

*Meter, Rhythm and Rhyme*

There are a bewildering number of guides to reading and writing poetry.<sup>1</sup> Nor is this a new situation. In ‘The Preface’ to the folio manuscript of her works, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, wrote:

And I am besides sensible, that Poetry has been of late so explain’d, the laws of itt being putt into familiar languages, that even those of my sex, (if they will be so presumptuous as to write) are very accountable for their transgressions against them. For what rule of Aristotle, or Horace is there, that has not been given us by Rapin, Despreaux, D’acier, my Lord Roscomon, etc.? What has Mr. Dryden omitted, that may lay open the very mysteries of the Art?<sup>2</sup>

In their different ways, contemporary guides ‘putt into familiar language’ an account of poetry’s forms and patterns and possibilities, past and present. Usually offered at a helpful level of generalisation with straightforward examples to illustrate the structures and the points being made about them, they tend to promote a craft-directed, formalist conception of the poetic art – identifying the individual performance with the type of poem it exemplifies. The impulse to write poetry and the desire to become better informed about it are treated in reverse order, learning the forms and expectations of verse being taken as a step in trying to write some, when the impulse to write has likely preceded such knowledge. As Samuel Johnson put it: ‘whatever ridicule may be incurred by a solemn deliberation upon accents and pauses, it is certain that without this petty knowledge no man can be a poet; and that from the proper disposition of single sounds results that harmony that adds force to reason, and gives

<sup>1</sup> For a recent review of such manuals, see Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19–21.

<sup>2</sup> Myra Reynolds (ed.), *The Poems of Anne Countess of Winchilsea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), 9.

grace to sublimity; that shackles attention, and governs passion'.<sup>3</sup> The 'petty knowledge' acquired can also be advantageous to a reader's beneficially enabling experiences of what I have called poetry's sound sense. Robert Frost observed in the remarks quoted in Chapter 1 that 'if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skilfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre'.<sup>4</sup> To be a reader of poetry is to perform, embody, hear and understand expressively meaningful sound sense, for this must be perceptually realised. If not perceivable then it isn't there, and those arguments suggesting that poetry can act subliminally because parts of its actions, the supposedly non-content-bearing parts, can be overlooked or ignored even as they work, may prove, as I suggest in Chapter 5, a disabling of intelligence.

Frost has it that we hear the interplay of irregular accent and regular beat, either when composing or reading a poem. Yet, whether this is perceived because heard, or conceptually realised from the hints of what is perceived, needs clarification: because, as already noted, when listening to a poem all that is heard is a single stream of phonemes. The 'irregularity of accent across the regularity of beat' may not, strictly speaking, be heard in 'And I have promises to keep'.<sup>5</sup> The word 'promises', for instance, has three syllables. This line follows 'The woods are lovely, dark, and deep', which reinforces the alternating weaker and stronger stresses of an iambic tetrameter line. But 'promises' does not rise in its third syllable to the same strength as its first.

What is performed and heard is a lesser stress after the even weaker middle one: there is no full iambic beat to hear in the line's third foot. The contrast between the iambic expectation and the sound of the word 'promises' is not heard in performing the poem, but rather conceptually constructed from the tacit contrast that comes from projecting forward an expectation from previous auditory experience. This conceptual contrast contributes to the experience of the poem, but it is not simultaneously heard and is not like counterpoint in music. Essential to the realisation of sound sense attunement in composing and reading is to hear the degrees of stress and their significance in the actual rhythmic contours of words such

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson, No. 88, Saturday, 19 January 1751, *The Rambler* ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss vol. 2 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 99.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995), 665.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

as 'promises', without which the conceptualisation of the line as a sound-sense complex of heard and unheard elements will not be realised.

Poets in English produce sound sense by hearing and articulating sequences of variously attuned, stress-pitched and timed phrasings. Further, hearing and responding to their rhythms, we do not simultaneously hear their meters as distinct (which may be why the two terms, meter and rhythm, tend so frequently to be confused, or confusingly substituted for each other, in writings on prosody). Rather we remember regularities and irregularities from previous instances in the poem being read, or in other poems already known. Meter in poetry is not, as it were, a bass line existing under the treble of the speaking voice. To illustrate the meter of a poem, if there is one, it will be necessary to exaggerate the stressed syllables, giving them a prominence equally different from the similarly weakened syllables. Doing this, the line's sound sense is thoroughly denatured to make a point.

There is usually, as I say, when reading a poem, only one instrument producing a single stream of naturally sounded human phonemes. This is why poems in regular or regularly varying meters often place guide versions of the metrical scheme in lines that come next to expressively discrepant variations on it. But the regular pattern is not heard simultaneously behind an irregular variation; rather, tension is produced by comparing and contrasting in memory temporally distinct verbal experiences of theme and variation. To hear and experience the rhythm you have to read the poem out loud (or attentively listen to it being read), monitoring while you do what you are hearing and feeling in body-and-mind. Rhythm is experienced as muscular, aural and conceptual.<sup>6</sup>

The *rhythm* of a poem is an experience of the patterned sound it makes when read aloud; any identifiable pattern, regularised in hinted at binary alternations of stress, is its *meter*.<sup>7</sup> As already noted, the meter is an abstract template that can, with varying degrees of plausibility, depending on the complexity of the cases, be identified by analyzing a poem's lines and phrases. In all but the simplest of jingles, the meter and rhythm, template and performance, are by no means the same. This is because there are more

<sup>6</sup> Richard Wollheim draws a distinction between knowing a language and having an artistic style in *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 27. His distinction, if applied to poetry, is complicated by language speakers having prosodic style in their usage informed by knowledge of lullabies, chants and other folk poetry with what he calls 'psycho-motor reality'.

