OXFORD

the POETRY
HANDBOOK

Second Edition

JOHN LENNARD

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A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism

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Contents

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Preface to the
Second Edition

S ince publication in 1996 *The Poetry Handbook* has by most accounts done its work reasonably well. As reviewers ignore text-books, feedback was slow, but interesting when it did come, very positively, from teachers and students using the *Handbook* as a course-text ; reader-reviews at Amazon.com were also good. The competition has sharpened a little, but sales remain strong and poetry is hardly a cutting-edge technology with necessarily short-lived manuals—so why (besides marketing imperatives) should there now be a second edition?

To begin with, if teachers and students alike were strongly positive, teachers had at least one recurrent doubt. Few actively disliked Walcott's 'Nearing Forty', with specific analysis of which every chapter ends—many came to appreciate it and acknowledged my reasons for choosing it—yet most felt that for some students it was an unhappy choice, and would have preferred an older canonical poem. Feedback also provided local rebukes about poets slighted and forms omitted, with some corrections of fact, regrets that more American poems were not cited, and requests for chapter-by-chapter exercises in versification and/or practical criticism. I also had my own dissatisfactions with this or that bit, and a growing awareness of having short-changed some things rather more than I had intended.

All this invited but didn't compel a new edition. The alleged problem with 'Nearing Forty' is putatively more serious, but to those who argue that a finely wrought and honest poem about the compromises of mid-dle age is inappropriate for youthful students, as to students who tell me they aren't yet nearing forty themselves, I give the reply a teacher once gave me : *Yes of course, but I think you'll find that's not true.* Walcott's extended syntax, formalism, erudition, and cultural complexity, as well as the imagination required by his subject from younger readers, certainly make his poem a formidable proposition, but, frankly, so much the better. Difficulties are also opportunities : all welcome the cultural and ethnic dimensions Walcott inherently activates, and younger students occasioned difficulty must be offset against mature

Preface to the Second Edition

students for once afforded a lesser rather than a greater barrier ; besides, every poem has weaknesses as well as strengths, and no choice among the many with potent claims and capacities would satisfy all. Errors should be corrected and serious omissions rectified, but why otherwise admit change when there can be no logical end to it?

The crux in 1996 was limitation to a single exemplary poem. A further modern poem or poems would have incurred copyright fees OUP was not then willing to bear, while any additional poems treated as 'Nearing Forty' is treated would have raised the word-count by many thousands, threatening price and market-profile. Some feeders-back were alert to this as a danger, and ended by cautioning me against their own special pleadings because the value of *The Poetry Handbook* lay substantially in its brevity and brisk tones ; do not, they said, sacrifice its racing lines by making it carry everyone's burdens—but (changing metaphors mid-stream) they seemed to countenance some growth all the same, especially if mild pruning were also possible.

This makes good and marketing sense, and a slight expansion-with-revisions would probably have been agreed—were it not that we are all willy-nilly amid a techno-revolution that is swiftly transforming our media of data-storage and -retrieval, and so our modes and practices of writing and reading. In personal practice that means that while in 1996 I was under no pressure, from myself or OUP, to gear *The Poetry Handbook* either to online resources or to web-pedagogy, both considerations now press on all decision-making about textbooks. Additionally, I have since 2002 been formally teaching online, and in all teaching obliged explicitly to confront changes in what 'research' actually is for readers who turn to the World Wide Web (WWW, 'the Web') before having recourse to a print-library.

All pages, whether on paper or screen, have normative limits (deriving from technology, practical convenience, and commercial viability) that constrain how text is embodied and affect how it can be conceived. The limits of the *metal page*[1]—the archetype at any given time of pages printed using Gutenberg's movable metal type—were dictated by the basic requirement for a separate metal type-piece for each character and necessarily centralised production, and so (despite technological improvements and the switch from hand- to machine-presses) were fundamentally unchanged for 500 years (1470–1970). They were also therefore among the principal determinants of the printed *codex*, or bound book, including most poetry (and pretty much all canonical

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[1] Italicised terms appear in the Glossary.

poetry) throughout modern history—but they have changed now, and the limits of the *e-page* remain to be established. I doubt if the codex or hard copy will cease to be used any time soon—handwriting, after all, has hardly been destroyed by print—but their roles have already changed and in part diminished, and their influences on the forms we give to data and texts have been (and will continue to be) variously challenged and complemented. How rapidly and severely poetry in itself will be affected by word-processor composition, laser-printing, and the e-page is moot, under exponential exploration, and well worth pondering even if one's own tastes are conservative ; a few particular developments are now mentioned in the text, but it is the broader impact of the Web on practical criticism that has for me truly justified a new edition.

