creative act of reading a poem is an art instigating the following process:

What the poet felt committing his intimate secret to paper the receptive reader is more or less bound to find reflected in the stream of his own imagination and emotionality. Thus, in our case the rhythm and the atmosphere of 'Crossing the Bar' are so intermingled and fused in one that you can hardly tell one from the other. And the words of the poem — both the uttered ones and the silent ones — strike the strings of your

rhythmical ear and those of your emotional perception alike and at the same time.

Now, a poet must be granted the right of initiator if he is to be enjoyed. The world of his imagination is his supreme domain, which we have to respect — all the more so if the message of the poem appears to be true and convincing. And we have every reason to believe that in the case of 'Crossing the Bar' it was undoubtedly so.

The poem is so irresistibly charming not only in word magic, but also in its atmosphere — in the childlike simplicity and sincerity of communication — that we simply have to submit to the poet's guidance, no matter what our own philosophy and view of life may be. The processes of thinking, feeling, and imagining that were passing through the poet's mind when the verses were written are the only initiators that are entitled to claim our participation.

And now let us finish the present discussion by a cautious analysis of the subtle rhythm of ideas and impressions transmitted by the rhythm of the words — and let us repeat once more that by doing so we shall endeavour just to pay a loyal reader's tribute to the poet's mastery of writing a beautiful thing, not only 'perfect in music' but also 'perfect in feeling'.

Sunset and evening star — the day is passing away and the night is approaching, but even the latter is befriended by intimate light, the evening star. Light — in one form or another, pleads the poet in face of all the shadows of human groping and destiny — is an inseparable companion of a man's consciousness. *The clear call* rings in the darkness: There is no death, only passing from life to life. The supreme stillness of the moment is respected even *by the bar, which does not moan*. *Returning home* after such a long departure is a reconciliation after the struggles of life. *Twilight and evening bell*: Twilight is a musical performance of nature, while the evening bell in the stillness repeats the above message of the clear call: There is no death, only passing from life to life. And even *in the dark* human faith in life and attachment to it says *farewell without sadness*. *Hope* and trust in the voice springing in human subconsciousness from *boundless deep* are your faithful companions to the last shadowy glimpse of the evening illumination. And having crossed the bar the life's sailor sees according to Tennyson *face to face* what he saw in human existence only in the mirror.

We have tried our best to participate discretely in Tennyson's experience and meditation concerning his 'Crossing the Bar'. And the emotional rhythm of the poem ends in us in a musing and fading appreciation:

"What a wonderful, life-confessing, and brave spirit, who was believing and creative enough not to capitulate even when crossing the bar!"

ANALÝZA RYTMICKÝCH EFEKTŮ V TENNYSONOVĚ BÁSNI 'CROSSING THE BAR'

Autor podrobně rozebírá poslední lyrickou báseň Alfreda Tennysona "Crossing the Bar". Zdůrazňuje zvukovou malebnost anglického básnického jazyka a souhru melodičnosti a rytmiky s hlubším významem básně.