<sup>7</sup> Seymour Chatman takes it as axiomatic 'that meter is a species of rhythm' in *A Theory of Meter* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 12. Though he does not confuse the terms, I prefer them separated for clarity of exposition. For an account of why the terms *meter* and *rhythm* can be contrasted and where the contrast is inherited from, see John Hollander's account of the Greek *metrikoi* and *rhythmikoi* in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 13–14.

than two levels of stress in naturally pronounced English. Even in jingles the distinct characters of the individual syllables will give variety to the simplification of such sounds into the abstractly alternating ‘*ti tum*’ of, in this instance, iambic metrical feet. These feet are similarly abstract interpretations attributed to formed phrasings. Intuiting a meter may be necessary, but is by no means sufficient to hearing the poem. Many poems are written in exactly the same meter or meters, so while their sound sense depends on what the meter contributes to the full and singular orchestration of its sonic experience, the meter cannot – strictly speaking – be what is heard.

Meters are, as noted, generic while rhythms are specific, and because the meter in individual cases is conceivable from the experience of the rhythm, it can be analysed as distinct from the rhythm but not so heard in performance. William Blake’s ‘The Clod & the Pebble’, from *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) not only exemplifies such reflections, but brings some of its own to bear too:

Love seeketh not Itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care;  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hells despair.’

So sung a little Clod of Clay  
Trodden with the cattle’s feet:  
But a pebble of the brook  
Warbled out these metres meet.

Love seeketh only Self to please,  
To bind another to its delight;  
Joys in anothers loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heavens despite.’<sup>8</sup>

Not only does Blake’s poem contain the word ‘feet’, preparing the only rhyme in the ABCB second stanza (the first and third rhyme ABAB), but it also rhymes thematically on the punning phrase ‘metres meet’. Yet, the meet-ness of its meters are challenged by the fact that the meter of the first quoted song, the clod’s in stanza one, is sung to the same meter as the pebble’s. The metrical form of this poem then as good as asserts that there is as much meet-ness in what the clod sings as in what the pebble does, and this is inescapably part of what Blake’s poem can teach. Yet, while all three

<sup>8</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poems* ed. Alice Ostriker (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 118–19.

verses might be described, generically, as octosyllabic iambic tetrameters (for this is the most common structure, appearing as the opening line to each verse), both of the variant burdens in lines 4 and 12 are nine syllables, with the variation produced by 'Heaven's' extra syllable appearing at different points in the line in each case. So too lines 2–4 of the second verse are all seven-syllables with a trochaic fall produced by beginning on a stress.

The fact that the metrical shapes of stanzas 1 and 3 are so nearly homologous incidentally underlines how meters are generic templates, but also draws attention to how they are experienced as specific combinations of sound sense, with distinct rhythmical contours produced by their word choices whose meanings cannot be fully accessed without hearing their exact intonation implications. Blake's poem invites its readers to experience the difference between sounding the 'not Itself' of stanza one and 'only Self' of stanza three in lines where the other words are exactly the same. The latter 'Joys in another's loss of ease' that bit more promptly, because 'only self' has a weaker middle syllable that allows for an easier flow from the one in 'only' to the one of 'self', while the separately stressed word 'not' and the greater emphasis needed then to initiate the word 'Itself' produces a slight midline caesura, a caesura expressive of all that may be involved in putting yourself second to another's pleasure.

The entire poem is also a commentary on the construction of Pandemonium in Hell at the end of *Paradise Lost* Book I, a commentary interpreting the purpose of that episode by bringing it back home into individual love lives, illustrating both Blake's observation that Milton 'was a true Poet and of the devil's party', and his proverb that 'without Contraries is no progression'.<sup>9</sup> Taking place in time, the poem allows the clod to get its idea in first, but then, suggesting the clod's innocence and the fragility of its goodness, it lets the pebble appear to correct it from experience. Meter and rhythm conceptualised together, however, underline the equal relevance of both versions of the verse and minutely criticise the pebble's song in the light of what has come before. The poem creates thus a dynamically contrary relationship between the two ideas of love that readers can work with, enabling both, and reflecting on their necessary interplay in the processes of amorous attachment.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' in *The Complete Poems*, 182 and 181.

<sup>10</sup> Denise Riley's 'Maybe; Maybe Not' alludes to Blake's poem ('I / thought as a clod, I understood as a stone'), crossing it with 1 Corinthians, 13.11, in *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), 1.

Reading a poem out loud in a natural and plausible way, then, will mean not dividing the syllables into two types of beat, for linguists have identified at least four levels of stress, and there are innumerable degrees of contextually relative, locally contrastive emphasis. The voice also rises and falls with the pitch contour of the phrase. There are minute and longer pauses, elisions of syllables and elongations of vowels. There are tiny increases and decreases of volume and speed. All of these happening together and being shaped – though not exclusively – by the words in the lines of the poem, constitute its rhythm. Therefore, the rhythm of a poem is not distinguishable from its meaning, its sound from its sense. The latter is manifested in and by the former; but, equally, the former could not be realised without the shaping purpose of the latter.