The critical decision was that the *Handbook* should be accompanied by a dedicated website, http://www.oup.com/uk/literature/poetry, where the poems I quote or cite are wherever possible (given copyright issues) gathered or hyperlinked. Readers with convenient access to the Web (which now includes most students facing formal exams) can thus read as much of my evidence as they wish, contextualise it all, and assess for themselves the strength of my generalisations and observations. (The website is in its nature capable of currency, and such matters as new volumes from or deaths of poets will be recorded there long before print can catch up.)

Systematic use of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (still the most widely used print-resource) is far too valuable to abandon, and it has itself again been updated, but voiding the general restriction to the *Norton* that I observed in 1996 has allowed a far wider range of poetic reference while retaining confidence that relevant information, exemplary poems, and publication-details are for almost all readers at most a google away. There have been considerable knock-on effects in all directions ; in particular, a systematic expansion of the 'exemplary poems' became compelling, and OUP agreed that two might incur additional *permissions* costs. The sections on 'Nearing Forty' have been substantially retained, but each chapter now considers, in addition, one or more of a small group of canonical poems : Donne's 'The Flea', Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', Dickinson's 'I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—', Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', Bishop's 'Sestina', and Hill's 'September Song'. These are quoted in full when first discussed, and reconsidered to enrich particular chapters. The print edition has therefore increased in bulk and remains fully autonomous, but just as those who used the first edition in conjunction with the *Norton* profited, so

those who use this second edition in conjunction with the *Norton* <u>or with the website</u> will profit.

The greater range of reference, quoting more poems (especially Renaissance material) at length or in full, and the ready availability online of digital facsimiles, have also forced me to confront issues of textual modernisation, marginalised in 1996 by a general reliance on the *Norton*. Now, while *Norton* references may still be provided, the text I quote will typically come from the first (or last authorised) edition, so readers will regularly be confronted by old orthography. In Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (printed 1598), for example, 'deceives' appears as "deceaues", showing both different spelling and the positional use of 'u' and 'v' as graphs of the same letter ; *long-s* (ſ) is also retained.[2] It looks odd when you're unused to it, but it rarely takes more than a second to work out what a word is, and anything genuinely difficult is glossed. For poems first printed after 1800 there isn't usually much in it, though Browning, for example, reworked his own texts quite heavily, and features such as italicisation and capitalisation are often edited away. My reasons for preferring fairly stringently unmodernised texts are variously suggested throughout my text, and formally set out in *The Drama Handbook* (OUP, 2002) ; here I will say only that modernisation destroys as much as it clarifies, and that the availability of digital imaging is already exerting a perceptible pressure on university teachers to expect familiarity with at least the general appearance and features of early editions. There is also an advantage in that scholarly editions of poetry, however published, always provide basic bibliographical information about their source texts, for which in many cases there are standard abbreviations. To keep pages and argument as clear as possible, I have therefore often felt free to give only summary details of the source (as, for Shakespeare, 'text from F1, 1623') ; fuller details are intrinsically provided by the links on the website.

Readers will also be confronted by unmodernised punctuation, which is treated systematically in Chapter 4 and elsewhere as necessary. Older conventions of punctuation are generally far more coherent than critics tend to allow, and while at first appearance (often in rela-

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[2] Before *c.* 1630 the Roman alphabet was reckoned to have 24 letters, i/j and u/v each counting as one (which explains why 'W', double-u, is formed as a double-v) : 'i' was used initially and medially, 'j' terminally (thus 'Iulius' and 'maior', but 'viij'), while 'v' was used initially, 'u' medially and terminally (thus 'vnto' and 'vpon', but 'loue', 'haue', 'glou[e]'). Meaning is not affected, but care is sometimes needed, as with 'Ioue' (Jove) and 'loue'. Before *c.*1800 's' and 'ſ' were variant lower-case or *minuscule* (p. 100) forms of the same letter : the upper-case form was always 'S', but in lower-case 'ſ' was used initially and medially, *short-s* terminally (thus 'ſuffers', 'loſs').

tively brief quotations) unexpected marks in unpredicted places may seem anomalous, familiarity breeds both understanding and respect. In some critical books with 'unmodernised' quotations, the uses of inverted commas are nevertheless modernised into conformity with the style of the main text ; not here. Inverted commas in quotations are retained as is, whether single, double, or admixed. My own practice in the main text is exemplified by 'deceives' and "deceaues" in the last paragraph : 'deceives' (with single inverted commas) because that is the normal modern spelling of the word in question, which needs to be clearly indicated to assist easy reading, but is not a quotation ; "deceaues" (with double inverted commas) because that is a quotation from Marlowe, the fidelity of which I guarantee. Single inverted commas may do slightly variant duty, as around some titles or as '*scare quotes*' (p. 130), but in the main text double inverted commas always indicate exact quotations.[3]

