

A.P. ENGLISH LITERATURE & COMPOSITION – MR. ROSE

Sound and Sense



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For Use with the Poetry Unit

Chapter Twelve – Rhythm and Meter

Our love of rhythm and meter is rooted even deeper in us than our love of musical repetition. It is related to the beat of our hearts, the pulse of our blood, the intake and outflow of air from our lungs. Everything that we do naturally and gracefully we do rhythmically. There is rhythm in the way we walk, the way we swim, the way we ride a horse, the way we swing a golf club or a baseball bat. So native is rhythm to us that we read it, when we can, into the mechanical world around us. Our clocks go tick-tick-tick-tick, but we hear them go tick-tock, tick tock in an endless trochaic. The click of the railway wheels beneath us patterns itself into a tune in our heads. Unquestionably, language that is rhythmical holds a strong appeal for us.

The term **rhythm** refers to any wavelike recurrence of motion or sound. In speech it is the natural rise and fall of language. All language is to some degree rhythmical, for all language involves some kind of alternation between accented and unaccented syllables. Language varies considerably, however, in the degree to which it exhibits rhythm. In some forms of speech the rhythm is so unobtrusive or so unpatterned that we are scarcely, if at all, aware of it. In other forms of speech the rhythm is so pronounced that we may be tempted to tap our foot to it.

Meter is the kind of rhythm we can tap our foot to. In metrical language the accents are arranged to occur at apparently equal intervals of time, and it is this interval we mark off with the tap of our foot. Metrical language is called **verse**. Nonmetrical language is **prose**. Not all poetry is metrical, nor is all metrical language poetry. *Verse* and *poetry* are not synonymous terms, nor is a *versifier* necessarily a *poet*.

The study of meter is a fascinating but highly complex subject. It is by no means an absolute prerequisite to an enjoyment, even a rich enjoyment, of poetry. But a knowledge of its fundamentals does have certain values. It can make the beginning reader more aware of the rhythmical effects of poetry and of how poetry should be read. It can enable the more advanced reader to analyze how certain effects are achieved, to see how rhythm is adapted to thought, and to explain what makes one poem (in this respect) better than another. The beginning student ought to have at least an elementary knowledge of the subject. It is not so difficult as its terminology might suggest.

In every word of more than one syllable, one syllable is accented or stressed, that is, given more prominence in pronunciation than the rest. We say inter, enter, intervene, enterprise, interpret. These accents are indicated in the dictionary, and only rarely are words in good poems accented differently: only cannot be pronounced only. If words of even tone syllable are arranged into a sentence, we give certain words or syllables more prominence than the rest. We say: "He went to the store" or "Ann is driving her car." There is nothing mysterious about this; it is the normal process of language. The only difference between prose and verse

is that in prose these accents occur more or less haphazardly; in verse the poet has arranged them to occur at regular intervals.

The word *meter* comes from a word meaning “measure.” To measure something we must have a unit of measurement. For measuring length we use the inch, the foot, and the yard; for measuring time we use the second, the minute, and the hour. For measuring verse we use the foot, the line, and (sometimes) the stanza.

The basic metrical unit, the **foot**, consists normally of one accented syllable plus one or two unaccented syllables, though occasionally there may be no unaccented syllables, and very rarely there may be three. For diagramming verse, various systems of visual symbols have been invented. In this book we shall use a short curved line to indicate an unaccented syllable and a short horizontal line to indicate an accented syllable. We generally do not attempt through longer or shorter horizontal lines to distinguish between heavier or lighter accents. A vertical bar will indicate the division between feet. The basic kinds of feet are shown in the first table below.

Examples	Name of foot	Name of meters
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{in}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{the}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{sun}}$	lamb	lambic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{en}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{went}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{to}}$	Trochee	Trochaic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{in}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{vene}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{in}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{a}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{hut}}$	Anapest	Anapestic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{en}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{prise}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{col}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{or}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{of}}$	Dactyl	Dactylic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{True}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{blue}}$	Spondee	Spondaic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{truth}}$	Monosyllabic foot	

The secondary unit of measurement, the **line**, is measured by naming the number of feet in it. The following names are used:

Monometer	one foot	Pentameter	five feet
Dimeter	two feet	Hexameter	six feet
Trimeter	three feet	Heptameter	seven feet
Tetrameter	four feet	Octameter	eight feet

The third unit, the **stanza**, consists of a group of lines whose metrical pattern is repeated throughout the poem. Since not all verse is written in stanzas, we shall save our discussion of this unit till a later chapter.

