



Critical Rhythm: The Poetics of a Literary Life Form

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The Rhythms of the English Dolnik

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

This essay starts by illustrating **the difference between accentual-syllabic meter in English and the popular form of four-beat verse, or dolnik**, by means of a comparison between poems by Thomas Wyatt in both forms. Some of the characteristics of dolnik are discussed, including its easily felt rhythmic base and its expressive flexibility, illustrated by the rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Inversnaid." To allow for a fuller description of dolnik meter than has hitherto been available, a distinction is drawn between two types of dolnik, one fundamentally duple in its rhythm and the other triple. Nursery rhymes provide clear examples of these alternative rhythms, including the possibility that a single poem can be read in either manner. Recognizing this distinction allows for a more detailed account of the rhythms of "Inversnaid" than can be achieved with traditional prosodic approaches; further evidence of this is provided by analyses of poems by Tennyson and Blake.

Keywords: accentual-syllabic metre, Blake, dolnik, duple rhythm, Hopkins, Tennyson, triple rhythm, Wyatt

1

The field of "historical prosody" can be understood in two ways: as an investigation of the changing norms according to which poets, consciously or unconsciously, handle the rhythmic properties of the (changing) language in their writing, or as an investigation of the governing prosodic theories of different periods, whether or not these reflect actual poetic practice. The focus on the specificity of both the deployment and the theorization of poetic rhythm in their historical contexts has been highly valuable: it has increased our understanding of many aspects of prosody, including the dependence of poets on prevailing aesthetic conventions and technological capabilities, the close connection between language change and shifts in metrical norms, and the embeddedness of prosodic theorization in the socio-political environment of the time.

However, an emphasis on historical change can obscure the remarkable longevity of some verse-forms in the English; in the case of such a verse-form, a contemporary reader can pick up a

poem written several centuries ago and immediately recognize and participate in its rhythmic patterning. This persistence over time is in need of explanation just as much as the changes that metrical norms undergo through history. We may take the case of Thomas Wyatt as an example of a poet whose verse illustrates both metrical change and metrical continuity over time. Wyatt was writing in a period of prosodic uncertainty: alterations in the English language, especially the disappearance of the pronounced final *-e* that was an important metrical resource for Chaucer and his contemporaries, **(p.154)** had produced a break in metrical traditions that necessitated a new start in the process of harnessing the rhythms of the language in poetic forms. The following sonnet by Wyatt, for instance, though it may have a particular appeal to ears accustomed to the freer forms of the past century, remains metrically puzzling:

Avising the bright beams of these fair eyes,
Where he is that mine oft moisteth and washeth,
The wearied mind straight from the heart departeth
For to rest in his worldly paradise,
And find the sweet bitter under this guise.
What webs he hath wrought well he perceiveth
Whereby with himself on love he plaineth
That spurreth with fire and bridled with ice.
Thus is it in such extremity brought:
In frozen thought now and now it standeth in flame;
Twixt misery and wealth, twixt earnest and game
But few glad and many divers thought
With sore repentance of his hardiness:
Of such a root cometh fruit fruitless.

I quote this example from an article by George T. Wright,¹ though I have modernized the spelling. Wright argues that it can be scanned as metrical using classical prosodic feet if we accept that the decasyllabic line in Wyatt's time allowed for a variety of different patterns, alternative forms of the pentameter inherited from Lydgate that were soon afterwards ironed out by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey to become the norm forever after. The problem with this claim is that *any* stretch of language can be pronounced metrical by assigning different foot types and invoking elision, shifted stress and other such licenses. Nonetheless, Wright may well be correct in supposing that Wyatt knew exactly what he was doing and that his first readers, when he circulated his poems in manuscript, did not register these lines as failed attempts at regular accentual-syllabic verse as we are likely to do. It is certainly true that, given the linguistic changes that had taken place by the early sixteenth century, there was no standard of "regular" long-lined verse to compare them with. The fact remains that to modern ears—indeed to mid-sixteenth-century ears, as evidenced by the regularizations of Wyatt's verse undertaken by Richard Tottel or his editor²—these lines don't sound like rhythmically regular verse.

When the contemporary ear encounters a poem of Wyatt's in shorter lines, however, there is no such sense of rhythmic jarring:

(p.155) My lute awake! perform the last
Labor that thou and I shall waste,
And end that I have now begun;
For when this song is sung and past

My lute be still, for I have done.

As to be heard where ear is none,
As lead to grave in marble stone,
My song may pierce her heart as soon;
Should we then sing or sigh or moan?
No, no, my lute, for I have done.

