

# *The Poetry Handbook*

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A Guide to Reading Poetry  
for Pleasure and Practical Criticism

Second Edition

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# 1

## Metre

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to a poet there may be no more important element of a poem.

JON STALLWORTHY (N2029)

(Rod upon mild silver rod, like meter  
Broken in fleet cahoots with subject-matter)

JAMES MERRILL, 'The Book of Ephraim', 'F'<sup>1</sup>

**R**hythm is basic : hearing our hearts beat, feeling our lungs breathe, walking, dancing, sex, and sport—all create and require a sense of rhythm. In all speech rhythmic patterns help us pick out phrase and meaning from strings of syllables, and to create and shape these rhythms, manipulating readers with words underpinned by them, is part of a poet's job. All poets use rhythm and all readers of poetry hear rhythm, whether or not they are conscious of doing so, but *prosody*, the description and analysis of poetic rhythms, can be as complicated as musical notation, and different languages require different sorts of prosody.

In the classical languages prosody was *quantitative*, based on vowel length or quantity. In Anglo-Saxon (or *Old English*) prosody was *qualitative*, based on patterns of stress or accent (with other complex rules concerning alliteration, p. 202). In Slavic languages, like Russian, words can be very long, because such *synthetic* languages build a lot of meaning into one word by adding prefixes and inflecting endings, but there is also a rule which allows only one stress per word, however long—so Russian poetry is usually analysed with a basis in accent but many variants. In Romance languages, like French, rules of stress are more flexible than Russian but more rigid than English ones, and French

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<sup>1</sup> *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982; New York: Atheneum, 1984), 20.

## Metre

poetry is usually analysed in *syllabic* prosody, according to the number of syllables in each line.

Modern English is a very *analytical* language, one which distributes meaning among many words and has a grammar dependent on prepositions and word-order rather than inflected endings (pp. 263–4). Its prosody has varied as the language and culture have evolved: medieval Middle English is usually analysed accentually, mixed with other rules concerning alliteration and/or rhyme (p. 165), and accentual systems apply as late as John Skelton (?1460–1529), whose tumbling prosody is sometimes called *Skeltonics*—but the main post-medieval system of prosody in English is the *accentual-syllabic*. This is a qualitative prosody, which disregards syllable length and is instead concerned with formal patterns of *un/stressed beats*, the syllables on which emphatic accent is (not) placed. Syllables matter, because each beat will be pronounced as one syllable, but it is possible to conflate or multiply syllables: ‘thickening’, for example, could have two syllables (thickening) or three (thick-en-ing); some words can be shortened by substituting an apostrophe (’) for one or more letters, as *cannot* → *can’t*, *of* → *o’*, or *never* → *ne’er*. This is called *elision* (the verb is to *elide*, and missing letters are *elided*), but you can’t usually elide stresses in the same way.

Accentual-syllabic prosody isn’t remotely perfect, but has proven the most popular and useful system. It is *neoclassical*, derived from Greek and/or Roman writings, which accounts for its many strengths, flexibility, and widespread acceptance, but some scholars argue forcefully that some aspects are ill-adapted to English, and alternatives should be considered (p. 12). Scholars often disagree in analysing prosody, partly because it’s genuinely complicated, like the drum- and bass-lines in a song but with rhythm created by words, not played behind them. As with music there is a technical vocabulary that puts people off, but without knowing the words you can’t talk about the rhythms usefully or write about them compactly in timed work. But your real guide must always be your own ears: don’t hesitate to read a poem aloud as you work (or mouth it silently in an exam), and if I ask you to read something aloud please do so: rhythm is much easier to speak and hear than describe, and reading lines of poetry aloud—making your mouth say what your eyes see—will help you think about them.

In accentual-syllabic prosody the basic unit of poetry is the *line*, clearly visible on the page, which may be defined as ‘a single sequence of characters read from left to right’. Lines are analysed by breaking the

*metre*,<sup>2</sup> the rhythmic pattern, down into the repetition of a basic unit, a *foot*, and saying how many *feet* make up a line. For example, this line from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 12' (N258 ; text from Q1, 1609, omitting a *drop-cap*.<sup>3</sup>) :

When I doe count the clock that tels the time,

would usually be spoken like this (stressed beats are in CAPITAL LETTERS, or 'caps') :

When I doe COUNT the CLOCK that TELS the TIME

This is analysed as five feet, each comprising an unstressed followed by a stressed beat, the *ictus* (Latin, 'a blow or stroke') ; I have separated the feet with vertical slashes :

When | | doe COUNT | the CLOCK | that TELS | the TIME

This kind of foot is an *iamb* (pronounced e-AMB) and there are five of them, so the line is an *iambic pentameter* (Greek πεντε [pente], 'five'). If there are only four iambs, as in this line from *The Winter's Tale* (text from F1,1623, where it is italicised as a song) :

When DAF- | faDILS | beGIN | to PEERE,

then the line is an *iambic tetrameter* (Greek τετταρα [tettara], 'four'), and so on.