The process of measuring verse is referred to as **scansion**. To scan any specimen of verse, we do three things: (1) we identify the prevailing foot, (2) we name the number of feet in a line—if this length follows any regular pattern, and (3) we describe the stanza pattern — if there is one. We may try out our skill on the following poem.

Virtue

By George Herbert (1593-1633)

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky;
The dew shall weep thy fall to night,
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

The first step in scanning a poem is to read it normally according to its prose meaning, listening to where the accents fall, and perhaps beating time with the hand. If we have any doubt about how a line should be marked, we should skip it temporarily and go on to lines where we feel greater confidence — that is, to those lines which seem most regular, with accents that fall unmistakably at regular intervals. In “Virtue” lines 3, 10, and 14 clearly fall into this category, as do also the short lines 4, 8, and 12. Lines 3, 10, and 14 may be marked as follows:

∨ — ∨ — ∨ — ∨ —	
The dew shall weep thy fall to night	3
∨ — ∨ — ∨ — ∨ —	
A box where sweets com- pact- ed lie;	10
∨ — ∨ — ∨ — ∨ —	
Like sea-soned tim-ber, nev-er gives	14

Lines 4, 8, and 12 are so nearly identical that we may let line 4 represent all three:

∨ — ∨ —	
For thou must die.	4

Surveying what we have done so far, we may with some confidence say that the prevailing metrical foot of the poem is iambic; we also reasonably may hypothesize that the second and third lines of each stanza are tetrameter (four-foot) lines and that the fourth line is diameter. What

about the first line? Line 1 contains eight syllables, and the last six are clearly iambic:

Sweet day, | $\overset{\vee}$ so — cool, | $\overset{\vee}$ so — calm, | $\overset{\vee}$ so — bright.

This too, then, is a tetrameter line, and the only question is whether to mark the first foot as another iamb or as a spondee. Many metrists, emphasizing the priority of pattern, would mark it as an iamb. Clearly, however, the word “Sweet” is more important and receives more emphasis in a sensitive reading than the three “so’s” in the line. Other metrists, therefore, would give it equal emphasis with “day” and mark the first foot as a spondee. Neither marking can be called incorrect. It is a matter of the reader’s personal judgment or of his metrical philosophy. Following my own preference, I mark it as a spondee, and mark the first foot in lines 5 and 9 correspondingly. Similar choices occur at several points in the poem (lines 11, 15, and 16). Many readers will quite legitimately perceive line 16 as parallel to lines 4, 8, and 12. Others, however, may argue that the word “Then”—emphasizing what happens to the virtuous soul when everything else has perished— has an importance that should be reflected in both the reading and the scansion, and they will therefore mark the first foot of this line as a spondee:

— — | $\overset{\vee}$ —
Then chief- ly lives.

These readers also will see the third foot in line 15 as a spondee:

$\overset{\vee}$ — | $\overset{\vee}$ — | — — | $\overset{\vee}$ —
But though the whole world turn to coal.

Lines 2 and 7 introduce a different problem. Most readers, encountering these lines in a paragraph of prose, would read them thus:

$\overset{\vee}$ — $\overset{\vee}$ $\overset{\vee}$ — $\overset{\vee}$ —
The bri- dal of the earth and sky;
 $\overset{\vee}$ — $\overset{\vee}$ $\overset{\vee}$ —
Thy root is ev- er in its grave.

But this reading leaves us with an anomalous situation. First, we have only three accents where our hypothetical pattern calls for four. Second, we have three unaccented syllables occurring together, a situation almost never encountered in verse of duple meter. From this situation we learn an important principle: though normal reading of the sentences in a poem establishes its metrical pattern, the metrical pattern so established in turn influences the reading. A circular process is at work. In this poem the pressure of the pattern will cause most sensitive readers to stress the second of the three unaccented syllables slightly more than those on either side of it. In scansion we recognize this slight increase of stress by

promoting the syllable to the status of an accented syllable. Thus we mark lines 2 and 7 respectively thus:

\checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — |
 The bri- dal of the earth and sky;
 \checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — |
 Thy root is ev- er in its grave.

