Jahan Ramazani. 2014. Poetry and Its Others.

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POETRY AND SONG

FOR ALL THE interconnections between poetry and prayer, between poetry and the news, and between poetry and the novel, theory, and the law, song has long been conceived as poetry's closest generic kin. Turning from the news, a powerful but younger and more distant cousin, to prayer, an older, closer relative with many resemblances, and now to song, poetry's closest "sister" genre, we have been exploring poetry in proximity to ever closer family relations. Even so, the question of poetry's kinship with song may seem an unlikely framework within which to explore modern and contemporary poems. The primal unity between song and lyric poetry (the Greek *lyrikos* meaning "singing to the lyre") is often said to have been fractured long ago by written texts and then exploded by print culture. In Giorgio Agamben's history of European lyric, "the poetic text's definitive break with song (that is, with the element Dante called *melos*)" came around the twelfth century, when a poem became "essentially graphic."[1]

Emphasizing English texts, James William Johnson dates this "crucial metamorphosis" later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when "the poet ceased to 'compose' his or her poem for musical presentation but instead 'wrote' it for a collection of readers"; now suited "to a visual as well as an auditory medium," the lyric "found itself bereft of the very element which had been the foundation of its lyricism—music."[2] The divide is said to have occurred still later in postcolonial African and Caribbean societies, which had rich traditions of oral poetry but took up literary verse to a significant degree only in the twentieth century. Whether the "story of the separation between song and speech" is set in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or modernity, it is haunted by the possibility of a split even at the point of origin, according to Jacques Derrida: "Degeneration as separation, severing of voice and song, has always already begun."[3]

Some modernist writers in the West—of European, African, and mixed ancestry—were intent on healing this fundamental breach, even though they often betrayed an ambivalence toward song that persists in contemporary poetry. Drawing on Homeric and Irish bardic examples, Yeats sought to return a musical orality to poetry and reverse the modern tyranny of the eye over the ear. He proposed a method of words spoken to delicate accompaniment on the psaltery. Yet he was emphatic that it must not stray into singing, which obscured sense behind sound and marred poetry's internal music. Song and print were a Scylla and Charybdis that the living poem must navigate: "I have always known that there was something I disliked about singing," begins his essay "Speaking to the Psaltery," "and I naturally dislike print and paper."[4] Yeats explained that "when I heard anything sung I did not hear the words, or if I did their natural pronunciation was altered and their natural music was altered, or it was drowned in another music which I did not understand. What was the good of writing a love-song if the singer pronounced love 'lo-o-o-o-o-ve,' or even if he said 'love,' but did not give it its exact place and weight in the rhythm?" (14). When he and Florence Farr tried to combine music and poetry, they "got to hate the two competing tunes and rhythms that were so often at discord with one another,

the tune and rhythm of the verse and the tune and rhythm of the music" (16). Yeats's friend Ezra Pound thought that poetry was at its best (as in ancient Greece and medieval Provence) "when the arts of verse and music were most closely knit together, when each thing done by the poet had some definite musical urge or necessity bound up within it," and so claimed of poets, "We all of us compose verse to some sort of a tune."[5] Yet for all his nostalgia for the synthesis of music and verse in preprint *melopoeia*, Pound was no less critical than Yeats when it came to actual musical settings of poems: the resulting "distortion may horrify the poet who, having built his words into a perfect rhythm and speech-melody, hears them sung with regard to neither and with outrage to one or both."[6] Despite their longings for poetry to be reunited with performed music, both Pound and Yeats scorned the actual results of such fusion in music's distortions of the internal music and meaning of poetry. Another author of what is often thought of as highly "musical" poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins also wanted to bring musical performance and poetry back together, but the notation systems available to him for melody and rhythm proved insufficiently elastic to accommodate his far-reaching poetic innovations. He was frustrated that he could not write songs successfully in quarter-tones and break the boundary of the musical bar.[7] Although Yeats, Pound, and Hopkins struggled in different ways to rejoin what print had sundered, all three of them acknowledged deep-seated genre differences that thwarted the union of these spheres of endeavor if the poetry of their poetry was to be maintained.