The basic feet and line-lengths you need to know are these<sup>4</sup> ; 'u' indicates an unstressed beat and 'x' an ictus<sup>5</sup> :

ux : *iamb*, from which the adjective is *iambic*

xu : *trochee*, *trochaic*

xx : *spondee*, *spondaic*

uu : *pyrrhic*, *pyrrhic*

<sup>2</sup> This word is confusing : in the US it is always 'meter' ; in the UK 'meter' and 'metre' are distinct. On its own, meaning 'rhythmic pattern in general', it is 'metre', but as a suffix, meaning 'a measurement', is 'meter' (as in 'pentameter').

<sup>3</sup> A large initial letter (here the W of 'When') occupying more than one line.

<sup>4</sup> The named triple and quadruple feet, most uncommon and some very rare, are in full:

triple feet : *tribrach* (uuu) ; *dactyl* (xuu) ; *amphibrach* (uxu) ; *anapaest* (uux) ; *antibacchius* (xxu) ; *amphimacer* (xux) ; *bacchius* (uxx) ; *molossus* (xxx) ;

quadruple feet : *proceleusmatic* (uuuu) ; *first* (xuuu), *second* (uxuu), *third* (uuxu), and *fourth paeon* (uuux) ; *ionic (a) majore* (xxuu) ; *ditrochee* (xuxu) ; *choriamb* (xuux) ; *antispast* (uxxu) ; *diamb* (uxux) ; *ionic (a) minore* (uuxx) ; *first* (uxxx), *second* (xuxx), *third* (xxux), and *fourth epitrite* (xxxu) ; *dispondee* (xxxx).

<sup>5</sup> Different notations may be used, as 'x' for an unstressed beat and '/' for an ictus. Always check what system a particular author is using.

## Metre

uux : *anapæst, anapæstic*

xuu : *dactyl, dactylic*

one foot per line : *monometer, adjective monometric*

two feet per line : *dimeter* *dimetric*

three feet per line : *trimeter* *trimetric*

four feet per line : *tetrameter* *tetrametric*

five feet per line : *pentameter* *pentametric*

six feet per line : *hexameter* *hexametric*

seven feet per line : *heptameter* *heptametric*

eight feet per line : *octameter* *octametric*

There is an easy way of remembering which foot is which, by pronouncing the name of each to embody its rhythm. The word i-AMB is an iamb, an unstressed beat followed by an ictus ; the word TRO-chee (TRO-key) is a trochee, an ictus followed by an unstressed beat ; SPON-DEE is a spondee, two equally stressed beats ; pyrrhic (pih-rick) is really a spondee (no word has no stress) but pronounced quickly is as near a pyrrhic as any word can be ; and an-a-PÆST (an-a-PEEST) is an anapæst. For dactyls use the adjective DAC-tyl-ic, or remember that it comes from Greek δακτυλός [daktilos], ‘a finger’, and is long-short-short (stress-unstress-unstress), like finger-joints.<sup>6</sup>

A full description of a line identifies the kind and number of feet, and immediately tells you what the basic pattern is : a trochaic trimeter will be three trochees, ‘xu | xu | xu’ ; an anapæstic dimeter (like ll. 3–4 of a limerick) will be two anapæsts, ‘uux | uux’, and so on. That is the basic pattern, but not every line described as an iambic pentameter (or whatever) will exactly follow it : a sequence of completely regular lines

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<sup>6</sup> Another useful mnemonic is Coleridge’s ‘Metrical Feet’, written for his sons ; each line is in the foot it names. As a classicist Coleridge refers to ‘longs’ and ‘shorts’ rather than un/stressed beats (Greek and Latin prosody depend on vowel length), and includes the *amphibrach(ys)* (uxu) and *amphimacer* (xux) :

Trochee trips from long to short ;  
From long to long in solemn sort  
Slow Spondee stalks ; strong foot! yet ill able  
Ever to come up with Dactyl trisyllable.  
Iambics march from short to long ;—  
With a leap and a bound the swift Anapæsts throng ;  
One syllable long, with one short at each side,  
Amphibrachys hastes with a stately stride ;—  
First and last being long, middle short, Amphimacer  
Strikes his thundering hoofs like a proud high-bred Racer.

There are also remarkable verses exemplifying complex metres by Tennyson, usually called ‘In Quantity’.

would sound monotonous and artificial. So to describe a poem as ‘in iambic pentameter’ means that the pattern of five iambs is the template a poet has used as the basis of each line, which readers can use to identify variations, effects at work in a particular line. There is an analogy with time-signature and syncopation in music, or you might think of the template as default-settings a poet will then modify.

Many combinations of feet and line-lengths are possible, but iambic pentameter (five iambs), and tetrameter (four iambs) are much the commonest. Spondees and pyrrhics are never used as basic metres, because lines made from them would be all *ictūs* (ik-toos),<sup>7</sup> which would sound like a dalek, or all unstressed beats, which is impossible. Instead spondees and pyrrhics are used within iambic and trochaic lines to vary the rhythm, acting as a *distinguishing* foot to the ear, just as SMALL CAPITALS or *italic* are distinguishing *faces* of type to the eye.<sup>8</sup> An iamb in an otherwise trochaic line, or a trochee in an iambic line, is called an *inverted* foot, and will also act as a distinguishing foot.<sup>9</sup> Both distinguishing and inverted feet are varieties of *substitute* feet, those which replace a regular foot.