Line 5 presents a situation about which there can be no dispute. The word “angry,” though it occurs in a position where we would expect an iamb, must be accented on the first syllable, and thus must be marked as a trochee:

— — | \checkmark — | — \checkmark — | \checkmark — |
 Sweet rose, whose hue, an- gry and brave.

There is little question also that the following line begins with a trochee in the first foot, followed by a spondee:

— \checkmark | — — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — |
 Bids the rash gaz- er wipe his eye.

Similarly, the word “Only,” beginning line 13, is accented on the first syllable, thus introducing a trochaic substitution in the first foot of that line. Line 13 also presents another problem. A modern reader perceives the word “virtuous” as a three-syllable word, but the poet (writing in the seventeenth century, when metrical requirements were stricter than they are today) would probably have meant the word to be pronounced as two syllables (*ver-tyus*). Following the tastes of my century, I mark it as three, thus introducing an anapest instead of the expected iamb in the last foot:

— \checkmark | \checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark \checkmark — |
 On- ly a sweet and vir- tu- ous soul.

In doing this, however, I am consciously “modernizing” — altering the intention of the poet for the sake of a contemporary audience.

One problem remains. In the third stanza, lines 9 and 11 differ from the other lines of the poem in two respects: (a) they contain nine rather than eight syllables; (b) they end on unaccented syllables.

— — | — \checkmark | — — | \checkmark — |
 Sweet spring, full of sweet days and ros- es,
 \checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — | \checkmark — |
 My mu- sic shows ye have your clos- es

Such left-over unaccented syllables are not counted in identifying and naming the meter. These lines are both tetrameter, and if we tap our foot while reading them, we shall tap it four times. Metrical verse will often have one and sometimes two left-over unaccented syllables. In iambic and anapestic verse they will come at the end of lines; in trochaic and dactylic verse they will come at the beginning.

Our metrical analysis of “Virtue” is complete. Though (mainly ease of discussion) we have skipped about eccentrically, we have indicated a scansion for all its lines. “Virtue” is written in iambic meter (meaning that most of its feet are iambs) and is composed of four-line stanzas, the first three lines tetrameter, and the final line dimeter. We are now ready to make a few generalizations about scansion.

1. Good readers ordinarily will not stop to scan a poem they are reading, and they certainly will not read a poem with the exaggerated emphasis on accented syllables that we sometimes give them in order to make the scansion more apparent. However, occasional scansion of a poem has value, as will become more apparent in the next chapter, which discusses the relation of sound and meter to sense. We shall give just one example here. The structure of meaning in “Virtue” is unmistakable. It consists of three parallel stanzas concerning things that die, followed by a contrasting fourth stanza concerning the one thing that does not die. The first three stanzas all begin with the word “Sweet” preceding a noun, and the first metrical foot in these stanzas—whether we consider it iamb or spondee—is the same. The contrasting fourth stanza, however, begins with a trochee, thus departing from both the previous pattern and from the basic meter of the poem. This departure is significant, for the word “Only” is the hinge upon which the structure of the poem turns, and the metrical reversal gives it emphasis. Thus meter serves meaning.

2. Scansion is at best a gross way of describing the rhythmical quality of a poem. It depends on classifying all syllables into either accented or unaccented categories and on ignoring the sometimes considerable difference between degrees of accent. Whether we call a syllable accented or unaccented depends, moreover, on its degree of accent relative to the syllables on either side of it. In lines 2 and 7 of “Virtue,” the accents on “of” and “in” are obviously much lighter than on the other accented syllables in the line. Unaccented syllables also vary in weight. In line 5 “whose” is clearly heavier than “-gry” and “and,” and is arguably heavier even than the accented “of” and “in” of lines 2 and 7. The most ardent champion of spondees, moreover, would concede that the accentual weight is not really equivalent in “Sweet rose”: the noun shoulders more of the burden. Scansion is thus incapable of dealing with the subtlest rhythmical effects in poetry. It is nevertheless a useful and serviceable tool. Any measurement device more refined or sensitive would be too complicated to be widely serviceable.

