

Vowel Patterning and the Rhythmic Analysis of Free Verse

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The concern of this paper is the expressive use of vowel length in poetry, which I suggest enables tonal effects in free verse. I would like to explore the work of the contemporary Irish poet Vona Groarke as an especially good example of this. I would also like to relate the analysis to the concept of iconicity, which is being investigated in the ‘Iconicity Research Project’ based at the Universities of Amsterdam and Zurich. This work challenges the view, prevalent throughout much of the twentieth century and stemming from the work of the French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, that the relationship between linguistic symbols and their meaning is almost always arbitrary. Iconicity needs explication, and there are qualifications that need to be made in any analysis of this kind, but I focus in this synopsis on a few selected examples from the poetry in order to support my claim for iconic tonal expressiveness.

An icon is a sign — a visual image, a piece of typography, a word or a phrase — that imitates or resembles what it represents. We are familiar with onomatopoeia, or ‘auditory iconicity’, but here the focus is ‘articulatory iconicity’, in which what matters is not the sound of a word but the way it is formed by our vocal apparatus. The primary linguistic qualification is that the pronunciation of a given vowel varies with context. This is due, firstly, to the well-attested finding known as ‘pre-fortis clipping’ in which stressed vowels are shortened before syllable-final voiceless consonants. Secondly, accents around the English-speaking world differ widely, and vowel length in use depends on the variety of English spoken. While Vona Groarke is Irish, I assume British Non-Regional or Standard Southern pronunciation. While there are some vowel pronunciation differences between Irish and British accents, these are less evident in more neutral accents, they typically involve differences in vowel quality that do not affect vowel length, and they do not have implications (in part due to pre-fortis clipping) for the lines considered below. In the notation used in the analysis, stressed vowels are underlined, short vowels are labelled under the line with an ‘s’, long vowels are labelled with an ‘l’, and clipped vowels are indicated using ‘sc’. The literary or critical qualification is the tradition of the critique of the inherent meaningfulness of sound in poetry. Wherever we perceive sound to be significant, we are invariably responding in the first instance to meaning, which is made more effective or palpable by sound patterning.

‘The White Garden’ from Vona Groarke’s collection *X*, published in 2014, is one of a series of poems in which a garden during a storm is used as a metaphor for the poet’s state of mind while coming to terms with the break-up of her marriage. Here the lines represent the storm as violently accusatory or antagonistic:

Come the wind,
s s
the garden will hold up
l s s
two clenched fists (/klɛntʃd/ /fɪsts/)
l s s

What interests me is the occasional tendency of vowel length to mimic the action that it corresponds to. To clench your fists is to forcefully contract them; to squeeze them. The semantics of the phrase is supported and emphasized by poet’s having chosen words containing short vowels. Contrast the above with the following invented line which contains a sequence of three long vowels:

two closed palms (/kləʊzd/ /pɑ:ms/)
l l l

‘Clenched fists’ is much more appropriate than ‘closed palms’ to the sense of violent action. The difference is no doubt mostly semantic, and there are also differences in consonant quality within the phrases. Due to the differences in vowel length, however, the phrase ‘clenched fists’ involves a shorter, more rapid articulation than the

more leisurely articulation of ‘closed palms.’ While the hand is squeezed, so too is the articulation. The articulation iconically enhances or emphasizes the meaning.

In Vona Groarke’s poetry, short vowels are occasionally but effectively used in phrases that, in their semantics, signify contraction of some kind, while long vowels are used in words that denote extension or duration. ‘The White Garden’, from which the phrase ‘clenched fists’ is taken, continues a little later, in this way:

and afterwards
s c
will have me know
s l
the promise of
s

one kind of love
s s
never leaning
s l
against any other.
s s

The context preceding these lines refers to a garden chair. The context combined with the lines suggest a particular image. Before the storm, two chairs had been stacked or positioned near each other. The storm has now forcefully separated these. This stacking or proximity that existed before the storm is a metaphorical figure for complementarity and mutual reliance. What pains the speaker is her desire to prolong what she knows, or what the poem suggests, cannot endure — an equal and ongoing mutual love, in which the love of one partner nurtures the other’s. ‘Leaning’ contains a long vowel, requiring an extended articulation, adding tonal emphasis to her desire — her straining — for prolongation or permanence.

A second poem in the collection *X*, from a series of poems related in their use of the garden metaphor, is ‘The Garden as an Island Approached by a Tidal Causeway’. An example of the use of short vowels to express contraction is in the third line quoted below:

I know this word, how it falls
l l l
the way the past falls,
l sc l
splinters under me.
s s l

To splinter is to fragment into pieces, and here the speaker’s sense of her past is of something no longer whole, no longer coherent, with the sense of fragmentation being supported by the use of a short vowel in ‘splinter’. In contrast, the three long vowels of the first line in the next quotation below enact the weariness of a prolonged or sustained effort. Although the poem as a whole does not follow a strict metrical pattern, the line is iambic. In the second line, the unexpected trochaic foot and the assonance, together with the rapid patter of short vowels, create a contrary shock, an emphatic abruptness, expressive of the suddenness of the failure which the line represents.

and all my scheme and wager
l l l
come undone.
s s