In describing the close of ‘To His Coy Mistress’, one of Andrew Marvell’s editors writes that ‘The force of the speaker’s claim for the instant consummation of his desire is enforced through a flattening of rhythm in the poem’s last line: the six final syllables are all stressed’.<sup>11</sup> Here a common critical attraction to power shows in ‘force’ and ‘enforced’. Yet this editor is commenting on a syntax that begins with an offer to resolve the pair’s differences in collaborative action:

Let us roll all our strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one ball:  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife,  
Thorough the iron gates of life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.<sup>12</sup>

In Marvell’s famous close the desire is not ‘enforced’ because that first-person plural proposes collaborative activity, implying that the speaker would convince his mistress, who may agree to collaborate, rather than raping her. Nor are the final six syllables ‘all stressed’, for, to begin with, the penultimate ‘him’ takes less stress than the surrounding verbs ‘make’ and ‘run’. There is, though, a complex ruffling of expectation in this last line, for while ‘will’ would usually take less stress than ‘make’, and can be heard to step back and foreground the verb for which it is an auxiliary, here it internally rhymes with the stressed ‘still’ two syllables before. Nevertheless, this ‘will’ is in the line’s fifth position, and thus would be expected to be weaker in an iambic line before a stressed monosyllabic verb.

<sup>11</sup> Nigel Smith (ed.), *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London: Longman, 2003; rev. ed. 2007), 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

Marvell has moved the pronoun 'we' from the third position in the penultimate line to the fourth in the final one. Moving predictive stress onto the pronoun in this fashion invites and expects the realising of emphasis against expectation, further underlining the idea that the pair may now work together to give the sun a run for its money. The editor notes that something unusual is happening with the syllables in this last line, but it is not that they are all stressed (or not all stressed equally), and the line is by no means 'flattened'. That word might be more apt, though not fully accurate, to Tennyson's depressively clustered 'On the bald street breaks the blank day' (also an octosyllabic tetrameter) in the last line of the seventh section to *In Memoriam*.<sup>13</sup>

For Marvell's winning close, a quite different effect is occasioned. The word 'flattened' is rarely likely to be a fair description for memorably inventive lines of poetry because to stress a syllable is not usually done by coming down heavily and flattening it, but by lengthening and raising it in pitch. Notice, then, how 'yet we' contrasts the short pronunciation of the first vowel with an unusually stressed, lengthened and raised pronunciation of the first-person plural pronoun. Contrasting with the shorter 'we' in the previous line, and collaborating with the open 'a' in 'make', the line performs its claim to have pleasurable time go on longer and be more valued, even though we can't prevent it from going. The line retains the oscillating sense of an iambic forward movement (after the dead stop of the comma'd-off spondee 'stand still'), but then gives some added prominence to the odd-numbered syllables 'yet' and 'will'. The 'him' is given little stress; and, further, by keeping it weaker Marvell underlines their claimed relative triumph over the sun as agent of 'time's winged chariot'. It's not a flattened, insistent, forced effect, but a rising and collaborative one – and one in which readers (like the pair in the poem) will join to enable its work.

In *Poetry: The Basics*, Jeffrey Wainwright spends time on the first line in Wordsworth's poem now called 'Daffodils': 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. He draws upon the useful detail that the poet's wife, Mary Hutchinson, once mis-transcribed the line as 'I wandered like a lonely cloud', then noticed her mistake and crossed it out. Wainwright comments:

In these two versions the sentiment expressed is the same, the image used to convey it is the same, the number of *syllables* and even the placing of the *beats* is the same. Nonetheless, and not only because of familiarity,

<sup>13</sup> Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition* ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1989), 351–2.

*'I wandered like a lonely cloud ...'* sounds wrong. Analytically, the reason must be that *like*, though a vital part of speech, is too weak a word to bear a stress at this point in the impetus of the line. Putting it there delays the important idea of loneliness, especially as associated with the *I*, whereas the stresses placed in *'I wandered lonely ...'* enable the line to gather its meaning into the long and important syllable *lone-* so that the line pivots upon it in both rhythm and meaning. But *'I wandered like a lonely cloud'* simply sags in the mouth.<sup>14</sup>

Wainwright's pointing, in this sensitive a sound-sense analysis, to the centrality of the first syllable in 'lonely' is surely right. He also notes that the number of syllables in each version of the line is the same, while the placing of the beats (though this may be a misleading way to put it) is approximately the same. The opening line of the poem, which we know is economical with the truth of the occasioning situation, serves to sketch in the poet's device of being surprised when encountering joy-giving or reflection-causing flora. He's 'lonely as a cloud' (not the most desolating kind of loneliness then) when 'all at once' he catches sight of 'a crowd, / A host of golden daffodils'.<sup>15</sup> The preference for solitude is underlined in that explanatory adjustment – for the word 'crowd' will prompt the thought of people. When he first saw the daffodils, he wasn't wandering on his own, but walking home from Eusemere to Grasmere with his sister, as Dorothy recounts in her journal for 15 April 1802.<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth's deletion of the purposeful walking and the company in his encounter with the flowers stages the contrast. If the poet weren't 'lonely' it wouldn't occasion the benefits of, and reflections on, that host of daffodils. Yet, if he were missing people, daffodils mightn't be enough. The nuanced and poised nature of his being not only 'lonely' but also relevantly so is crucially sounded in the poem.

