Hass, Robert. A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry. New York: Harper Collins, 2017

A NOTE ON STRESS

Rhythm: *A perceived pattern in a sequence of sounds and the pleasure in the changes in the pattern that the existence of the pattern allows us to hear.*

Stress: *The rhythm of poetry depends on rhythmic elements present in ordinary speech. And those rhythms are based on the fact that we utter some syllables with more emphasis than others:*

Are you totally out of your mind?

Anyone saying that sentence knows that the syllable "tot" needs to be spoken more emphatically than any other syllable in the sentence.

Are you totally crazy?

In this sentence, on the other hand, "tot" and "craz" would probably receive about equal emphasis and might even build from the first to the second. Distributing emphasis, making it up as we go along, is one of the main pleasures of speech.

Having a little lapse of sanity?

In this more understated sentence, *lapse* would probably get slightly more emphasis than *hav-*, *lit-*, and *san-*, but all of them would receive a certain light emphasis in relation to the other syllables in the sentence.

KINDS OF STRESS

In spoken English stress, or accent as it is also called, occurs for three reasons:

(1) Stress is used to underline the key elements of grammatical structure in English. Normally, the main syllables in the key words in a sentence, the ones that convey meaning, receive more emphasis than the words used to indicate relation like articles and prepositions. In the sentence "He went to the store," spoken in however matter-of-fact a way, *went* and *store* get more emphasis. Linguists call the words that receive stress (by some rule of speech we learn when we're learning to talk) "lexical words." The lexical words are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The nonlexical words are conjunctions, articles, and prepositions. Nonlexical words receive stress in normal speech if they have more than one syllable, however, so prepositions of more than one syllable do carry stress. Demonstrative pronouns—*this* and *that*—can, but don't automatically, receive stress. So their stress, when they are stressed, is rhetorical; it's a matter of contextual emphasis. Forms of the verb "to be" don't receive the same stress in speech as action verbs. Pronouns don't receive stress in ordinary speech, presumably because they are only markers for the nouns that do. Sometimes their degree of stress is a matter of contextual emphasis.

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(2) In English the normal pronunciation of multisyllabic words requires that we pronounce one, and sometimes two, syllables in a word more emphatically than the others: *an*swer, *ro*tating, in*def*initely, *consti*tu*tional.

(3) What is contextual, or rhetorical emphasis? Saying is rarely neutral, which is why the third reason for the use of stress is rhetorical emphasis. You might want to emphasize the fact that *he* went to the store, or the fact that he went to the *store*, and in each case you'd make your emphasis differently. This is where play comes into the way we use emphasis in speech. For different reasons and in different situations one might say, "Are you *to*tally out of your *mind*?" or "Are *you* to*tal*ly out of your *mind*?" or "Are you *to*tally *out* of your *mind*?" or "*Are* you *to*tally *out* of your *mind*?," even "*Are* you to*tal*ly *out* of *your mind*?" And there are probably other variations.

Rhetorical stress is often hard to determine in printed language because it has to be inferred from the context. "Who wants to be a millionaire?" the song goes, "*I* do." Or "Do you take this person to be your . . ." "I *do*." One needs to know the story to read the stress.

THE RELATIVITY OF STRESS

Notice that in the case of the pronunciation of multisyllabic words and the enunciation of lexical words in sentences, the distribution of stress is based on a codified rule. Notice also that there are not only two degrees of emphasis, weak and strong; some words of more than three syllables have a primary and a secondary stress. If you are unsure which syllable gets the main and which gets the secondary stress in a word like *fortification*, check a dictionary. In compound nouns, the first syllable usually gets the stronger stress: rose-leaves, milk-cow. In English the existence of secondary stress and of com-

pound nouns complicates the rules of stress, but the pronunciation of English is always rule governed. It isn't arbitrary.

Nor is rhetorical stress arbitrary. In our test case sentence, the main syllable in the intensifier *totally* always gets the most emphasis. After that the main syllables in the key grammatical words are emphasized, and how much they are emphasized in relation to each other depends on meaning—that is a matter of rhetorical emphasis. So not all emphases in a sentence are absolutely fixed. One thing gets a lot or a little more emphasis than another. This is why people speak of "relative stress," because it is almost always a comparative thing. It is governed by rules and is not, in that sense, relative at all, but it is also governed by context and intention. When people get to scanning metrical poetry or marking stresses in nonmetrical poetry, it's often the contextual relativity of stress and the existence of secondary stress in polysyllabic words that make them feel insecure.

To summarize, all spoken language in English is based on a mix of more and less stressed syllables, which convey meaning and from which speech gets its musical, or rhythmic, rising and falling quality.

Meter introduces a fourth kind of stress, metrical stress. One of the things that makes meter sound regular is that it introduces a rule that governs secondary stress. It also adds metrical stress to words that are not stressed in normal speech, usually prepositions, to heighten the order in speech rhythm and, often, create a kind of tension between speech rhythm and metrical pattern. Here is an example of the way that meter promotes a nonlexical syllable, giving it more stress than in speech to fulfill the expectation of the metrical pattern. The phrase:

> They walked together in the woods,

in ordinary speech gets three stresses, on *walked*, *geth-*, and *woods*, according to the rules of lexical stress. But as part of a pattern of iambic

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stresses, an unstressed-stressed pattern, the syllable *in* also receives stress, heightening the feel of rhythmic regularity in the phrase:

> Thěy wálked tŏgéth- ĕr ín thĕ wóods.

By itself the phrase "in the woods" has a skipping anapestic feel, but it has been pulled into the orbit of iambic rhythm. "er in" is an iamb and "the woods" is an iamb.

And here is an example of its regularizing of secondary stress, from a poem by Stanley Kunitz about his World War II infantryman's rifle:

> What the nymphomaniac enjoys,
> Inexhaustibly, is boys.

In normal speech the polysyllabic words have syllables that carry primary and secondary stress. We know instinctively, having learned it quite young, though not that particular word, that *man* carries the primary stress in *nymphomaniac*. The rule has to do with the fact that *maniac* is the main idea and *nympho* is a modifier, but the difference in emphasis is quite slight, and if the question under consideration were which kind of maniac a rifle is, *nymph* would probably get the heavier stress. In the second line, *haust* carries the primary stress in *inexhaustibly* as a dictionary would tell you. The phrase

> What the nymphomaniac enjoys

in ordinary speech carries three lexical stresses—*what*, *man*, and *joys*—and a secondary, somewhat lesser stress on *nymph*. Kunitz, however, is writing in an iambic meter—a kind called "headless pentameter" (it was a favorite meter of his master, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats) that has a pattern of a stressed initial syllable followed by four feet with the pattern unstressed-stressed. So the line scans like this:

> Whát thĕ nýmph- ŏmán- ĭác ĕnjóys

nymph and *ac* have been promoted by metrical stress. The same thing happens in the next line:

> Ín ĕxháust- ĭblý ĭs bóys.

In normal speech *haust* and *boys* carry the primary stress, *in* has secondary stress. Meter has promoted both *in* and *ly*.

(In my experience the word *nymphomaniac* belongs to an eighth-grade boy's terror of and curiosity about sexuality, rather than the supposedly insatiable sexual appetite of some women, so it is an awkward word to use as an example here, because it carries such sexist freight. On the other hand, it might therefore not be so inappropriate to locate that set of male dreams and terrors, as Kunitz does, in a rifle.)