3. Scansion is not an altogether exact science. Within certain limits we may say that a certain scansion is right or wrong, but beyond these limits qualified readers might legitimately disagree. Line 11 of “Virtue” provides the best example. Many metrists— those wanting scansion to reflect as closely as possible the underlying pattern — would mark it as perfectly regular: a succession of four iambs. Others — those wishing the scansion to reveal more nearly the nuances of a sensitive reading — would find that

three sensitive readers might read this line in three different ways. One might stress “ye”; a second, “your”; and a third, both.

4. Finally—and this is the most important generalization of all perfect regularity of meter is no criterion of merit. Beginning students sometimes get the notion that it is. If the meter is smooth and perfectly regular, they feel that the poet has handled the meter successfully and deserves all credit for it. Actually, a moderately talented versifier can easily make language go ta-dam ta-dam ta-dam. But there are two reasons why this is not generally desirable. The first is that, as we have said, all art consists essentially of repetition and variation. If a meter alternates too regularly between light and heavy beats, the result is to banish variation; the meter becomes mechanical and, for any sensitive reader, monotonous. The second is that, once a basic meter has been established, any deviations from it become highly significant and provide a means by which the poet can use meter to reinforce meaning. If a meter is too perfectly regular, the probability is that the poet, instead of adapting rhythm to meaning, has simply forced the meaning into a metric straitjacket.

Actually, what gives the skillful use of meter its greatest effectiveness is that it consists, not of one rhythm, but of two. One of these is the expected rhythm. The other is the heard rhythm. Once we have determined the basic meter of a poem, say, iambic tetrameter, we expect that this rhythm will continue. Thus a silent drumbeat is set up in our minds, and this drumbeat constitutes the expected rhythm. But the actual rhythm of the words — the heard rhythm — will sometimes confirm this expected rhythm and sometimes not. Thus the two rhythms are counterpointed, and the appeal of the verse is magnified, just as when two melodies are counterpointed in music, or as when two swallows, flying together and following the same general course but with individual variations, make a much more eye-catching pattern than one swallow flying alone. If the heard rhythm conforms too closely to the expected rhythm, the meter becomes dull and uninteresting. If it departs too far from the expected rhythm, there ceases to be an expected rhythm. If the irregularity is too great, meter disappears and the result is prose rhythm or free verse (see page 186).

There are several ways in which the poet can introduce variation into the meter. The most obvious way is by the substitution of other kinds of feet for regular feet. In our scansion of line 9 of “Virtue,” for instance, we found a spondee, a trochee, and another spondee substituted for the expected iambs in the first three feet (plus an unexpected unaccented syllable left over at the end of the line). A less obvious but equally important means of variation is through simple phrasing and variation of degrees of accent. Though we began our scansion of “Virtue” by marking lines 3, 10, and 14 as perfectly regular, there is actually a considerable difference among them. Line 3 is quite regular, for the phrasing corresponds with the metrical pattern, and the line can be read ta-dum ta-dum

ta-dum ta-dum. Line 10 is less regular, for the three-syllable word “compacted” cuts across the division between two feet. We should read it ta-dum ta-dum ta-dump-ty dum. Line 14 is the least regular of the three, for it shows no correspondence between phrasing and metrical division. We should read this line ta-dump-ty dump-ty, dump-ty dum. Finally, variation can be introduced by grammatical and rhetorical pauses. The comma in line 14, by introducing a grammatical pause, provides an additional variation from its perfect regularity. Probably the most violently irregular line in the poem is line 5,

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,

for here the spondaic substitution in the first foot, and the unusual trochaic substitution in the middle of a line in the third foot, are set off and emphasized by grammatical pauses, and also (as we have noted) the unaccented “whose” is considerably heavier than the other two unaccented syllables in the line. Significantly, the violent irregularity of this line (only slightly diminished in the next) corresponds with, and reinforces, the most violent image in the poem. Again, meter serves meaning.