During the modernist era, writers of the Harlem Renaissance also famously tried to achieve such a synthesis: they wanted to reinvigorate and African-Americanize print poetry by infusing it with musical and song traditions, including jazz, ballads, spirituals, and the blues. Langston Hughes called on African American artists to open their work to the "colorful, distinctive material" of black music, including "the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith."[8] Signature poems of the movement self-consciously creolize the scribal with the oral, combine literary verse with musical works. Hughes's "The Weary Blues"

incorporates lyrics from an eight-bar blues and a twelve-bar blues, and its lines are inflected by blues syncopations ("Droning a drowsy syncopated tune"), interjections ("O Blues!"), vernacular ("sad raggy tune"), and call and response. But by anchoring the poem's speaker in rhyming iambic pentameter lines that aurally and visually contrast with the blues quotations, and by setting the speaker's lines apart as a written record of his reflective response to an overheard blues song ("I heard a Negro play," "I heard that Negro sing"), Hughes also marks the social and medial distance the poem straddles between literary speaker and blues singer.[9] As Hughes said, he wrote his early poems "after the manner of the Negro folk-songs known as Blues," a prepositional phrase that inscribes both likeness and ineradicable difference.[10]

So, too, do the song-based poems of Jean Toomer's *Cane*. "Song of the Son" begins:

> Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
> O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
> Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,
> And let the valley carry it along.
> And let the valley carry it along.[11]

This poem deliberately incorporates features of African American spirituals—apostrophe, repeated lines, melancholy tonality, and antiphony (e.g., the alternating refrain in the last stanza)—and fuses them with a self-understanding as a songlike poem grown from the "seed" of slave songs and spirituals. But as a modern poem written by a descendant or "son," it represents itself as self-consciously belated ("I have returned to thee," "late" though "not too late yet"), singular rather than collective ("saved for me"), and high literary rather than vernacular ("So scant of grass, so profligate of pines, / Now just before an epoch's sun declines").[12] Even more persistently than their white contemporaries, poets of the Harlem Renaissance labored to rejoin poetry and song, but their song-poems also acknowledge their literary difference.

In the aftermath of modernisms black and white, the gap between poetry and song, understood as verse vocally performed

to music, has arguably yawned ever wider. At the most basic level, contemporary poetry's largely free-verse techniques have relegated most song forms to the margins, while most songs have clung to regular forms. But if poetry and song have irrevocably parted ways, why do many modern and contemporary poets, like Toomer, designate their poems "songs" in titles and texts, including prominent "American" poets from T. S. Eliot and H.D. to Adrienne Rich and W. S. Merwin, and "postcolonial" poets from Derek Walcott and Okot p'Bitek to A. K. Ramanujan and Jean Binta Breeze?[13] How do we explain poetry's abundant quotations of song lyrics from rock, pop, blues, jazz, folk, and opera, as also from funeral dirges, praise songs, abusive songs, reggae, and rap? Why have song lyrics continued to play a crucial role in poetry since modernism, from the wartime pop and Wagnerian opera in Eliot's *Waste Land* to the radio-blared blues "Love, O careless Love" overheard by the isolated speaker of Robert Lowell's confessional "Skunk Hour," to the more than eight hundred goofily distorted song lyrics that make up Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptualist *Head Citations* (2002), beginning with "This is the dawning of the age of malaria"?[14] How do we understand the survival of at least some song structures in modern and contemporary poems? What is the influence on poetry of the rise of technologies for the mass distribution and circulation of recorded song, most recently in digital form? Though we might think of the intergeneric and intermedial crossing between poetry and song as more relevant to medieval carols, Renaissance madrigals, and Romantic ballads, we understand modern and contemporary poetry more deeply by teasing out its self-understanding in relation to song, both its interfusions with it and its implicit self-definitions by contrast.

As we've seen in poetry's spirited engagements with the novel, theory, the law, the news, and prayer, although the widely embraced dissolution narrative of modern literary history postulates ever-more-blurred generic lines, it needs to be supplemented with a countervailing narrative: even as poetry appropriates and mimics song, among other genres, becoming ever more porous, it also asserts its specificity. To the extent that song is poetry's closest "sister" genre, the stakes for poetry may in this case be

especially high. Characteristically chiastic and overstated, Jacques Roubaud's aphorism is nonetheless suggestive: "It's an insult to poetry to call it song. It's an insult to song to call it poetry."[15] Even as it celebrates its likeness to song, modern and contemporary poetry is alert to differences between musical singing and poetic inscription, between melodically vocalized verses and printed text.