Lines made up of iambic and anapæstic feet produce a *rising rhythm*, because stressed beats, for which the voice tends to be pitched slightly higher, come after unstressed beats, when the voice is pitched lower. If you read aloud these lines in iambic pentameter from Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (N239 ; text from Q2, 1598), you’ll hear your voice rise with each stress and drop down to rise again with the next :

Her vaile was artificiall flowers and leaues,  
 Whofe workmanhip both man and beaft deceaues.  
 Her VAILE | was ART- | iFI- | ciall FLOWERS | and LEAUES,  
 Whose WORK- | manSHIP | both MAN | and BEAST | deCEAUES.

It sounds silly when exaggerated, but rising rhythm is the basic pattern of sound in most English speech. We all talk in iambs and anapæsts,

<sup>7</sup> Latin 5th declension plurals are formed with long ‘u’, shown by a macron ; cf. *status, statūs*.

<sup>8</sup> A fount of type (font in the US) is a design for a complete set of letters and numbers. This book is printed in Stone Serif ; this is Comic sans MS ; and **this is Westminster**. Each fount has designs for all lower-case and UPPER-CASE letters (or ‘large caps’) and numerals, in roman, *italic* and SMALL CAPS, each a (*type-*)*face* of that fount. Each face comes in different sizes, called points ; the main text of the book is in 12-point : it could be 14-, 16-, or even **18-point**, but that would waste paper.

<sup>9</sup> An anapæst in a dactylic line, or a dactyl in an anapæstic, would also be inverted feet.

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and as you listen to others | you WILL | be A- | ble EA- | siLY | to HEAR | the RIS- | ing RHY- | thm IN | their WORDS. This is how most native speakers of English would normally speak those words ; it is also a natural sequence of nine iambs. This explains why iambic metres are most popular with poets, because they sound most like ORDinary SPEECH in PEOPle's MOUTHS.

Lines of trochees and dactyls produce a *falling rhythm*, with voice pitched higher on each opening ictus and lower on each following unstressed beat. It is rare to hear anyone talk conversationally in English in trochees, and sounds strange ; in poetry strangeness can be harnessed to good use. Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855, N954) is famous partly for its trochaic tetrameter ; this is from book III, 'Hiawatha's Childhood' (I haven't indicated the ictūs because every line is regular ; if you read the lines aloud you will hear your voice create the falling rhythm) :

By the shore of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

You can hear the falling rhythm become a chant, helped along by the repetitions. It doesn't sound natural—but there's no reason it should, and as Longfellow was writing about Hiawatha and his wife Minnehaha, both strongly trochaic names, it made sense for him to choose a trochaic metre.<sup>10</sup>

Browning sought a very different effect in 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' (N1010), one of the great hate-poems in English ; the metre is again trochaic tetrameter :

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<sup>10</sup> Longfellow was influenced by the Finnish epic *Kalevala* ; an OUP reader tells me that "In trochaic tetrameter, both alliterative and repetitive in phrasing, it was the last oral epic tradition to be collected in Europe, by Lönnrot in the early nineteenth century, and therefore of great interest to philologists of the time and Longfellow's model." In Finnish, first syllables of words are always stressed, and falling rhythms closest to common speech ; things are otherwise in English, as Longfellow found out. See the 'Editor's Preface' in the illustrated 1909 edition (°).



There's a great text in Galatians,  
 Once you trip on it, entails  
 Twenty-nine distinct damnations,  
 One sure if another fails :  
 THERE'S a | GREAT text | IN Ga- | LATians,  
 ONCE you | TRIP on | IT, en- | TAILS  
 TWENTy- | NINE dis- | TINCT dam- | NATions,  
 ONE sure | IF a- | NOTHer | FAILS :

It sounds more natural than *Hiawatha* (Browning was a better poet) but still odd, and the whole poem shows the monk speaking the lines to be pretty odd himself ; metrical oddity suggests mental oddity, unusual stresses as much as actual words betraying his obsessions—to begin with, there is no such text in Galatians. Trochaic effects vary, but it's always worth asking what use of falling rhythm a poet is making.

Notice that the second and fourth lines in Browning's stanza are missing their last unstressed beat (or have an incomplete fourth trochee). You could argue therefore that the poem isn't all in trochaic tetrameter, because every other line is trochaic *sesquiterimeter* (with 3½ trochees),<sup>11</sup> but as it's common to omit a final unstressed beat people mostly don't bother ; in the same way, iambic and anapaestic lines can miss their first unstressed beat. Such lines are *catalectic* (from Greek καταληκτικός [catalektikos], 'to leave off'), and are common ; it's almost always unstressed beats at the beginning or end of the line that are missing.

Lines can also be *hypermetric* (from Greek υπερ [hyper], 'over-', + 'meter'), with an extra beat, like Shakespeare's famous line from *Hamlet* (text from F1) :

To be, or not to be, that is the Question :  
 To BE, | or NOT | to BE, | THAT is | the QUES- | tion :

'THAT is', the fourth foot, is inverted, a trochee, but the others are regular iambs, and the line works as an iambic pentameter despite the fact that '-tion' is an eleventh beat. Such additional beats used to be called *feminine endings* if unstressed, and *masculine endings* if stressed ; these sexist terms are easily replaced by *stressed* and *unstressed hyperbeats*.