These are the opening stanzas of one of Wyatt's most famous poems, which, for the contemporary reader and, we must assume, all readers since Wyatt's time, has an unmistakable rhythmic swing to it. The major metrical difference between the two poems is, of course, that the first is in some kind of five-beat verse and the second in four-beat verse, which, in view of the strictness of the arrangements of stressed and unstressed syllables, we can characterize more narrowly as iambic tetrameter. Wright points to this discrepancy as a puzzle needing to be solved: "[M]any shorter-line poems are not only regular but seem expert in their handling of rhythms. How then can we believe that so assured a master would, in effect, go to pieces metrically when confronted with the decasyllabic line, and then only in some poems?"³

Wright's rhetorical question overlooks the major differences between four-beat and five-beat rhythms: whether the lack of rhythmic regularity in many of the longer lines is due to conscious craftsmanship or an uncertain grasp of the form, it reflects the fact that five-beat lines present a distinct set of challenges and opportunities that have little to do with the world of four-beat verse. Let us rephrase the question as a real, not a rhetorical, one: how was Wyatt able to write short-lined verse—and "My Lute Awake" is typical of his poems of three or four realized beats per line—with a regularity that allows it to be unproblematically grasped today when his longer lines strain against any attempt to make them conform to a familiar norm? We might suppose that Wyatt was following a prior literary model in this shorter-lined verse, but if so it's one that is not easy to identify. Although Gower had written regular four beat verse with a strict syllable-count a little over a century earlier, the disappearance of pronounced final *-e* would have rendered it irregular to Wyatt's ear. (The phonetic change in question was not understood until several centuries later.) His immediate predecessor, John Skelton, had **(p.156)** developed his own distinctive short-lined verse-form, based on two or three, or occasionally four, beats, but he wrote nothing like Wyatt's syllabically strict tetrameters.

We can be sure, however, that **the four-beat rhythm on which these poems are based was the staple of popular song and verse**, as it had been since at least the beginning of the thirteenth century—the lyric "Nou goth sonne under wode" was first recorded in 1240, and a number of popular romances in four-beat meters can be dated from around the same time. These traditions did not observe a fixed number of syllables per metrical unit, so may seem an unlikely source for Wyatt's tetrameters; **Wyatt was aware, however, of other verse traditions, notably the Italian, in which the exact syllable-count was a crucial requirement.** Putting the two together would have produced the kind of octosyllabic verse we have from Wyatt's pen. Not surprisingly, he preferred a rising (or iambic) rhythm to a falling (or trochaic) rhythm, and a duple to a triple rhythm, both choices being closer to the natural rhythm of spoken English. The result was a verse-form that had the syllabic strictness of Italian poetry and the easily perceived rhythm of popular English verse. The longer line, by contrast, did not tap into this popular source and did not, to the early sixteenth-century hearer, have a strong rhythmic shape; Wyatt probably did not perceive a huge difference between lines that conformed to what was later to be called iambic pentameter and those that did not. Or, to be more precise, he would have perceived a difference but was happy

to exploit it in his poetry, the “iambic pentameter” not having achieved canonic status. (This metrical form became more established in Surrey’s poetry, though its status as the preeminent long line for English verse was challenged for many decades by poulter’s measure, a version of four-beat verse that grouped two short lines together and no doubt sounded more rhythmical to many hearers than the unfamiliar pentameter.)

It is interesting to note that at this early point in the history of accentual-syllabic verse in modern English Wyatt, when writing four-beat verse, discovered some of the most common variations from the strict alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables that were to be the staple of poets from then on: in the lines quoted above, there is initial inversion (“Labor...”), promotion (“As to be”), and demotion (“No, no”). The same poem includes examples of line-internal inversion, both rising (“thorough love’s shot”) and falling (“lie withered and”; “know beauty but”).⁴ All these variations observe the conditions that would be followed by later poets writing accentual-syllabic verse, the form in which they have their natural home. As we shall see, four-beat verse that doesn’t observe a syllable-count is less hospitable to them.

(p.157) If Wyatt’s longer line was written in a verse-form which is now, as a felt experience of rhythmicality, inaccessible to us (whether or not we are able to justify it intellectually in terms of variant forms of the pentameter), how is it that we can transcend the centuries between Wyatt’s time and our own in the case of the shorter line? Part of the answer must lie in the four-beat rhythm itself as one of the most fundamental forms of rhythmic behavior in numerous cultures, whether it be in verse, music or dance.⁵ And part of the reason for this near-universality must spring from the simplicity of the four-beat rhythmic unit, which is built up from two two-beat units, themselves merely the repetition of the basic beat. (Most three-beat lines as used by Wyatt imply a fourth, unsounded beat, as musical settings testify.) Wyatt’s experiments with five-beat lines mark an attempt to escape from the dominance of the four-beat rhythm, to achieve something less like song and more like impassioned speech, a capability the dramatists later in the century were to capitalize on. Our ability to respond to Wyatt’s poetry—and to much earlier verse in four-beat forms—also arises out of the historical continuity of the stress-rhythms of the English language itself, rhythms which underlie all major regular verse-forms and determine what hearers will find insistently rhythmical. That medieval verse in four-beat forms still sounds strongly rhythmical is one indication of the stability of this aspect of the language while other aspects, notably vowel-sounds, have changed enormously.