Wainwright is acutely perceptive when he explains that the word 'lonely' has to be associated with the 'I'. This further underlines why sentiment and image are distinguishable. It's rather different to be 'lonely as a cloud' than to be 'like a lonely cloud'. As pathetic fallacies go, the second is decidedly more pathetic because clouds can be 'alone' but are (as far as I know) never, strictly speaking, 'lonely'. Wordsworth could thus foreground his 'as', relatively stressing the syllable; even though, lacking

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, *Poetry: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 56–7.

<sup>15</sup> William Wordsworth, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', citing the 1815 version, *Poetical Works* ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 149.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Pamela Woof and Madeline Harley *The Wordsworths and the Daffodils* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2002), 7–35, and for details of Mary Wordsworth's mis-transcription, 32.



the consonantal frame of 'like', it might be weaker than the other word used to access a simile. Thus, one way to redefine the relationship and difference between meter and rhythm is that to identify conceptually the meter you have to make a plausible, but arbitrarily over-emphatic, distinction between the individual syllables in a line, dividing sheep from goats, as it were, the stressed from the unstressed, while to hear its rhythm you have to appreciate the relative and relational differences of emphasis between one syllable and the next.

Perhaps the mistakenly transcribed line doesn't so much sag as divide sharply into two parts at the over-emphatic hinge word 'like'. When Wainwright states that the correct line can 'gather its meaning', he's evocatively suggestive as regards how sound sense is collaboratively achieved. The sounds and the meanings of the correct line and its mistakenly transcribed version are different, which is why their sentiments are different, and, since in the correct version the cloud is not directly described as being 'lonely', so is the image. It's unlikely too that the 'sentiment' in a line of poetry precedes the words with which it is said to be expressed, as Wainwright's conventional word 'convey' implies. The sentiment (a feeling with an attitude) is realised and understood – by the composing and rereading poet too – from the trial words composed. The feeling in a poem is not prior to it and *conveyed* by its words; it is *created* by words and rhythm, in the achievement of sound sense.

Yet, this is not how Wordsworth in his prime understood the action of meter. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he proposes that

though the opinion will at first appear paradoxical, from the tendency of metre to divest language in a certain degree of its reality, and thus to throw a sort of half consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition, there can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose.<sup>17</sup>

Wordsworth argues that the metrical structure of poetry introduces a mitigating feeling to regulate the passions that its narrated matter excites, and he assumes that the poet both stirs up the reality of painful experience and then makes it more bearable with the formal structure, going on to contrast 'the distressful parts of *Clarissa Harlowe*' with 'Shakespeare's writings, in which the most pathetic scenes, never act upon us as pathetic

<sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 755. This passage was added in 1802.

beyond the bounds of pleasure'.<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth's project in his Preface, of justifying the use of a language which was assumed to be inappropriate to metrical composition, is obliging him to conceive of language and form as distinct entities, a separation of poetic components that then allows him to propose this idea of the poet's care for the reader's pleasure even when challenging it with painful realities – as if it were easier to bear Lavinia's raped and mutilated condition evoked by Marcus in *Titus Andronicus* than Clarissa's in her post-defilement letters. Given his observation regarding the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* (an act 'too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition'),<sup>19</sup> Johnson is unlikely to have believed this view of poetry's super-adding of pleasure, though his use of the word 'endured' may indicate an influence on Wordsworth's formulation. Yet, whether the rhythmical easing works as proposed depends upon a reader or listener not making the distinction Wordsworth uses to press his point, for that would be to separate out the painful description and its pleasurable form, where the effect Wordsworth argues for is a single, complexly mitigated experience.

Nietzsche expressed a very similar, but differently nuanced idea about what the meter of poetry 'adds' to its words:

Metre lays a veil over reality: it effectuates a certain artificiality of speech and unclarity of thinking, by means of the shadow it throws over thoughts it now conceals, now brings into prominence. As beautification requires shadows, so clarification requires 'vagueness'. – Art makes the sight of life bearable by laying over it the veil of unclear thinking.<sup>20</sup>

This observation compounds his equivocal skepticism about poetic form in *The Gay Science*, asserting the unjustified and unjustifiable, but still entrancing, sonic amorality of poetic form: 'even the wisest among us occasionally becomes a fool for rhythm – if only insofar as we feel a thought to be *truer* if simply because it has a metrical form and presents itself with a divine hop, skip, and jump'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, according to Nietzsche, not only does the form of poetry veil reality, but it will tempt us to think

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 755–6.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare* 2 vols. ed. Arthur Sherbo, intro. Bernard H. Bronson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), II, 703.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), sec. 151, 82. For an earlier attempt at these issues, see my *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160–1; and for a discussion of how Wordsworth's theory of metrical addition contributes to a particular work, see my 'Reparation and "The Sailor's Mother"', *In the Circumstances: About Poems and Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20–2.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 140.

this distorted vagueness truer than it actually is. Here might be two related reasons for believing that poetry cannot have the truth-content that, among others, J. H. Prynne and Simon Jarvis has passionately and intricately argued for it.