Feet with two beats (iambs and trochees) create *duple* metres, whose basic pattern is an alternation of stressed and unstressed beats ;

<sup>11</sup> You can add *sesqui-* (from Latin, *semis que*, meaning 'and-a-half') to any line-length—sesquimonometers, lines of 1½ feet; sesquidimeters, 2½, etc.

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similarly, feet with three beats (mainly anapæsts and dactyls) create *triple* metres, and in English rising triple metres tend to be comic because of the tripping rhythm produced by consecutive unstressed beats. Limericks, for example, are in anapæstic trimeter (ll. 1–2 + 5) and dimeter (ll. 3–4) : read aloud this, by Edward Lear, and you'll hear the triple rhythm (all lines are catalectic, with the first unstressed beat missing, which is common in limericks) :

There WAS | an Old MAN | with a BEARD,  
Who SAID, | "It is JUST | as I FEARED!—  
Two OWLS | and a HEN,  
Four LARKS | and a WREN,  
Have ALL | built their NESTS | in my BEARD!" (N1041)

The connection between triple rhythm and comedy is strong but not unbreakable ; it's possible, for example, to write serious limericks, or ones about such a bitter subject that they aren't at all funny however they trip off the tongue (pp. 29, 76).

These technical terms make it possible to write about rhythms you hear, but only in very boring poems will all lines conform exactly to the prescribed metrical pattern. For one thing, writing an exactly iambic line means any longer word/s in the line must alternate un/stressed syllables, as "AL-ter-NAT-ing" does. This leaves a wide but nevertheless restricted choice of vocabulary ("vo-CAB-u-la-ry" would be out). It would not mean, though, that every word must be iambic, because a trochaic word could be split across two iambs, as "unctuous" and "vapor" are in this line from *Paradise Lost* (IX. 635 ; N439) :

ComPACT | of UNC- | tuous VA- | por, WHICH | the NIGHT

Both "unctuous" and "vapor" must be pronounced trochaically, as 'UNCtuous' and 'Vapor'—you cannot naturally say them iambically, as 'uncTUOUS' or 'vaPOR'—but by putting the stressed syllable of each word in one foot and the unstressed in the next, Milton fits both into a regular iambic line. This is one way of enlivening regular lines, and in reading you hear simultaneously the *cadence* (Latin, *cadere*, to fall) of trochaic words, the falling rhythm they try to generate (which slows you down), and the rising rhythm of iambic metre (which keeps you going). In this way it is possible to fit iambic words into trochaic lines, and vice versa ; anapæstic and dactylic words are a different problem, and it is common for poets in one or another way to distort the prescribed rhythm.

This variability and irregularity can sometimes make it difficult to decide what the basic metre is. For example, “Hoping for love, longing for change” (HOPing for LOVE, LONGing for CHANGE) could be described as an iambic tetrameter with substitute trochees in first and third place (‘xu ux xu ux’), or as a trochaic tetrameter with substitute iambs in second and fourth place (‘xu ux xu ux’). Both descriptions are accurate, and nothing in the line itself indicates one is better than another ; what usually makes one description clearly more helpful is context, for if the line appears in a sequence of predominantly iambic (or trochaic) lines, there is little point in supposing that for one line the poet changed the basic foot. You should therefore never try to identify a metre from one line—especially not the first, often irregular precisely because it is first ; instead read a dozen or so lines and decide which template best fits what you are hearing. The vast majority of poems written before 1900, and many written later, do have a consistent template which isn’t difficult to identify, and you can then begin to spot variations.

Once you know the basic foot and line-length, you confront three aspects of metre. The first is the prescribed pattern of stress, as ‘ux | ux | ux | ux | ux’ for iambic pentameter : the template (or default-setting). The second is the way you would speak the words of the line in every-day conversation, the normal pronunciation of the words (settings you superimpose on some or all of the default-settings). The third is created by the interaction of the first two, the rhythm of that particular line described prosodically ; working it out is called *scanning* the line, and the final pattern on which you decide is your *scansion*.

Sometimes prescribed pattern of stress and normal pronunciation are identical, in which case there is no problem. Sometimes they differ, and normal pronunciation will then usually overturn prescribed pattern to create a substitute foot of some kind. This must be so, for you cannot easily mispronounce words to make them fit : “VOC-a-BU-la-RY” is at first incomprehensible as a sound, then irritating or stupid. It is possible, especially in song-lyrics, hymns, and strongly oral poems such as *ballads* (where pitch and stress may be very stylized in performance) to force slight changes of pronunciation, usually for the sake of rhyme. In verse 19 of ‘The Twa Sisters’, an old Scottish ballad—“The miller quickly drew the dam, [/] And there he found a drowned woman”<sup>12</sup>—the last word would normally be a trochee (WOMan), but the rhyme

<sup>12</sup> A line-break is usually represented by a *solidus* or *forward slash* (/) : p. 127. Within inverted commas, square brackets (*crotchets*) indicate an editorial insertion/emendation.

## Metre

with “dam” prods a reader towards an iamb (woMAN) ; in the last verse “then” rhymes with “Ellen”, forcing the name from ‘ELLen’ to ‘eLLEN’. An accent thus forced to move along by one or more beats is *wrenched* : they rarely sound good but can be useful, even necessary, in a particular poem. Scanning a line therefore involves identifying first the pattern of the metre, then which feet (if any) are altered from their prescribed value by the actual words (identify the default-settings and which have been overridden).