2

As I’ve noted, Wyatt’s short-lined poems observe a strict syllable-count, and in this respect differ from the popular tradition that may have been one of the sources he drew on: lyrics such as the aforementioned “Nou goth sonne” and the popular romances were in a four-beat form that did not observe a fixed number of syllables. However, verse in this meter is just as easily identifiable and enjoyable as Wyatt’s (and later) regular tetrameters. It is a form familiar to anyone who has grown up in an English speaking household, since it is characteristic of the most popular nursery rhymes. The following example is typical of hundreds. (Beats, including the felt beats that are not spoken, are indicated by “B”):

```
Hark, hark, the dogs do bark—
  B      B      B      B

The beggars are coming to town;
  B      B      B      [B]
```

(p.158)

Some in rags and some in jags.

B B B B

And one in a velvet gown.

B B B [B]

The four-beat meter—realized here as units of 4, 3, 4, 3 with a felt, or virtual beat, at the end of the second unit and echoed, mentally, at the end of the fourth—is immediately perceptible, and its strong rhythm has an effect on the pronunciation of the words.⁶ The reader is likely to give more weight to the syllables taking a beat than would be the case in a prose rendition, and the interval between the beats is accorded roughly the same duration in pronunciation, whether it contains no syllables (“Hark, hark”), one (“dogs do bark”), or two (“coming to town”). The entire sequence of sixteen beats is experienced as a hierarchy: a major division after eight beats (signaled by the rhyme and strong syntactic break), lesser divisions after every four (reflected in the way the verse is set out on the page), and in lines 1 and 3 slight divisions after two (emphasized by internal rhyme). Each line ends emphatically on a break in sense, and rhyme plays an important part in accentuating the stanza’s structure. These aural characteristics are particularly evident in the kind of recitation a parent might give a child, and emerge strongly if a group of readers is asked to read together without a leader.

As we’ve seen, one constraint that features in almost all literary verse does not apply here: the requirement that the meter observe fixed numbers of syllables. In this example, the varying number of syllables between the beats results in lines having 6, 8, 7, and 7 syllables, in spite of the fact that the first and third lines have four realized beats (or in traditional prosodic terms, four feet), while the second and fourth have three. Far from rendering the verse less emphatically regular, less catchy in its rhythm, these variations make it more so. If we rewrite the rhyme in regular alternating verse (iambic tetrameter and trimeter), the effect is still one of regularity but the distinctive rhythmic spring of the original has gone:

Beware, beware, the dogs are there—
The beggars near the town,
A few in rags and more in jags,
They seek a velvet gown.

The rhythm is relatively colorless now, the picture of the marauding troupe of beggars less vivid.

Various names have been applied to the type of verse exemplified by “Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,” a type of verse characteristic of nursery (p.159) rhymes and of many other popular forms, including ballads and advertising jingles. The most common label is probably “loose iambic”—though it could often be equally well termed “loose trochaic,” “loose dactylic,” or “loose anapestic.”⁷ Sometimes it is called “strong stress” or “accentual” verse, highlighting the importance of the stressed syllables carrying beats; but these terms miss the particularity of the verse-form we’re considering here, as they apply equally to various types of alliterative verse that lack its distinctive rhythm. In order to signify that distinctiveness it is useful to have a term that doesn’t imply the form is simply a variety (perhaps a crude variety) of an established meter. Marina Tarlinskaja adopts the Russian term for a similar type of verse, “*dol’nik*,” which, slightly anglicized as *dolnik*, is a serviceable alternative.⁸

To insist on the distinctiveness of the dolnik rhythm is not to claim that it has clearly defined boundaries as a form: **there are intermediate poems that are neither wholly in strict accentual-syllabic meter nor wholly in dolnik meter.**⁹ For instance, such poems may introduce into the alternations of syllabically regular verse an occasional variation in the number of syllables between beats (such as so-called “trissyllabic substitutions” in iambic verse), or begin otherwise strict lines with a variety of openings. Other poems have a typical dolnik distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables but use run-on lines to counter the strong shaping imparted by its hierarchical rhythm (Wyatt’s “last/Labor” is an example). But **dolnik verse proper has a number of definite properties: it is always in four-beat measures (including the possibility of the fourth beat’s being virtual), is always rhymed, and always varies in the number of inter-beat unstressed syllables. And, importantly, the variations in those syllables always produces a strong rhythm. By contrast, five-beat verse with the same variations is perceived not as more strongly rhythmic than strict iambic pentameter but less.**

At first blush, dolnik meter seems easy to define, then: four stressed syllables with any arrangement of one, two, or no unstressed syllables before, between, and after them. (As occasional variations, a stressed syllable may be allowed between beats, though in performance it will lose some of its normal emphasis; and the number of syllables between beats may be increased to three.) The following poem, Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Inversnaid,” illustrates these rules; it also demonstrates the poetic power of which dolnik verse is capable. (I indicate beats and between them the number of—usually unstressed—syllables.)