The uses of rhythm and meter are several. Like the musical repetitions of sound, the musical repetitions of accent can be pleasing for their own sake. In addition, rhythm works as an emotional stimulus and serves, when used well, to heighten our attention to and awareness of what is going on in a poem. Finally, by choice of meter, and by skillful use of variation within the metrical framework, the poet can adapt the sound of verse to its content and thus make meter a powerful reinforcement of meaning. Nevertheless, we should avoid the notion that there is any mystical correspondence between certain meters and certain emotions. There are no “happy” meters and no “melancholy” ones. The choice of meter is probably less important for poets than how they handle it after they have chosen it. However, some meters are swifter than others, some slower; some are more lilting than others, some more dignified. Poets can choose meters that are appropriate or inappropriate to the content of the poem, and by their handling of them can increase or decrease the appropriateness. A swift, lilting meter used for a serious and grave subject will probably keep the reader from feeling any really deep emotion, while a more dignified meter will intensify the emotion. In all great poetry, meter works intimately with the other elements of the poem to produce the appropriate total effect.

We must not forget, of course, that poetry need not be metrical at all. Like alliteration and rime, like metaphor and irony, like even imagery, meter is simply one resource poets may use. Their job is to employ resources to the best advantage for the object they have in mind—the kind of experience they wish to express. And on no other basis can we judge them.

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE

Of the four standard meters, iambic is by far the most common. Perhaps eighty percent of metered poetry in English is iambic. Anapestic meter (examples: “The Chimney Sweeper,” and “In the Garden;”) is next most common. Trochaic meter (example: “Counting-Out Rhyme,”) is relatively infrequent. Dactylic meter is so rare as to be almost a museum specimen (“Bedtime Story,” in stanzas of three tetrameter lines followed by a dimeter line, is the sole example in this book).

Because of the predominance of iambic and anapestic meters in English verse, and because most anapestic poems have a high percentage of iambic substitutions, Robert Frost has written that in our language there are virtually but two meters: “Strict iambic and loose iambic.” This is, of course, an overstatement; but, like many overstatements, it contains a good deal of truth. “Strict iambic” is strictly duple meter: it admits no trisyllabic substitutions. Trochees, spondees, and occasionally, monosyllabic feet may be substituted for the expected iambs, but not anapests or dactyls. The presence of a triple foot has such a conspicuous effect in speeding up or loosening up a line that the introduction of a few of them quite alters the nature of the meter. Herbert’s “Virtue” is written “strict iambic” (most of its feet are iambic; and, with the dubious exception of “virtuous,” it contains no trisyllabic feet). “In the Garden” and “The Chimney Sweeper” (after its difficult first stanza) are anapestic (most of their feet are anapests). But e. e. cummings’s “if everthing happens that can’t be done,” though by actual count it has more iambic feet than anapestic, sounds more like “The Chimney Sweeper” than it does like “Virtue.” It would be impossible to define what percentage of anapestic feet a poem must have before it ceases seeming iambic and begins seeming anapestic, but it would be considerably less than fifty percent and might be more like twenty-five percent. At any rate, a large number of poems fall into an area between “strict iambic” and “prevailingly anapestic,” and they might be fittingly described as iambic-anapestic (what Frost called “loose iambic”).

Finally, the importance of the final paragraph preceding this note must be underscored: poetry need not be metrical at all. Following the prodigious example of Walt Whitman in the nineteenth century, more and more twentieth-century poets have turned to the writing of free verse. Free verse, by our definition, is not verse at all; that is, it is not metrical. It may be rimed or unrimed but is more often the latter. The only difference between free verse and rhythmical prose is that free verse introduces one additional rhythmical unit, the line. The arrangement into lines divides the material into rhythmical units, or cadences. Beyond its line arrangement there are no necessary differences between it and rhythmical prose. Probably more than fifty percent of published contemporary poetry is written in **free verse**.

To add one further variation, a number of contemporary poets have begun writing “prose poems,” or poems in prose (example: Carolyn Forché’s “The Colonel,” No. 226). It is too early to determine whether this is a passing fashion or will be a lasting development.