Even with twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry in *free verse*, with variable or less strictly observed metres where the usefulness of accentual-syllabic prosody (or any neoclassical system) may be limited, it should not be forgotten. As a rule of thumb, if the template seems to be changing every few lines complete metrical analysis is likely to be lengthy and complex, and (especially in exams) you are probably best off confining yourself to a straightforward observation of the metre as free verse while pointing out any particularly striking or pleasing local effects—but even then don’t turn your ears off completely. Sometimes there will be groups of lines in a regular metre : in Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (N1340), for example, lines vary from three (l. 45) to twenty syllables (l. 102) in length ; but ll. 112–18, where Prufrock talks about Hamlet, and ll. 125–31, the last seven, are blocks of regular iambic pentameter. As the metre in which much of *Hamlet* is written it is appropriate (or ironic, as Prufrock is explaining how he isn’t like Prince Hamlet) for lines invoking it to be in iambic pentameter ; regularity and commonness of metre also help Prufrock to find a place where he can stop, as the irregularity of many earlier lines reflects the way in which, uncertain and worried, he rambles on.

A related example is the last line of John N. Morris’s ‘*Hamlet at Sea*’, describing a performance of Shakespeare’s play on the *Dragon*, sailing in convoy with the *Hector* to the East Indies in 1607.<sup>13</sup> For the performance most sailors from both ships went aboard the *Dragon* ; some had to stay on the *Hector* to man it but could see lights and hear noise, and as these sailors strain to hear *Hamlet* across the water :

It sounds like happiness at a distance.

The poem is in free verse, so metre is variable, but many lines, including this one, are in iambic pentameter—as one might expect in a

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<sup>13</sup> In Morris, *A Schedule of Benefits* (New York: Atheneum, 1987). This performance of *Hamlet* is the earliest known outside Britain ; see Gary Taylor, ‘Hamlet in Africa 1607’, in Ivo Kamps and Jyotsna Singh, eds, *Travel Knowledge: European ‘Discoveries’ in the Early Modern Period* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) and online (©).

poem about *Hamlet*. The prescribed pattern of stresses is therefore five iambs :

It SOUNDS | like HAP- | piNESS | at A | disTANCE.

but in ordinary speech the line would usually be spoken like this :

It SOUNDS | like HAP- | piness | at a | DIStance.

As you can see, prescription and ordinary speech are identical in the first two feet, “It SOUNDS | like HAP-”, so there is no problem and the result is two iambs. But in the third foot, the prescribed iamb is not matched by the ordinary speech : “happiness” is usually pronounced ‘HAP-pi-ness’, with only one stress, on the first syllable (i.e. it is dactylic) ; ‘-pi-ness’, here the foot, is thus a pyrrhic, two unstressed beats. The prescription wants to make that pyrrhic into an iamb by stressing “-ness”, so giving ‘HAP-pi-NESS’ two stresses, on the first and last syllables. This is unusual, but not obviously wrong, a pronunciation which can be understood and doesn’t offend the ear unless grossly exaggerated. You could insist it be scanned as a pyrrhic ; I would allow it as a weak iamb, with a relatively light ictus (-piNESS rather than piNESS).

The clash between prescription and speech is stronger in the fourth foot. An iamb is prescribed, to make it “at A”, but in speech it would be another pyrrhic, without a stress on either word, and pronounced quite quickly, as short, unstressed words tend to be. Making the foot into an iamb by stressing “A” would slow the line (which might or might not be acceptable) ; it would also affect meaning, insisting that this distance was ‘a distance’, not ‘the distance’ or ‘two distances’—which clarifies nothing, and disturbs the usual rhythm of the phrase (at a DIStance, ti-ti-TUM-ti). Because it is common, the way that phrase is normally spoken carries a lot of weight : this foot must be scanned as a pyrrhic, and the prescribed iambic ictus goes missing. (If you decided to scan the third foot as a pyrrhic, consider whether you really want two pyrrhics, four unstressed beats, in a row.)

In the fifth foot the clash between prescription and speech is absolute. The prescription wants an iamb, “disTANCE”, but the word is usually pronounced as a trochee. “DIStance”, and cannot acceptably become iambic. So the foot has to be a trochee, an inversion in this iambic line which therefore ends with an unstressed beat, not the ictus one would expect with iambs : for the last line of the poem to trail off in the unstressed sibilance of “-tance” sounds rather wistful, inviting readers to remember that the sailors to whom *The Tragical Historie of*

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*Hamlet* sounds like happiness would rather be watching the performance on the *Dragon* than keeping watch on the *Hector*. The line as a whole deviates increasingly from the prescribed pattern—iamb, iamb, weak iamb, pyrrhic, trochee :

u x | u x | u x | u u | x u  
It SOUNDS like HAPpiNESS at a DISTance.

The loss of rising rhythm in the weak third, stressless fourth, and inverted fifth feet also makes the line sound wistful rather than assertively regular. Scanned thus, the line sounds well in making good sense ; its relations of sound and sense are coherently expressed.