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This darksome burn, horseback brown,

1 B 1 B 0 B 1 B

His rollrock highroad roaring down,

1 B 1 B 1 B 1 B

In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam

1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B

Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

4

B 1 B 2 B 1 B

A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth

1 B 1 B 2 B 0 B

Turns and twindles over the broth

B 1 B 1 B 2 B

Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówning,

2 B 1 B 1 B 0 B 1

It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

8

1 B 1 B 1 B 1 B 1

Degged with dew, dappled with dew

B 1 B 0 B 2 B

Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,

2 B 2 B 2 B 1 B

Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,

B 1 B 1 B 2 B

And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

12

2 B 2 B 2 B 2 B

What would the world be, once bereft

B 2 B 1 B 1 B

Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,

1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B

O let them be left, wildness and wet;

1 B 2 B 0 B 2 B

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

16

B 2 B 2 B 2 B

(p.160) The whole poem displays the classic four-beat structure: lines of 2 + 2 beats (oft en divided by a pause, sometimes by an offbeat realized by a **(p.161)** pause); stanzas of 2 + 2 lines (signaled by rhyme); and the whole made up of 2 + 2 stanzas, signaled by a shift in rhythm. (Hopkins increases the number of double offbeats in the second pair of stanzas—from 3 and 3 to 9 and 8.) Yet the rhythmic variety achieved within this four-square structure is remarkable. Hopkins uses fourteen different rhythmic patterns: line 11 repeats the pattern of line 6 and line 14 repeats the pattern of line 3; otherwise each line is a unique arrangement. The dolnik variations make for both a firm, easily felt, rhythmic base and great expressive flexibility. To take one example: there are three lines that have no double offbeats and thus no triple lift to lighten the movement—the opening pair, with their somber, fierce description, and the darkest line of the poem, “It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.” By contrast, the sprightliest rhythmic movement, achieved by means of four double offbeats, is given to the cheerful line “And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.” Although literary dolnik verse (under any name) is oft en associated with light verse, and its conspicuous rhythms do unquestionably render it appropriate for humor, Hopkins shows that its potential is much wider than this association would suggest. Among the many poets who have deployed dolnik for serious purposes are Coleridge (most famously in “Christabel”), Scott, Shelley, the Brownings, Tennyson, Dickinson, Swinburne, Hardy, de la Mare, and Frost.¹⁰

3

Two lines of Hopkins’ “Inversnaid” disrupt the easy swing of the dolnik: lines 5 and 7 end with compounds that produce successive stressed syllables, “fáwn-fróth” and “féll-frówning.” Both, of course, are Hopkins’ coinages, and it’s noteworthy that both are accorded diacritics indicating two strong accents, the only occurrence in the poem of the symbols the poet liked to add to his lines. Hopkins was clearly aware that to sustain the dolnik rhythm he needed two beats at this point, and that in normal pronunciation one of the stresses in a compound would be weakened. We have to read these compounds as if they were separate words, then; this mode of pronunciation introduces a slight pause between the stresses and allows them both to be experienced as beats. It’s not obvious why the image of airy lightness in line 5 should be expressed in rhythms that disturb the easy flow of the dolnik, but it’s certainly appropriate that in the dour lead-up to that line about “Despair” the rhythm should falter.

This is not the end of the story, however. Even with Hopkins’ diacritics urging us to override normal pronunciation in favor of verse rhythm, the placement at the end of the line of two beats without a syllable between **(p.162)** them detracts from the smoothness of the dolnik rhythm. It seems that our initial definition of the form will not do: there are restrictions on the disposition of stressed and unstressed syllables, restrictions that are hard to identify because composers of dolnik verse—most of whom never put their names to their compositions—were not conscious of them as rules; they simply avoided arrangements that didn’t work, choosing instead those that enhance the dolnik rhythm.

For example, Hopkins’ other lines with a zero offbeat—1, 9, and 15— place it in the middle of the line at a syntactic break: the result is strongly rhythmic, balancing the line across the gap:

O let them be left, wildness and wet;
1 B 2 B O B 2 B

A rewritten version of the line with the gap filled is still rhythmic, but without the lift that the zero offbeat provides:

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O let them be left, the wildness and wet;

1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B

However, if we keep the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables unchanged but do away with the medial pause, the result is distinctly uncomfortable:

O let them be kept wild and untamed;

1 B 2 B O B 2 B

Another example of a variation that gives the dolnik rhythm a distinctive flavor is the use of a stressed monosyllable between two stresses. There are two instances in Hopkins' poem:

Flutes and low to the **lake falls home**
Are the groins of the braes that the **brook treads through**

It's not by chance that this rhythmic figure occurs in both instances at the end of the line; this is the position dolnik poets have always favored, providing the line with a climactic triple emphasis. Although the monosyllable in the middle loses some of its weight in a strongly rhythmic performance, it still slows the line down at its end. Compare a rewritten line:

Are the groins of the braes that the **streamlet spans**

Here there is no emphatic close to the line. This figure can occur anywhere in the line, but it provides less reinforcement of the rhythm elsewhere:

The **brook treads gently** the groins of the braes
The brook in the **deep groins treads** its way

(p.163) A full analysis of the handling of rhythm in dolnik verse has never been undertaken, and would require an extended treatise to do justice to the complexity of the form; in the remainder of this essay I can do no more than make some initial suggestions.¹¹ Nursery rhymes furnish some of the best examples of highly rhythmic verse that exploits to the full the variety possible in the dolnik form, and they present a useful starting point for any such analysis.