Yet, the disjunctive structure of Nietzsche's idea determines what it can allow itself to say. The 'reality' in the quotation from *Human, All Too Human* turns out to be language-use outside of poetic art, speech without the 'artificiality' of metrical form. This presupposes a true or real prose statement of what a poem might have said, but couldn't, existing behind the veil of its distorted version in the metrical composition. The competition between these supposed different kinds of language-use is reconfigured as a contest between reality and illusion, where art's success is simultaneously its defeat, or vice versa. But if the speech of poetry is, by means of its techniques, able to invite exact attunements of sound sense in a reading ear, then these complexly differentiated relations of meter and rhythm in poetry are also contributing to its truth-content access.

To offer a further example, consider how Emily Dickinson shapes reflections on feeling and order beyond suffering:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -  
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -  
 The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'  
 And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before?'

The Feet, mechanical, go round -  
 A Wooden way  
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -  
 Regardless grown,  
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -  
 Remembered, if outlived,  
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -  
 First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -<sup>22</sup>

The close of this poem imagines what it might feel like to be rescued from such a freezing end after you've lost consciousness, but before death has you. It is entirely taken up with thought about form and feeling in poetry, as its first line, which may be characterised as an eleven-syllable iambic pentameter with a dactyl for its first foot, implies. If it is concerned with

<sup>22</sup> R. W. Franklin (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* Reading Edition (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 170.

the reduction of people to automata after great pain when 'The Feet, mechanical, go round', it enters such a state in the disposition of its metrical feet, repeatedly underlined, so as to be audible, by its emphatic and disjunctive use of commas and dashes.

Yet, it doesn't merely succumb to a deadened formality, for the poem's final line, also a pentameter, offers a vividly rhythmical resistance to the formal expectation that Dickinson has reminded readers of in the previous line. Where 'As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -' is regularly iambic with a comma-marked caesura dividing it after the second main stress and the fifth syllable, 'First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -' shapes strong stresses on the first four syllables (the first 'then' much less weak than the second syllable of 'Stupor', falling into regularity in the second hemistich 'then the letting go -'). Vitality in this poem is figured as a resistance to the mechanical, the routine, and calls upon reserves of energy in ways from which there is always the danger of relapse. The metrical and formal intelligence here is not separate from its conceptualisations of experience, rather it gives access to them. Its reality is not veiled by the meter, but measured in its revelation.

Sound sense is also inherent in what Charles Tomlinson called 'the chances of rhyme'.<sup>23</sup> The sounds of particular words and their capacities to rhyme, or not, with other words are contingencies that have developed with the communally purposeful evolution of a natural language. It is a curious fact about the development of this hybrid pidgin, English, that, borrowing words from a variety of distinct language groups, ones in which the concepts don't necessarily rhyme, it has created a number of highly charged rhyming contraries: 'night' and 'light', 'womb' and 'tomb', and 'breath' and 'death'. Here the temptation might again be to say that such rhymed opposites drive a wedge between sound and sense, but such a notion is dependent upon an assumption of simple mimesis between a sound and a meaning; rather, the auditory affinity between the consonantly differentiated words bespeaks the conceptual interdependence of the terms. It is as if they had been created by the poet in all our ancestors – so much so as to render them, for poets, both problematic and inescapable. Similarly, folk music and popular song have so exploited the loftier rhymes on the word 'love' that poets have been driven to inventiveness, for, as Wittgenstein notes, it is an accident that in German 'Rast' rhymes with

<sup>23</sup> Charles Tomlinson, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 194–5.

'Hast', but it is a lucky one, and you can discover it – as Goethe did when composing his motto: 'Ohne Hast, aber ohne Rast'.<sup>24</sup>

In 'A Fit of Rime against Rime', Ben Jonson's classicizing leads him to prefer how

Greeke was free from rimes infection,  
Happy Greeke, by this protection,  
Was not spoyled.

The titular equivocation in the poem's strategy, the action of its sound sense, allows Jonson to illustrate the infection and deploy his own illness as its cure. He may be

Wresting words, from their true calling;  
Propping verse, for feare of falling  
To the ground

Yet, he is also deploying the ways that 'falling' calls back to 'calling' as a shape for his verse, and further using its sound as his sense, while the six-line patterning of the poem (rhymed AABCCB) means that what falls 'To the ground' in his tumbling mimetic line three is picked up in the answering second half of the form:

Joynting Syllables, drowning Letters,  
Fastning Vowells, as with fetters  
They were bound!<sup>25</sup>

The poet ambivalently rails against, and effectively deploys, the constrictions of rhyme. Simultaneously, he is also complaining about – and benefiting from – the limited rhyming possibilities in English. The relative poverty of rhyme words and near absence of homophonic inflections has contributed to English rhymes being sound-sense pairings, for in this language the similarity in difference of rhyme is heard on monosyllables or stem syllables, not remnant inflections, and the sound of a rhyme is inextricable from its sense. This is what produces a superficial contrariness in those rhymes such as 'breath' and 'death' with which I began. In Jonson's lines '-fect' and '-tect', 'call-' and 'fall-', then 'lett-' and 'fett-'

<sup>24</sup> The footnote in *Culture and Value*, though it translates the German rhymes, explaining tacitly why the English translation substitutes 'last' and 'fast', they do not reference Goethe's motto, 'Without haste, but without rest'. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains* ed. Georg Henrik von Wright et al., trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, rev. 2nd edition, 1998), 93–3e.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Poems, The Prose Works* ed. C. H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 183–4.

are the parts of the words that produce the rhyme. Obligated to rhyme on stem sense too, poets may find it near useless that 'womb' rhymes with 'tomb', because the in-my-beginning-is-my-end idea is too plainly invited by the rhyme itself. Similarly, while a poet today might have great difficulty with the rhyme of 'love' and 'dove', because again the romantic picture of the nestling birds has been worked to a nullity, the rhyme automatically triggering the familiar idea, so the less promisingly conceptualised rhyme of 'love' and 'of' might stimulate a poet's art.