Many readers of modern verse, and many critics (who should know better), seem to think neoclassical prosody has no relevance after *Modernism*, but when metrical poetry was joined by free-verse poetry it didn't die away—nor even slacken much. It is true that reaction against the iambic pentameter was a part of Modernism, and that neoclassical prosody was and is widely attacked and variously subverted ; it is also true that the pentameter survives pretty much unscathed, often (as in Eliot and Morris) keeping cheerful company with free verse. So do many other metres, and knowledge of them is as indispensable in reading and assessing contemporary work as in confronting the *canon* of older work—but if that knowledge is to be useful, its limitations as well as its strengths must be appreciated.

The various attempts to propose a wholly different basis on which to approach rhythm, including those founded on musical time-values and various linguistic or statistical approaches, have yet to find widespread acceptance and are patently less adequate than the system/s they abandon. The outstanding modern prosodic theorist, Derek Attridge, summarises the alternatives usefully in *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, and is dismissive, moving on to clearly superior ideas of his own about ways of approaching the rhythms of poems which consciously abandon foot-based prosodies : for such poems his thinking is invaluable, but they are relatively few in number, and Attridge's complex approach does not obviously deal better with poems whose authors were thinking neoclassically than the neoclassical system he also slights. There is certainly a genuine problem, common in neoclassical systems, in that the basic conceptual apparatus had to be translated from quantity to quality, and subsequently evolved into a very different system in which some of the basic concepts are permanently wrenched—but if the evolved terminology is taken as a means to an

end, a way of seeking to communicate what you can hear in a line, it is a powerful tool.

The object lesson in recognising the limits of neoclassical prosody is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who famously articulated a theory of *sprung rhythm* to describe the metrics he had developed in the 1870s–1880s. Hopkins's terminology and notation are primarily neoclassical, explaining various circumstances in which additional, usually unstressed beats can be added to feet or lines, and many students down the years have spent days puzzling out what they think he means, and how it supposedly all works. My advice is not to bother, because it doesn't : Hopkins appears here under 'Lineation' (p. 166), because what he had in fact done was to abandon post-Renaissance neoclassical prosody altogether, and revert to an adapted Old or Middle English accentual model that doesn't bother much with unstressed beats at all, instead requiring a combination of numbers of accents and alliteration within a particular kind of line that isn't foot-based. Hopkins's attempt to provide a neoclassical model of un-neoclassical practice is politically and intellectually interesting, but prosodically a mare's nest of irrelevance and laxity that is far more hindrance than help in understanding with ear, mouth, and pen what he might have been up to. It's his poems that matter, not his retrospective rationalisations, but it does not follow from Hopkins's horrible theoretical self-traducement that the terminology he abused is useless or incorrigibly complex.

Clearly, some free-verse poets need special prosodic attention. Eliot developed and influentially disseminated (partly in verse-drama) an accentual system, for which Old and Middle English prosodic models are needed as often as neoclassical ones, and a distinct American accentual line descends from Whitman via W. C. Williams, as a distinct Irish one was imported into British poetry principally by Yeats (pp. 167–70). With globalisation, all these models and analytical systems (and more, from other local and regional traditions) have become more readily available to all, so that with almost any modern poet, as much as with a musician, the sampled or experimental use of many different metrical frameworks should be expected. But just as figurative art has not been displaced by abstraction, nor tonal music by atonal, so neoclassical metrics continue to appear among and often to dominate other modes of composition and shaping ; in the professionally competent close reading of poetry knowledge of them is a simple necessity.

Prosody is now for many students an unfamiliar subject, and some of

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the things you can describe with it (such as dactylic octameter) are very rare ; equally, some (particularly iambic tetrameter and pentameter, spondees, pyrrhics, and inverted feet) are things every reader of English poetry will frequently encounter. Whatever better prosodic systems may eventually be devised for English, the neoclassical system I have been describing will remain necessary, and not only because it is what poets from Chaucer to Auden and beyond understood themselves to be doing ; it endured for so long, and continues to endure, because it is, taken rightly, a superbly flexible tool allowing readers of poetry to describe what their voices and ears can make of a line. Used with habitual care about the distinction of a prescribed metre and a worked-out scansion, it can also accommodate without a qualm the individual accents and speaking voices of every reader, however varied (a matter also considered under ‘Rhyme’)—and in that alone is far more politically correct, in the best way, than some of its (supposed) rivals. It has often been written about tediously and badly, and its classroom teaching, when attempted at all, is too often timid and abstract : but it need not be so. Read aloud oneself, then again ; listen to others read, including when possible the author or a professional reader ; all that is at stake is to be able to analyse and describe what you are in any case doing as you search the words for their pulse by lodging them in your own rhythms of breath and hearing.

## Exemplary Poems

1. John Donne, ‘The Flea’, from *Songs and Sonets in Poems, by J. D. with Elegies on the Authors Death* (London: John Marriot, 1633), 230–1 (N309). Drop-cap. omitted, line-numbers added. Various *manuscripts* (handwritten texts) of the poem have multiple minor variants, but as none are *autograph* (in Donne’s hand) I opt for 1633, without assuming spelling, punctuation, etc. to be necessarily Donne’s.

