Lecture Handout: Poetic Discourse: Variation.

The aims of the lecture are to explain the concept of Variation in Poetic Discourse and to communicate the value of the concept in studying poetry. The objectives are to get you to understand both the concept and its application so that you have a deeper understanding of the role played by discourse variation in poetry.

Variation

If the use of regular patterns or linguistic forms in a poem can be a method of foregrounding, a poet is not restricted to using only one form. Often poets use contrasts systematically and equivalently so that it is difficult to call the contrast a deviation from an internal norm. Instead we appear to have two types used in variation and the function of the contrast itself becomes significant.

Contrasting features can draw on standard grammatical forms - like declaratives and interrogatives, for instance. But there are other resources. And these are discourse resources. The notion of discourse brings various social meanings from the contexts in which language is used into consideration. Language in society exists in VARIATION. There are different varieties in a speech community which are evaluated differently. Different registers exist in society. And language can vary according to REgister which is subdivided into TENOR, MODE and DOMAIN of discourse.

TENOR has to do with language variation according to users. Here, you can get differences according to social or regional affiliation of the users - dialect versus the standard, for instance. Or according to scales of formality or informality, written language features being more formal than spoken language ones. For instance - ‘It is regretted that Mrs. B is to leave shortly’ is much more formal than ‘I’m sorry that Betty is leaving us so soon.’ MODE deals with the differences derived from the medium used, whether spoken or written. Added to this we can have differences between dialogue and monologue, one as a spoken the other as a written form. DOMAIN looks at differences that occur when language is used systematically in some specific context as appropriate to it - for instance, legal language would differ from religious language which would differ from the language of sports commentaries; different registers are used.

You need first to identify variation and its features if it is used in a poem; think about its function; and explore its role in interpreting the poem. Questions that arise will be related to how choices of this kind provide contrasts and what you think their function is in the poem. They contextualize in various ways the overall ‘image’ which the poem constructs, the terms of its action or description which needs to be interpreted.

Examples

Mode

1  I feel I am, I only know I am,
2   And plod upon the earth as dull and void:
3  Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
4   Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed.
5  I fled to solitudes from passion's dream
6  But strife pursued - I only know I am.
I was a being created in the race
Of men, disdaining bounds of place and time,
A spirit that could travel o’er the space
Of earth and heaven, like a thought sublime -
Tracing creation, like my maker free,-
A soul unshackled - like eternity:
Spurning earth’s vain and soul debasing thrall -
But now I only know I am - that’s all.

But how shall I...make me room there:
Reach me a...Fancy, come faster -
Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,
Thing that she...There then! the Master,
(G.M. Hopkins: *The Wreck of the Deutschland*)

Yuh hear bout di people dem arres
Fi bun dung di Asian people dem house?
Yuh hear bout di policemen dem lock up
Fi beat up di black bwoy widout a cause?
Yuh hear bout de M.P. dem sack because im refuse fi help
im coloured constituents in a dem fight
'gainst deportation?
Yuh noh hear bout dem?
Mi neida.
(Valerie Bloom: *Yuh Hear Bout*)

Tenor

‘For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,’

‘With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve
Take you a course, get you a place’ (John Donne: *The Canonization*)

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus... (John Donne: *The Sun Rising*).

It is not meet, Sir King, to leave thee thus...

‘Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go? (A.Tennyson: *Morte D’Arthur*)

Your bed’s got two wrong sides. Your life’s all grouse.
I let your phone-call take its dismal course:
Ah can't stand it no more, this empty house!

Carrots choke us wi'out your mam's white sauce!

Them sweets you brought me, you can have 'em back. 
Ah, m diabetic now. Got all the facts. 
(The diabetes comes hard on the track 
Of two coronaries and cataracts.)

Ah've allus liked things sweet! But now ah push 
food down mi' throat! Ah'd sooner do wi'out. 
And t'only reason now for beer's to flush 
(so t'dietician said), mi kidneys out.

When I come round, they'll be laid out, the sweets, 
Lifesavers, my father's New World treats, 
still in the big brown bag, and only bought 
rushing through JFK as a last thought. 
(Tony Harrison: Long Distance.)

Domain

5. 
Yes, I remember Adelstrop - 
The name, because one afternoon 
Of heat the express train drew up there 
Unwontedly. It was late June. 
The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. 
No one left and no one came 
On the bare platform. What I saw 
Was Adelstrop - only the name.

And willows, willow herb, and grass, 
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry, 
No whit less still and lonely fair 
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang 
Close by, and round him, mistier, 
Farther and farther, all the birds 
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. 
(Edward Thomas: Adelstrop.)