In Jonson's 'A Fit of Rhyme against Rhyme', the poet customises his art's technique, associating it with 'fetters' (thanks to the opportune rhyme on literary 'letters'), working with and against those thematic senses in the course of his poem. Such sounds as senses can evoke no end of allegiance and affiliation, producing heated debates, blows and ripostes, between poets and their critics on what a particular technique entails and whether it should or shouldn't be used – something G. H. Lichtenberg's observation notes by taking part in it when asserting that 'To most of the opponents of rhyme there no doubt applies what Dryden said of Milton: they possess no talent for rhyme'.<sup>26</sup> Marvell's encomium, 'On Mr Milton's *Paradise Lost*', reiterates the equivocating strategy of Jonson's 'A Fit of Rhyme against Rhyme' in its closing couplets:

Well mightst thou scorn thy reader to allure  
 With tinkling rhyme, of thine own sense secure;  
 While the town-Bayes writes all the while and spells,  
 And like a pack-horse tires without his bells:  
 Their fancies like our bushy points appear,  
 The poets tag them, we for fashion wear.  
 I too transported by the mode offend,  
 And while I meant to praise thee must commend.  
 Thy verse created like thy theme sublime,  
 In number, weight, and measure, needs not rhyme.<sup>27</sup>

Marvell is obliged, he admits, to 'commend' Milton because appearing compelled to rhyme with 'offend'. His final couplet simultaneously argues for unrhymed blank verse as the more sublime, while claiming its own 'needs' for the sense pointing of a rhymed form – affirmatively revaluing the technique even in light of its having been denigrated with analogies from a horse's bells and fashion accessories. Milton had associated rhyme

<sup>26</sup> Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *The Waste Books*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: New York Review Books, 2000), 114.

<sup>27</sup> Nigel Smith's headnote and critical apparatus provide details for the contextual issues related to rhyming in Marvell's poem in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 184.

with bondage, tyranny and custom in his note on ‘The Verse’ of *Paradise Lost*, and, as a result, had his style attributed with republican and regicidal tendencies, something that couldn’t be said, by the by, of Jonson’s poem rhyming against rhyme. The sound sense equivocation in Marvell’s poem commending Milton’s epic enables it to support his friend’s values while allowing for a plurality of styles – and politics.

But how far away may a rhyme word be before a reader can no longer catch its echo? This will vary from person to person, culture to culture, and between those who have trained themselves to be sensitive to such effects, and those who haven’t. The long ‘Prologue’ to Dylan Thomas’s *Collected Poems* (1953) proves a test case for such limits. All the lines rhyme, the first with the last, the second with the penultimate, and so on to a couplet at the centre of the poem. When, in reading beyond that central couplet, do you stop hearing that Thomas’s poem rhymes?<sup>28</sup> Denise Riley has observed of her rhymed poem “Affections of the Ear”, which is written in lines of some 21 syllables:

This piece also deploys such a long line itself that any listening ears will not catch its structure of rhymed alternating couplets. There seems to be a ‘natural’ length for the heard line, beyond which the ear cannot stretch, so that here an elaborate structure has turned out to be worked up for nothing. In this respect it’s in a worse position than poor Echo’s enforced repetitions of others’ endings.<sup>29</sup>

Having been told this by the poet, when you then go back to her poem you can see the rhymes and sound them, but they still don’t appear to integrate into a sound sense amalgam, the poet having created an experimental structure in which the rhyme is both present and at least partially disabled. This continues even when she starts to comment on the constraints she has put herself under as symptomatic exemplification:

A rhyme rears up before me to insist on how I should repeat a stanza’s formal utterance – other  
 Than this I cannot do, unless my hearers find a way of speaking to me so I don’t stay semi-dumb  
 Or pirouette, a languid Sugarplum. Echo’s a trope for lyric poetry’s endemic barely hidden bother:

<sup>28</sup> Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poems* ed. John Goodby (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2014), 201–3, and for the test across the divide, 202.

<sup>29</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 111.

As I am made to parrot others' words so I am forced to form ideas by rhymes,  
the most humdrum.<sup>30</sup>

Riley is acute about line-length and audibility, as can be sensed when we suddenly encounter that extra internal rhyme, at a pentameter-like tenth syllable, invoking the Sugarplum Fairy in the *Nutcracker* ballet. In the space that they articulate for this meta-poetic commentary and the bravura effort inaudibly to end-rhyme throughout, her lines articulate a paradoxical case, not unlike Jonson's, for and against the fetters of rhyme.

The verbs adopted in the last line quoted above are perhaps, though, overstated to make a case because to 'parrot' is to reiterate without reflection (and reflecting Riley is manifestly doing), while at that late twentieth-century stage in the history of poetry no one was *forcing* her to form ideas by humdrum rhymes.<sup>31</sup> Her widely influential point is that we don't speak language so much as language speaks its created beings: 'I am made to parrot others' words'. Although if she is so made, I can't help thinking, then the others were too, so, strictly speaking, they wouldn't be able to own or seem to originate words either. The dialectics of freedom and constraint encountered here in the chances of rhyme are returned to in relation to lyric subjectivity and agency in Chapter 6.