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,  
How little that which thou deny’ft me is ;  
It fuck’d me first, and now fucks thee,  
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee ;  
Thou know’ft that this cannot be laid  
A finne, nor l’hame nor loffe of maidenhead,  
Yet this enjoys before it wooe,  
And pamp’er’d fwells with one blood made of two  
And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

5



Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,	10
Where wee almost, yea more then maryed are.	
This flea is you and I, and this	
Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is ;	
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,	
And cloisterd in these living walls of Jet.	15
Though use make you apt to kill mee,	
Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,	
And sacrilege, three finnes in killing three.	
Cruell and fodaine, hast thou since	
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence ?	20
Wherein could this flea guilty bee,	
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee ?	
Yet thou triumph'ft, and failest that thou	
Find'ft not thy selfe, nor mee the weaker now ;	
'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee ;	25
Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'ft to mee,	
Will waite, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.	

Donne's poem of persuasion and remonstrance became famous in the twentieth century as a rude canonical text, delightfully favouring sex and disparaging virginity, but to his contemporaries the metre was as interesting as the content. Such *Carpe Diem* poems (Latin, 'seize the day'), enjoining a reluctant woman to co-operate, were as common as unrequited poets—Herrick's 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time' and Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' (N357, 478) are other famous examples—and even using the intimate travels of a flea as a pretext was (in an age of fleas) pretty obvious. Donne's argument, however, becomes sufficiently vehement to put his metre under considerable pressure.

In his *Conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden* (1619), a record of table-talk during a visit to Scotland, Ben Jonson—who knew Donne well—called him "the first poet in the world in some things" but insisted that "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging".<sup>14</sup> People are rightly amused by Jonson's doubtless well-lubricated severity, but as a playwright he had reasons to worry about clarity of rhythm, and his exasperation with Donne is understandable by anyone trying to scan 'The Flea'. Almost any stress-pattern could be argued for the first four words (from 'MARK but this flea' to 'Mark but this FLEA'),

<sup>14</sup> Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1985), 597, 596.

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and many other (bits of) lines also seem disconcertingly malleable in the mouth—but even so an iambic pattern can quickly be discerned. Trochees might just seem possible for ‘MARK but | THIS flea’, but carry on and they go plainly wrong :

... AND marke | IN this  
HOW lit- | TLE that | WHICH thou | DE-ny’ft | ME is;

None of these template-trochees could survive into an agreed scansion (‘lit-TLE’ and ‘DE-ny’ft’ are as absurd as ‘dis-TANCE’), but after those first four unstable words (and openings are often unstable) iambs, if debatable, are nevertheless clearly speakable :

... and MARKE | IN THIS  
How LIT- | tle THAT | which THOU | deNY’ST | me IS;  
It SUCK’D | me FIRST, | and NOW | fucks THEE,  
And IN | this FLEA, | our TWO | bloods MING- | led BEE;

This is not the scansion, remember, only a template with which your voice must engage—even in these few lines “which thou”, “me is”, “me first” and several more feet could plainly become spondees—but the fact that an iambic template is speakable without obvious impossibility suggests strongly it is right (as unspeakability showed trochees must be wrong). Applying iambs also reveals consistent alternation in line-lengths between tetrameters (ll. 1, 3, 5, 7 of each stanza) and pentameters (ll. 2, 4, 6, 8–9), and however many feet you might want to substitute in your scansion that rules out as basic feet anything triple or quadruple.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Donne’s problems with “keeping accent”, therefore, his iambs remain audible, but reading aloud also makes it clear that speed is essential ; despite the careful and rational arrangement of argument in *stanzas* (See this flea . . . Don’t kill it! . . . Now that you have . . .) each stage is under pressure. The difficulty in scanning ‘Marke but this flea’ is precisely about how many stresses in what pattern—that is, how to manage with vocal force a balance between playfully rational argument and serious desire. “Oh stay [. . .]” is in its nature a sudden interjection as the woman reaches out to squash Donne’s argument, and the whole pleading stanza that follows invites hasty (as it debar ponderous) speech. Only in the final stanza, where Donne takes unexpectedly severe offence at the wanton killing of the flea (witless slaughter posing

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<sup>15</sup> Though it is theoretically possible to produce alternating lines of 8 and 10 beats with catalectic and hypermetric anapaestic or dactylic trimeters.

as a counter-argument), am I willing to let my voice really slow down, and the more it does so—especially in the final three lines, which can profitably be deliberately, even coldly spoken—the greater the problem of settling on a scansion.

It is precisely such shimmying accents that make Donne so rewarding a poet to hear read well, but faced with a Donne poem under exam conditions I would be chary (unless the question were specifically prosodic) of delving too deeply. Closeness to impassioned speech makes for uncertain complexity, and under time-pressure it may be as well to join Jonson in letting Donne's prosody go hang—yet at the same time many of his poems cleave more closely to regularity than this one. Even here the iambic beat is quite strong enough for “Cruell and fodaine” to leap into auditory focus : “Cruell” (helped by its spelling) drags out over both beats as a near-spondee (or is the line catalectic ?), while the brutally trochaic “fodaine” (equally helped) is broken over the foot-division and chopped-off by a comma (‘CRU-ell | and SOD- | aine, . . .), reflecting the sudden pressure needed to kill a flea, and the jet of blood that results if it has just sucked. One might also without too much detail venture an argument that (except for l. 16) the final three lines of each stanza tend to be metrically more regular than the first six, reflecting a division of labour : each first six lines tell the story, and are sped (hence additionally stressed) by action ; each last three reach a conclusion, and are slowed (hence more readily regular) by judgement. If you train your ears even a little, such an argument will be readily available even on one quick *sotto voce* reading in an exam-room ; elsewhere, with time and sound available, there are many worse and few better ways of coming to Donne than through reading him aloud, and to do so well is willy-nilly to scan him, whether you ever write it down.