Since one of the main characteristics of dolnik verse is the variation between types of offb eat, and in particular between single and double offb eats, it may seem that it is a form that does not distinguish, as accentual-syllabic verse does, between a duple and a triple rhythm—or that it constantly shifts between the two. This is not the case, however; there are two fundamental types of dolnik, depending on whether the underlying rhythm is duple or triple, and the way a dolnik poem is voiced will depend on which of these the reader adopts. It is almost always an unconscious choice, since the distinction I am describing is not one that readers are generally aware of; it operates at a deep psycho-physical level. Many poems allow of being read in either way, but the choice is a perceptual one akin to that between duck and rabbit in the famous drawing: the reader has to opt for one of the two types of rhythm. Which is most suited to the words being read usually emerges very early in the poem, though occasionally in reading a new poem it becomes necessary to adjust one's performance. Poems rarely shift from one type of rhythm to the other, or, to be more accurate, readers, having settled into one mode of reading seldom change it during the course of the poem. Musical settings of dolnik verse have to make the same choice between a duple and a triple meter.

To give full weight to the rhythm in true dolnik verse, then, is to find oneself adopting either a **one-two-one-two** sequence or a **one-two-three-one-two-three** sequence. Take the following example:

Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John
Went to bed with his trousers on.

Like all dolnik verse, this is based on groups of four beats, but its specificity lies in what happens between (and before and after) those beats. If the lines are read rapidly and with a strong rhythm, everything between the beats is unstressed:

Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John¹²
B 3 B 1 B 1 B
Went to bed with his trousers on.
B 1 B 2 B 1 B

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(p.164) But if we slow down our reading and pay more attention to those inter beat syllables, a subsidiary rhythm emerges:

Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John
B b B b B b B [b]
Went to bed with his trousers on.
B b B b B b B [b]

This is **dipodic verse**, so called because every pair of “feet” constitutes a rhythmic unit in itself. What the more detailed analysis shows is that the rhythm of these two lines is fundamentally duple, its sixteen beats arranged in alternations of stronger and weaker beats: everything occurs in twos. One large part of the body of dolnik verse follows this pattern, including such nursery rhymes as “Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,” “Baa, baa, black sheep,” “Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” and “Pease porridge hot” and such poems as “Nou goth sonne under wode,” Shelley’s “The Cloud,” and Hardy’s “Neutral Tones.” A. A. Milne made brilliant use of duple dolniks in poems like “Disobedience” and “Happiness.”

Many other nursery rhymes observe a fundamentally triple rhythm. The following example asks to be read with a **one-two-three-one-two-three** movement:

Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
B 2 B 2 B 2 B 1
The cow jumped over the moon.
1 B 1 B 2 B [B]

Unlike duple dolnik verse, this verse can’t be further analyzed into weaker beat-offbeat patterns. If one imagines these lines set to a simple melody, the triple rhythm emerges clearly. Another large part of the body of nursery rhyme verse falls into this rhythmic norm, including such favorites as “Three Blind Mice,” “Little Bo-Peep,” and “Humpty Dumpty.” Triple dolnik in literary verse is rarer, just as triple accentual-syllabic meter is rarer. We’ll turn to an example in due course.

Although it's obvious that triple dolnik tends to have a larger proportion of double offbeats than duple dolnik, it should be noted that *both* forms can use single, double, and occasionally triple or zero offbeats. When a double offbeat occurs in duple dolnik, one of the two syllables takes a subsidiary beat, as in the case of "with" in the earlier example:

Went to bed with his trousers on.
 B b B b B b B [b]

(p.165) The two words "with his" occupy the same temporal space as the other beats in the line, both strong and weak. (Of course, in talking about these exact timings one is talking about a rigidly rhythmical performance, as one might chant to a child; in literary verse, the reader or reciter is likely to be more flexible—though in a good reading this underlying rhythm will always be felt.) We can show this temporal arrangement by means of symbols under the beats: each square represents the same amount of time, the black squares indicating beats. When double offbeats occur in duple dolnik, the white square indicates the beginning of the inter-beat temporal unit, as is the case with "with his" in the following line:

Went to bed with his trousers on.
 B b B b B b B [b]
 ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □

We can think of this as *rhythmic* scansion, complementing the *metrical* scansion of beats and offbeats. To bring out the rhythm in performance, it helps to tap regularly on the temporal units, giving the black squares more emphasis than the white.