If we consider the complex relation in song between music and text, reasons behind poetry's sometimes fractious engagements with its musical kin begin to emerge. Although song's musical elements are usually thought to be in a relation of mutual enhancement with its verbal elements, they are in tension more often than we typically acknowledge. Instead of adopting the conventional view that music supports and elaborates the poetry in song, the musicologist Lawrence Kramer argues that song's "dissociative" quality, "the disintegrative effect of music" on words, is such that vocal styles—whether the crooning in American pop or the explosive sounds of rock, the rhythmic exaggerations of nursery songs or the language-bending stylizations of lieder—variously "attack the text."[16] In his words, "the relationship between poetry and music in song is implicitly agonic"; the "music appropriates the poem by contending with it, phonetically, dramatically, and semantically."[17] Kramer conceptualizes as "songfulness" song's relative independence of "verbal content,"[18] its "manifestation of the singing voice, just the voice," its Lacanian retrieval of the mother's "enveloping voice."[19] From a less theoretical vantage point, that of a practicing composer, Martin Boykan comes to similar conclusions about what he calls "the disjunction between music and text" in song, noting that "music obliterates so many of the effects poetry relies on," including the complexities of verbal sounds and rhythms.[20] Musical accents are often at odds with poetic rhythms and enjambments, and the music forces the poetry to follow a different tempo, typically slowing it down and even obscuring the text's intricate semantic networks—hence the commonplaces that "the best texts for music are the simplest" and that composers should "avoid poetry with complicated syntax or involved intellectual frameworks."[21] Needless to say, such a prohibition would

rule out a great deal of poetry after modernism, with its syntactic dislocations and conceptual complexities, even if composers, in settings of poems by Yeats, Rilke, Pound, Stein, W. S. Merwin, and many others, have ignored this advice. Paradoxically, even as poetry has cannibalized numerous song texts, the poetics of difficulty in modernism and its aftermath has driven the formal logic of poetry and song farther apart.

Although literary critics have yet to consider adequately the bearing of this heightened music-text friction on modern and contemporary poetry, scholars who elaborate the critical tradition that regards music and literature as sister arts have been aware of "episodes of jealousy, ironic misunderstandings," and efforts at control between them.[22] Citing Paul Valéry's comparison of hearing a good poem set to music with seeing a painting through a stained-glass window, John Hollander may take issue with it, but even so, he concedes "the deep rift in English verse between literary lyric and song text" and acknowledges what he calls the "incompatibility of major lyric poetry in the English language with the traditions of musical setting available to it."[23] In *The Experience of Songs*, Mark W. Booth also invokes Valéry's aphorism, noting the paradox that verse "highly patterned with musical sound of its own may clash with the music of its tune": in the music-text interplay, "there is a constant tug against the resolution of the words to carry out their own business."[24] Although sound repetition is central to poetic language, Booth points up its greater prominence in song:

> Given the relationship of redundancy to information, a songwriter should not have anything really new to say, at least if he expects to say it with words of the song alone. A poet on paper has much greater freedom to test the patience and ingenuity of the reader and to stretch his comprehension. He can aspire to enlarge the reader's world of experience and ideas. But a song, hedged by the demands of unity and clarity, must say things that are simplifications, and generally familiar simplifications.[25]

Similarly, Charles O. Hartman attributes to "practical necessity" the many forms of repetition in song, such as refrain, rhetorical pattern and formula, and duplicated lines, as well as the genre's being less dense in imagery and meaning than poetry tends to be, since "a song is its performance; and this means that it exists for its audience at a pace which is set, not by the person experiencing the song, but by the performer."[26]

These genre differences are, of course, shifting and unstable, and neither literary verse nor song is an essential or determinate, transhistorical or transcultural entity. Exceptions are often made to distinctions between poetry and song, including the poetic work of songwriters Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Chuck Berry, Patti Smith, Cole Porter, and, as we will see, Lord Kitchener, or whole genres, such as lied, hip-hop, avant-garde art song, crooning, country, and calypso, but they are exceptions that are telling by their exceptionality. Songs in a number of different kinds of music typically subordinate the semantic, rhythmic, and imagistic dimensions of words to music and voice. Booth avers that in "classical singing and in jazz singing, notably, the voice may often be more a musical instrument than a medium of language."[27] In the poem "Syrinx," Amy Clampitt conjures a diva whose singing, "all soaring / pectoral breathwork, / . . . rises / past saying anything."[28] In rock singing, too, the young Mick Jagger was hardly alone in deliberately obscuring lyrics in performance; as one critic summarizes, "lyrics—the literary component of rock songs—are secondary to other, more meaningful elements," including performativity, sonic excess, communal event, and star personalities.[29] The words of a songwriter-poet such as Bob Dylan are, as even Christopher Ricks concedes, "one element only, one medium, of his art. Songs are different from poems, and not only in that a song combines three media: words, music, voice."[30]