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2. Wilfred Owen, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (1917) ; text of Owen's final draft, British Library MS 43720 (N1386). Line-numbers added.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons. 4  
No mockeries now for them ; no prayers nor bells ;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —  
The shrill demented choirs of wailing shells ;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires. 8  
What candles may be held to speed them all ?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall ; 12  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Owen's famous sonnet is popular and memorable partly for its familiar form. Sonnets conventionally have 14 lines of iambic pentameter ; here there are some oddities of form, but prosodically a fierce iambic regularity. The first foot may be a spondee, but iambs immediately reassert themselves (WHAT PAS- | ing BELLS | for THOSE | who DIE | as CAT - | tle) ; "Only" may open ll. 2–3 with trochees, but all other trochaic words (passing-, monstrous, rifles' rapid rattle, patter, mourning, wailing, bugles) and the amphibrachic "demented" (deMENTed, uxu) are split among regular iambs. Again, if Owen creates obvious prosodic effects with "stuttering" and "mockeries" (which demand substitute anapæsts, or must be syllabically compressed as 'stutt'ring' and 'mock'ries'), those effects are local, and stand out precisely because of the otherwise rigid iambic regularity. The point is also clear in l. 7, "The SHRILL | deMEN- | ted CHOIRS | of WAIL- | ing SHELLS", where there is a real temptation in reading aloud to give undue emphasis to 'shrill', making it sound its meaning, but the voice is restrained from overdoing it by the encompassing regularity of the beat. Owen's metre is under discipline, and surviving drafts of the poem (∩̂) show him progressively tightening it to leave only those well-braced local effects—plus the total effect of maintaining such prosodic regularity despite the passionate content.

This is the metrical aspect of the central (if surprisingly little-remarked) paradox of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', bluntly caught in the very idea of writing a sonnet about the grotesque and terrible

meat-machine of trench-warfare. Much as Owen's elegiac and enraged impulse is bound within what Wordsworth called "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground" (N796), so individual lines are bound tightly to their templates, and readers invited to a scansion with (by my count) 65 of 70 feet as regular iambs and at most five substitute feet, all in ll. 1–5. After "shrill" in l. 7, moreover, there isn't even any temptation to metrical irregularity : ll. 8–12 are stringently iambic, and neither the slight slurring of "flowers" (l. 13) as it contracts into one stressed beat, nor the trochaic cadence of "a drawing-down of" (l. 14) can disturb the sonority of the final two lines. Reading aloud, I find anger and speed decreasing, and sentiment increasing (the formal shift in the last six lines is clear)—but both initial passion and later quiescence must be held within a clear and determined regularity, and in as much as they colour one's reading voice, must do so behind metrical bars.

The march of Owen's iambs might be interpreted as just that, a soldier's beat marching him "up the line to death" (as Sassoon has it in 'Base Details'), or more largely as embodying the ossified military logic that recklessly killed millions, including, eventually, Owen himself. I also suspect Owen had to write metrically to write at all, not simply because that was how almost all the poetry he knew was written, but because to write otherwise would be to risk ranting in desperation—metre as guiding foot-holes rather than metrical bars. But a different thought is suggested by another striking moment of untoward iambic regularity, worth fullish quotation, in Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover' (N1009 ; text from *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842) :

Be sure I looked up at her eyes  
 Proud, very proud ; at last I knew  
 Porphyria worshipped me ; surprise  
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew  
 While I debated what to do. 35  
 That moment she was mine, mine, fair,  
 Perfectly pure and good : I found  
 A thing to do, and all her hair  
 In one long yellow string I wound  
 Three times her little throat around, 40  
 And strangled her. No pain felt she ;  
 I am quite sure she felt no pain.  
 As a shut bud that holds a bee  
 I warily oped her lids ; again  
 Laughed the blue eyes without a stain. 45

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And I untightened next the tress  
    About her neck ; her cheek once more  
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss :  
I propped her head up as before [. . .]

There is one hammering moment, the triple stress of “mine, mine, fair,” ending l. 36 with a spondee and “Perfectly” inverting the first foot of l. 37 ; infinitely more terrifying is the quite undisturbed metre everywhere else. Even the moment of murder registers in this gynocide’s words only as a full-stop, and does not trouble (or even fill) its regular tetrameter ; if the immediately repeated assurance suggests anxiety (“No pain felt she ; [/] I am quite sure she felt no pain.”), metre and punctuation express only calm certainty. What Browning catches is a capacity for monstrous indifference, an egotism unable to recognise the claims of another life—and that sounds close in kind, if not scale, to the central concern of Owen’s ‘Anthem’. One might therefore argue for Owen’s metrical self-constraint as (besides bars and footholds) in its very unsuitability a primary means of registering abnormality and wrongness, in some measure taking hold and making reportable, but acknowledging also that it can only hold up against the slaughter a frame any imagination of it must exceed.