A slightly rewritten line shifts the placing of the second weaker beat, which now occurs on the *second* syllable of the double offbeat, but doesn't alter the rhythm:

Went to market with trousers on.
 B b B b B b B [b]
 ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □

Now it is "market" that fills the temporal space of a beat, as does "with" on its own.

Triple dolnik, conversely, can cope happily with a single offbeat; again, the rhythmic scansion shows how this happens:

The cow jumped over the moon.
 1 B 1 B 2 B [B]
 □ ■□ □ ■□ □ ■ □□ ■

Here "cow" takes as long to pronounce as the disyllable "over"; the extra length—two temporal units—is indicated by ■□, allowing "jumped" to be destressed and given the same time as "-er" or "the." (It's a feature of spoken English that the stress-rhythm can override syllabic distinctions: we have no difficulty in reducing "jumped" to the length and weight of those apparently much shorter syllables.)¹³

As an example of a rhyme that doesn't reveal immediately which of these two rhythmic types it belongs to we may take the following:

(p.166) Doctor Foster went to Gloucester
 In a shower of rain.

He stepped in a puddle right up to his middle
And never went there again.

The first line invites a firm duple reading, and the second line can be made to fit, especially if “shower” is treated as a monosyllable:

```
Doctor Foster went to Gloucester
B 1 B 1 B 1 B 1
■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □

In a shower of rain.
B 1 B 1 B [B]
■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
```

But the following lines are unmistakably triple (it becomes clear that the rhyme is, in fact, shaped as a limerick, a verse-form that is regularly triple):

```
He stepped in a puddle right up to his middle
1 B 2 B 2 B 2 B 1
□ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □

And never went there again.
1 B 2 B 1 B [B]
□ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■
```