Let's return to half of Roubaud's aphorism: why is it "an insult to poetry to call it song"? If we treat poetry as song, we obscure capacities it possesses and song lacks. The comparison to sung verse also makes literary verse seem deficient in melody and harmony, the physicality of the embodied voice, and the thick social

and performative contexts. Even poetry in performance cannot compete on these terms. What Roland Barthes conceptualizes as "the grain" in a singer's voice—"the materiality of the body," heard in "the lungs, . . . the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose," "the body in the voice as it sings"—disappears from the printed poem and is of lesser significance in poetry recitations and readings than in song.[31] As Robert Pinsky writes in his poem "The Uncreation," we hear in songs "sentences turned and tinted by the body."[32] The materiality and bodiliness of the Barthesian "grain" can be powerful elements of song, more so than the critical fictions of voice constructed around literary verse. Sound poetry is, like other kinds of performance poetry, an obvious counterexample, but as we will see, it diverges from song in yet other ways.

Alive to the differences between performed song and inscribed verse, contemporary poets often pay homage to aspects of song that are beyond the powers of literary texts. In one of a number of elegiac poems for her mother in *Mercy* (2004), "last words," Lucille Clifton prays for the return of her mother in her thirties, particularly the grain of her singing voice, but she concedes its irrecuperability in a poem: "I can barely recall her song," she writes, and it is the physical embodiment of her mother's voice in song that she longs for, "my mother's calling, / her young voice humming my name."[33] Song seems to realize a fullness of vocal presence and interpersonal melding that are beyond the scope of the written poem—belated, estranged, fractured by elegiac yearning. In Tim Nolan's "At the Choral Concert," song affords a moment of cross-generational communion, when parents are surprised to find themselves joining "at exactly the right moment," "in one voice with our beautiful / children," singing the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's *Messiah*.[34] Similarly, in Sebastian Matthews's "Barbershop Quartet, East Village Grille," father and son experience through song an oceanic fusion with each other, the singers, and the music itself: "we dive into the song. Or maybe it pours / into us, and we're the ones brimming with it."[35] Lyric poetry may aspire to this Dionysian dissolution of boundaries between self and other, as in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*,[36] but by its desire for that state, the written text marks itself as more beholden to the Apollonian

principium individuationis. In the title work of C. K. Williams's *The Singing* (2003), the poet overhears a young man "making his song up," "obviously full of himself hence his lyrical flowing over," including improvised references to the poet's height.[37] But when the poet thinks of singing back in kind, he "couldn't come up with a tune" and is left instead in writerly alienation, inscribed in long, emphatically unsingable lines, clause awkwardly tumbling over clause, his syntax eschewing songlike fluency.[38]

Conversely, says Roubaud, "It's an insult to song to call it poetry." If we treat song as poetry, we effectively overvalue textual elements, which may be secondary, if not peripheral. Deracinated from their musical, vocal, and social contexts, song lyrics often seem skeletal, diminished, caricatured by expectations of semantic, graphic, syntactic, imagistic, allusive, psychological complexity and imaginative reach. Although contemporary poems thrill at the affective force of the voice in song, they point up the difference in poetry's layers of self-scrutiny. In "The Boleros," about these traditional songs sung in Spanish by Pedro Vargas, Lola Beltrán, and others, Alberto Ríos admires their emotional power and immediacy, like a screw, "each repetition another whole turn // Full of feeling, forced into you. / The words, and a half-sob as well // In the voice of the singer."[39] But the poem, self-reflexively aware that it lacks sobs, vocal grain, and instrumental music, pulls away from song's almost violent intrusion ("forced into you"), critically interposing itself in the affective relay between voice and audience: "It's easy to feel / Sympathy for the singer."[40] In "callas lover," D. A. Powell conjures the great soprano's rendition of an aria, "Un bel di" or "One Beautiful Day," in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, "her voice a sashed kimono," "such a pitch of tenderness in the voice," but this poem, too, draws back, dryly observing that "the emotion is, after all, an artfully conjured gesture."[41] Powell calls attention to the mechanics of digital mediation ("this is the track I've had on REPEAT all afternoon," "[shuffle play]"), and the distance of the technological simulacrum from the living singer corresponds in turn to the poem's remove from the voice it textualizes and tropes.[42]

Poetry's relation to digital technologies of recorded song is a

subject to which I return in the second half of this chapter, which extends the book's purview to song-crossed American poems written in the twenty-first century. But the first archive I've selected for exploration is one in which the traffic between poetry and song has been especially heavy: postcolonial poems from Africa, the Caribbean, and black Britain. If even such song-enriched poetry reflects on its divergence from the songs it absorbs, then like novelized, theorized, and legalized poetry, like poetry that tells the news and poetry that prays, poetry that sings illuminates both poetry's dialogic engagements with its others and its awareness of its peculiarities as poetry.