To conclude with a metered poem that highlights its thematically significant sound sense composites, I turn to one of Rudyard Kipling's, which no less self-consciously than Riley deploys a complex of delayed rhymes and highly flexible metrical shapes rhythmically to qualify the elapsing of time. In his essay on Kipling as poet, T. S. Eliot was unapologetic about the looseness of his terminology regarding 'poetry' and 'verse':

I make no apology for having used the terms 'verse' and 'poetry' in a loose way: so that while I speak of Kipling's work as verse and not as poetry, I am still able to speak of individual compositions as poems, and also to maintain that there is 'poetry' in the 'verse'. Where terminology is loose, where we have not the vocabulary for distinctions which we feel, our only precision is found in being aware of the imperfection of our tools, and of the different senses in which we are using the same words.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2000), 96.

<sup>31</sup> Her more recent experience of severe bereavement, discussed in *Time Lived, without its Flow*, has rekindled an equivocal engagement with rhymed and metered verse. See her poems about mass wartime bereavement in Denise Riley, 'A Gramophone on the Subject', *The Pity* (London: The Poetry Book Society, 2014), 37–49, and collected in *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), 63–71.

<sup>32</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Rudyard Kipling', *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), 35.



Eliot's purpose is to claim that 'in speaking of Kipling we are entitled to say "great verse"', while admitting that were he to construct a category of writers who had written similarly he would be 'dealing with matters as imprecise as the shape and size of a cloud or the beginning and end of a wave'. Among the poems Eliot selected for *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* at least one fails to fit the offered definition of great verse, not because it is bad, but because it is manifestly and unqualifiedly poetry. Yet, it is an instance of particular interest because the poet has consciously deployed varieties of metrical feet in the composition of his lines, varieties that he is expecting readers to hear quite clearly as a thematic contribution to the sound sense of his poem.<sup>33</sup>

'The Way through the Woods' first appeared in 'Marklake Witches' from *Rewards and Fairies* (1910). Its interwoven rhythms, rhymes and metrics are strongly intimated:

They shut the road through the woods  
 Seventy years ago.  
 Weather and rain have undone it again,  
 And now you would never know  
 There was once a road through the woods  
 Before they planted the trees.  
 It is underneath the coppice and heath,  
 And the thin anemones.  
 Only the keeper sees  
 That, where the ring-dove broods,  
 And the badgers roll at ease,  
 There was once a road through the woods.

Yet, if you enter the woods  
 Of a summer evening late,  
 When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools  
 Where the otter whistles his mate,  
 (They fear not men in the woods,  
 Because they see so few.)  
 You will hear the beat of a horse's feet,  
 And the swish of a skirt in the dew,  
 Steadily cantering through  
 The misty solitudes,

<sup>33</sup> Basil Bunting notes, though, that 'Kipling's foot is heavy – his rhythms have something coarse in them that prevents the subtleties you can find in Wyatt before him or in his contemporary Yeats', and adds: 'I find the same defect in Eliot'. Peter Makin (ed.), *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 111.

As though they perfectly knew  
 The old lost road through the woods . . .  
 But there is no road through the woods!<sup>34</sup>

For the first seven lines, aside from the regularly spaced internal rhymes, there appears to be practically no end-rhyme. If we overlook the rime-riche 'wood' rhyming with 'wood', and the 'ago' and 'know' at lines two and four, there is none. The internal rhymes at lines three and then again at seven do have the reassuring insistence that recalls the verse writing of Kipling's more familiar kind. The second end-rhyme appears at line eight when 'anemones' meets 'trees', and then the stanza rhymes twice more on the same sound: 'sees' at line nine and 'ease' at eleven. But by now, a first-time reader's sense of the verse has been transformed, for 'broods' at line ten has picked up the two 'woods' from lines one and five, as well as preparing for the closing rhyme again on 'woods' at line twelve. If we allow that the internal rhymes at lines three and seven stand in for end-rhymes, then the entire stanza is rhymed, but, again, the sense that it is so rhymed only dawns over the stretch of the twelve lines. This complex rhyming pattern is repeated in the second verse, though the two stanzas are not of the same length – the second having thirteen lines, made by echoing with a variant the twenty-fourth line.<sup>35</sup>

The poem is written in variations of trimeters and tetrameters, the latter being the lines with the internal rhyme. However, the syllabic count and metrical feet for the trimeter lines turns out to be expressively varied. 'They shut the road through the woods' is made of two iambic feet followed by one anapaest, while 'Seventy years ago' could be scanned as a trochaic foot, followed by two iambs. This is followed by the first of the tetrameters: 'Weather and rain have undone it again' – a trochee and an iamb followed by two anapaests. Glancing forward to the other tetrameters, readers can hear Kipling's skill in varying lines that appear from the internal rhyming to be firmly four square. Not quite so, especially in the first verse, for 'It is underneath the coppice and heath' give us an anapaest, followed by two iambs, and then a second anapaest. 'When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools' has the matching pairs of an anapaest followed by an iamb, or, since both halves contain a hyphenated compound, it might be more plausible to say an anapaest followed by a spondee. The final tetrameter

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Pinney (ed.), *The Poems of Rudyard Kipling*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 663.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Frost, author of 'The Road Not Taken' and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', which also echoes its penultimate line to conclude, is likely to have been familiar with Kipling's poem.

then closely echoes the third with ‘You will hear the beat of a horse’s feet’, a doubling of anapaests and iambs.