And if we go back to the first two lines and read them with the same triple rhythm, they acquire a spring lacking in the rather mechanical **one-two-one-two** of the duple reading:

```
Doctor Foster went to Gloucester
B 1 B 1 B 1 B 1
■□ □ ■□ □ ■□ □ ■□ □

In a shower of rain.
B 1 B 1 B [B]
■□ □ ■□ □ ■ □ □ ■
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Note that this manner of reading extends many of the stressed syllables to double their length; “Doctor Foster” changes from a four-square pronunciation with unstressed syllables taking as long as stressed syllables to one that gives stresses appropriately extra emphasis. Note, too, that scansion without any indication of temporal relations has no way of representing these different rhythms. (Foot-scansion, of course, would merely record a **(p.167)** the rhythms of the english dolnik/167 succession of trochees for two lines followed by an indeterminable series of feet that could be dactyls, amphibrachs or anapests; it would not capture the rhythm of the lines at all.) Interestingly, YouTube offers musical settings of this rhyme in both two-four time and three-quarter time; to my ear, the latter is more engaging.¹⁴

One major difference between accentual-syllabic verse and dolnik verse is the handling of metrical variations. We noted in Wyatt’s “Awake, my lute” instances of promotion and demotion; these departures from the strict alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables do not require vocal adjustment. As long as the three syllables of “As to be” are given the same weight in pronunciation they will function rhythmically as offb eat-beat-offb eat. Equally, “No, no” can be read as two syllables with the same emphasis and still feel metrical (though a perfectly plausible

reading would be to give the second more weight). In dolnik verse, promotion and demotion are rare: the strong rhythm encourages the voice to reduce the emphasis on stressed syllables occurring in offbeat positions and to increase the emphasis on unstressed syllables occurring in beat positions. The former is a more common occurrence than the latter, especially in triple dolnik verse; in the verse we have looked at the word “son” in “my son John” loses some of its weight when we read with a pronounced rhythm. Similarly, as we have seen, the word “jumped” in “cow jumped over” is likely to be destressed. These are not, therefore, instances of demotion, strictly speaking. An example of a normally unstressed syllable that takes a beat and is therefore likely to be given additional weight is the first syllable in “In a shower of rain”; again, this is different from promotion as it occurs in accentual-syllabic verse. In “my son John,” there is no question of treating “my” as anything but a strongly stressed syllable, though the meaning doesn’t require it. Inversion, as in Wyatt’s “thorough loves shot” (rising inversion) and “lie withered and” (falling inversion) is even rarer in dolnik verse, occurring only if the meter temporarily shifts into something more like accentual-syllabic verse.

4

Let us return now to Hopkins’ “Inversnaid.” The rhythm of the opening settles quickly into a duple rhythm:

This darksome burn, horseback brown,

1 B 1 B 0 B 1 B
 □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■

His rollrock highroad roaring down,

1 B 1 B 1 B 1 B
 □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■

In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam

1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B
 □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■

Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

B 1 B 2 B 1 B
 ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■

(p.168) What this means is that the few double offbeats—“and in,” “of his,” and “to the”—can be read quickly and lightly, as befits their relative lack of importance. As we’ve noted, however, the third and fourth stanzas have an increased number of double offbeats. This raises a question: should we adjust our reading of these two stanzas to introduce a triple rhythm into the poem? Such a reading would be scanned as follows:

The Rhythms of the English Dolnik

What would the world be, once bereft
B 2 B 1 B 1 B
■ □ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■

Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B
□ ■ □ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

O let them be left, wildness and wet;
1 B 2 B 0 B 2 B
□ ■ □ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
B 2 B 2 B 2 B
■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

This reading is certainly possible, but to my mind such a shift would introduce a lilting quality out of keeping with more serious tone of these lines. A duple reading gives the stressed syllables greater weight:

What would the world be, once bereft
B 2 B 1 B 1 B
■ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

O let them be left, wildness and wet;
1 B 2 B 0 B 2 B
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
B 2 B 2 B 2 B
■ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

(p.169) Hopkins's plangent prayer for the unkempt portions of the natural world is all the stronger for its musicality: only two of the sixteen syllables taking beats do not begin with/w/or/l/ ("once," of course, begins with the former phoneme), the middle two lines form a pleasing chiasmus, and the expansion of "wildness" to "wilderness" functions wonderfully to bring the poem to a satisfying close. The duple dolnik rhythm is part of this music: it combines strong rhythmicity with a lightness of movement that turns the poem, at its end, into something like an incantation.

Does an understanding of dolnik rhythm help us to approach the meter of that most discussed of all dolnik poems, Tennyson's "Break, break, break"? It's another example of a poem that can be

read either as duple or as triple dolnik, with different results. I show both possibilities under the opening lines:

Break, break, break,

B 0 B 0 B [B]
■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

2 B 1 B 1 B [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ □ ■□ □ ■□ □ ■ □ □ ■

And I would that my tongue could utter

2 B 2 B 1 B 1 [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ □ ■ □ □ ■□ □ ■ □ □ ■

The thoughts that arise in me.

1 B 2 B 1 B [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ ■ □ □ ■□ □ ■ □ □ ■

O, well for the fisherman's boy,

1 B 2 B 2 B [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

That he shouts with his sister at play!

2 B 2 B 2 B [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

O, well for the sailor lad,

1 B 2 B 1 B [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ ■ □ □ ■□ □ ■ □ □ ■

That he sings in his boat on the bay!

2 B 2 B 2 B [B]
□ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■
□ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

(p.170) The opening three words give nothing away, and a reciter doesn't have to decide between duple and triple. But the second line immediately presents alternatives: are we going to give "On" and "thy" the same length as "cold," and prolong "cold" and "stones" to double the length of "gray" in order to sustain a triple rhythm? Or does the line go better in a duple rhythm, moving more quickly of "On thy" and giving "cold," "gray," and "stones" equal durations? My preference is for the latter, and even when the poem becomes more fully triple as far as metrical analysis is concerned—that is, in terms of beats and offbeats—a duple dolnik rhythm sustains the emphasis on the three stressed syllables of each line while moving rapidly over the unstressed syllables. This is how Sir John Gielgud reads it, in a highly moving performance;¹⁵ and the choral setting by Stuart Vezey also treats it as duple to good effect.¹⁶