Kipling’s choice of ‘beat’ and ‘feet’ for the internal rhyme of his final tetrameter invites the thought that an ability to hear the metrical units he deploys and to catch rhymes is central to the thematic sense of ‘The Way through the Woods’. Why does he decide on seventy years for the time that has elapsed since the road was shut? Three score and ten is the traditional lifespan, and this means that hardly anyone alive can remember there being a road through the woods. Yet the rhyming and metrical ensemble of the poem asserts that, listening carefully, you can hear the sound of this distant, lost past:

You will hear the beat of a horse’s feet,  
And the swish of a skirt in the dew,  
Steadily cantering through  
The misty solitudes,  
As though they perfectly knew  
The old lost road through the woods

Following the internally rhyming tetrameter, there are three anapaests (‘And the swish of a skirt in the dew’), then, reversing the rhythmical shape, a pair of dactyls with a final stressed syllable (‘Steadily cantering through’), or a dactyl, a trochee, and an iamb.<sup>36</sup> Then there’s a line of iambs: ‘The misty solitudes’, then one of two iambs and an anapaest, culminating, or almost, in a three-syllable stress cluster (‘old lost road’) around the poem’s topic (‘The old lost road through the woods’), an iamb, a spondee, and an anapaest. Kipling distinguishes the sound of the ‘skirt’ (anapaests) from the sound of a cantering horse (dactyls), and these from the background sound of the woods (iambs). If readers can listen as closely as to hear these different patterns of sound, then we are not as bereft of the past as might have been thought. That Kipling is concerned with himself, his readers, and contemporaries is let slip by the use of ‘as though’ in ‘As though they perfectly knew / The old lost road through the woods’ – since, if what we hear are the people who used to use the road (or their ghosts), then it isn’t for them ‘as though’ at all. They do know the road. Yet, for us, it is ‘as though’ for we enable the intuition, one underlined with his final, contrast-asserting line: ‘But there is no road through the woods’.

<sup>36</sup> The scanning of English verse, as noted above, is achieved by attributing a template-like pattern to a series of words with much more varied and flexible stresses, so different templates can approximate to the same sequences of phonemes.

In the course of his Kipling essay, Eliot attempts a discrimination between his subject and another writer devoted to the English countryside:

Kipling's awareness and love of Sussex is a very different affair from the feeling of any other 'regional' writer of comparable fame, such as Thomas Hardy. It is not merely that he was highly conscious of what ought to be preserved, where Hardy is the chronicler of decay: or that he wrote of the Sussex which he found, where Hardy wrote of the Dorset that was already passing in his boyhood. It is, first, that the conscience of the 'fabulist' and the consciousness of the political and historical imagination are always at work.<sup>37</sup>

These wartime remarks, dated 26 September 1941, involve a broadly generalising critical intelligence that was only truly valuable in so far as a similarly informed reader could engage with it. Eliot had a cultural-religious aversion to Hardy (see, for example, the poor treatment he receives in *After Strange Gods*)<sup>38</sup> and the contrast made here convinces less than he would like – as if Hardy never composed self-aware fables, or wrote of the contemporary world as he found it, or had no sense of what needed preserving, or had little political or historical imagination in, say, *The Dynasts*. 'The Way through the Woods' compares appropriately with 'The Darkling Thrush' in the latter's evocation of nature as discontinued poetic inspiration with its 'strings of broken lyres' and its technical siding with the thrush's note in the renewed rhythmic and syntactical flexibility of stanzas three and four.<sup>39</sup> Both poems locate the explicit speaking subject in Hardy's poem ('I leant') and the implicit one in Kipling's ('You will hear') as detached from the scenes which each views with a sense of loss, while each addresses and compensates for this identified loss by deploying poetic rhythms against social changes they describe or imply have befallen.

Not that Eliot doesn't have a point to make once he's done his bit of dividing and ruling: 'The second peculiarity of Kipling's Sussex stories I have already touched upon, the fact that he brings to his work the freshness of a mind and a sensibility developed and matured in a quite different environment: he is discovering and reclaiming a lost inheritance'.<sup>40</sup> Both Hardy's poem and Kipling's, in their different ways, are about 'discovering and reclaiming a lost inheritance', not only that of

<sup>37</sup> Eliot, 'Rudyard Kipling', 32.

<sup>38</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), 54–8.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed reading of 'The Darkling Thrush' in this light, see my 'Thomas Hardy' in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry* ed. Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 449–51.

<sup>40</sup> Eliot, 'Rudyard Kipling', 32–3.

the threatened English countryside, but of the threatened sound senses of poetry, felt to be under sentence of death from changes to the rhythms of life – for instance, the mechanisation of transport and farming. Meter, rhythm and rhyme in poems can have truth-content because they can evoke by a species of quotation or allusion cultural memories and previously established meanings. Yet the ways in which ideas of memory's uses can be composed are as various as the poems in which they occur. In 'The Way through the Woods' and 'The Darkling Thrush', Kipling and Hardy, writing within a decade around the turn of the twentieth century, show sensitivity to ways the sound sense of poetry can be deployed to counterpoise the experience of historical change and intuited crisis.