We may end with a dolnik poem that, in contrast, encourages a triple reading. Here are the first two stanzas of Blake's "Nurse's Song" from *Songs of Experience*, with metrical and rhythmic scansion:

When the voices of children are heard on the green

2 B 2 B 2 B 2 B
 □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

And laughing is heard on the hill,

1 B 2 B 2 B [B]
 □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

My heart is at rest within my breast

1 B 2 B 1 B 1 B
 □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

And everything else is still.

1 B 2 B 1 B [B]
 □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

“Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down

1 B 2 B 2 B 2 B
 □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

And the dews of night arise;

2 B 1 B 1 B [B]
 □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ ■ □ □ ■

Come, come, leave off play, and let us away

1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B
 □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

Till the morning appears in the skies.”

2 B 2 B 2 B [B]
 □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■ □ □ ■

(p.171) Though it would be possible to read these lines with a duple rhythm, the result would do Blake’s poetry much less justice. Take this line, for example, shown here in a duple reading:

Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
 1 B 2 B 1 B 2 B
 □ ■ □ ■ □ ■ □ ■

In a triple reading each of the words in “leave off” have the same length as the syllables taking beats, so that “come, leave off play” is felt as **one-two-three-one**; but in a duple reading the whole phrase “leave off” is only a single temporal unit and feels rushed. Moreover, in a triple reading “play” is extended, and thus highlighted, but not in a duple one. The same lengthening occurs, very appropriately, in a triple rhythm reading of “rest,” “dews,” and “night.” Blake no doubt held in his head a large stock of popular verse in dolnik meters in both types of rhythm,

and drew on this stock without having to reflect consciously on which type was more appropriate to the poem he was writing.

To ascertain exactly what properties of poems propel readers toward duple or toward triple underlying rhythms would require an extensive survey of both popular and literary verse. Nor is it obvious that readers **(p.172)** would always agree on which of the two was preferable in particular cases. But if the study of prosody is to advance, the distinctive characteristics of dolnik verse need to be taken fully into account, as a rhythmic form that has endured for eight or more centuries and shows no sign of falling into disuse.

Notes:

(1.) George T. Wright, "Wyatt's Decasyllabic Line," *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985): 129-56.

(2.) The collection of poems known as *Tottel's Miscellany*, first printed and perhaps edited by Richard Tottel in 1557, included several works by Wyatt that had been altered to make them conform to standard iambic pentameter.

(3.) Wright, "Wyatt's Decasyllabic Line," 131. As one indicator of Wyatt's willingness to diverge from the decasyllabic model, Martin Duffell, analysing Wyatt's 22 sonnets, finds that 40 percent have more or fewer syllables than ten. *A New History of Metre* (London: Legenda, 2008), 120.

(4.) Here and throughout I use the terminology developed in Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), and *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

(5.) See Andy Arleo, "Counting-out and the Search for Universals," *The Journal of American Folklore* 110 (1997): 391-407; Robbins Burling, "The Metrics of Children's Verse: A Cross-linguistic Study," *American Anthropologist* 68 (1966): 1418-41; Andreas Duft er and Patrizia Nel Aziz Hanna, "Natural versification in French and German Counting-out Rhymes," in *Towards a Typology of Poetic Forms: From Language to Metrics and Beyond*, ed. Jean-Louis Aroui and Andy Arleo (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), 101-21; Attridge, *Rhythms*, 81-84 and *Poetic Rhythm*, 53-57.

(6.) Though I find it unavoidable in referring to particular poems, I would prefer not to speak of "lines" in discussing popular four-beat verse since this verse-form is more a matter of sequences of beats occurring in a rhythmic hierarchy than separable entities that might be shown visually as such on a page. Poulter's measure and its near relation, the fourteener, are conventionally lineated so as to combine two short "lines" into one long one.

(7.) An example of the kind of multi-syllabled nonsense that arises when rhythmically straightforward verse of this type is treated as if it were a complex construction created out of classical feet is Timothy Steele's assertion that a short, playful poem of Keats' in this form is made up of "two catalectic trochaic tetrameters, two acatalectic trochaic tetrameters, and two iambic tetrameters" (<http://learn.lexiconic.net/meter.html>).

(8.) Marina Tarlinskaja, *Strict Stress-Meter in English Poetry Compared with German and Russian* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993), and "Beyond 'Loose Iamb': The Form and Themes of the English 'Dolnik,'" *Poetics Today* 16 (1995): 493-522. I acknowledge that the term sounds foreign to ears accustomed to the traditional terminology of English prosody, but I

believe it's important to be able to designate this verse-form by means of a label with no implication that it is merely a variant of accentual-syllabic or strong-stress meter.

(9.) The distinction between "rhythm" and "meter" is notoriously uncertain, and the subject of much dispute. My use of "meter" is meant to indicate an arrangement of language according to set rules, while "rhythm" refers to an experience registered by the performer both mentally and physically. The standard meters of English establish, for the reader or speaker, regular rhythms; some more *recherché* meters, such as syllabics, do not. All utterances have a rhythm, however, and there are tendencies towards regularity even in ordinary speech. To speak of "dolnik meter" or "iambic meter," therefore, is to emphasize the operation of rules; to speak of "dolnik rhythm" or "iambic rhythm" is to emphasize the experiential dimension of the verse. "Dolnik verse" or "iambic verse" is poetry written according to the rules of a meter and experienced as having the rhythm produced by those rules.

(10.) For a discussion of the dolnik as a major presence throughout the history of medieval and modern English verse, see Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 7.

(11.) There are, broadly speaking, two ways of approaching this question: one is to accumulate a large amount of data in order to identify the most common patterns in dolnik verse, the other is to test existing texts against rewritten versions to determine the effect on the rhythm of various possibilities. Both approaches have their weaknesses: the former fails to engage with the non-occurring patterns and thus is unable to determine which are most detrimental to the rhythmic integrity of the verse; the latter depends on a single pair of ears. I hope it goes without saying that in following the latter course, I am offering my own judgments for testing by readers.

(12.) We may note here the characteristic triple stress at the end of the line.

(13.) There is nothing to prevent a rhythmic analysis of this type being undertaken for accentual-syllabic verse, but it doesn't reveal anything that is not shown by metrical analysis: iambic and trochaic verse is in duple rhythm, dactylic and anapestic verse is in triple rhythm.

(14.) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1EKfP7x_JE; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOthsY6Aguo>

(15.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEMZYEvqLUM>

(16.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyCKAIaF-3w>

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