I have, however, made one systematic exception to a policy of exact quotation, by making consistent in quotations, and extending to my own practice, a welcome feature of many pre-1939 texts, the use of spaces <u>before</u> as well as after semi-colons, colons, and question- and exclamation-marks. I personally find it extremely helpful as a reader for articulation of sense to be thus displayed, in verse and prose, and as a teacher know how vital it can be in enabling a competent sense of grammatical construction to develop ; as computers now permit me to provide OUP with the text directly, as attachments, and for such conventions to be preserved in production, it becomes possible to adapt personal practice without financial penalty, and seems foolish not to do so.

Besides the exemplary poems, the major addition is of exercises : versification, requiring only a pen and paper (and not even that if you can concentrate hard enough), offers no challenge to the print edition, but, with the website available, to restrict analytical exercises to those possible without a computer is unacceptable. Some such exercises (or where history, biography, and gender are concerned, a commentary in lieu) are provided, but other and interactive exercises are and will be available online. In some instances, of course, the computer is merely a handy tool for doing what could be done anyway—highlighting or colour-coding, for example—but through labour- and time-saving,

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[3] Strictly speaking, only *photoquotations* are wholly unmodernised—in any re-setting there is almost always a *de facto* modernisation of type-fount, some aspects of layout, and the general *bibliographical codes* (p. 96)—but I have been as stringent as possible in preserving alphanumerics, punctuation, and details of layout.

clarity, and interactivity, online exercises can also encourage and advance analytical competence in ways we are still discovering.

The only major cut from the first print edition is of the student-essays, transferred to the website, where they are joined by a much wider range of examples provided by students at various levels using the *Handbook*. Other (interactive) materials have been and will be added to the site. It is not yet clear what may simply be a form of bonus-track, nor how the Web may most profitably be exploited, but there is fearsome invigoration in the scale of this change, and it will be extremely interesting to see in a few years what the interactive aspects of the website have generated.[4] Particularly in dealing with layout, punctuation, and rhyme there are compelling pedagogic opportunities here, but there is also a severe danger of over-expansion : text online cannot profitably be read any faster than print, the time available to students to read course-texts and research their essays has not grown, and how they choose to deploy it remains to be seen.

I have extensively reworked most of Chapters 1–8 (Metre–Syntax) to address the assorted complaints and my own second thoughts, but later chapters have changed far less, though all text has been curry-combed and emended as necessary. The material on exams has been changed to reflect the transfer of student essays to the website and include material on written work devised for *The Drama Handbook*. To summarise the methodological changes :

- *Norton Anthology* references are retained and updated to the 5th edition (2004) ; *Oxford Anthology* references have been cut.
- Where there is a *Norton* reference no other is provided for citations, nor for modern quotations unless the text I quote differs (in which case there is a footnote). For unmodernised older texts only a brief parenthetical reference is usually provided, but for modern texts <u>not</u> in the *Norton* full bibliographical data is given in footnotes on first occurrence, and short-title references thereafter.
- Sources cited in footnotes throughout without bibliographical detail (including anthologies cited by editor and/or short-title as the source of poetic quotations) are fully detailed in the 'Select Bibliography and Further Reading'. To minimise footnote clutter

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[4] Consider a movement in eight years from three student essays, predicated on one university system and included against conventions of academic monography, to the proto-normative provision of a website with a varied collection of such essays, offering future examinees access to their peers, not within one school or university but around the world.

standard abbreviations have been used, notably 'U[niversity]' and 'P[ress]'. See also the list of Abbreviations, p. xx.

- Again to minimise clutter, cross-references appear simply as parentheses of the form '(p. xxi)'
- Specific directions to a page of the website are occasionally indicated by the Wingdings computer-mouse (🖰).

The chapter-glossaries, main glossary, initial use of italics for technical terms, and use of underlining for emphasis, are retained ; all are explained in the Introduction (p. xxi).

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The one change I bitterly regret is the record of Jeremy Maule's death in my renewed dedication. Few have done more for their students, or been kinder to their friends.

John Lennard
Kingston, W. I.
June 2005

Abbreviations

BCE	Before Common Era (= BC)
CE	Common Era (= AD)
ch.	chapter
FSG	Farrar, Straus and Giroux
IT	information technology
LRB	London Review of Books
ME	Middle English
MS/S	Manuscript/s
OE	Old English
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OED2	Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition, 1989
OUP	Oxford University Press
P.	Press
RKP	Routledge and Kegan Paul
Sh. OED	Shorter Oxford English Dictionary
TESL	teaching English as a Second Language
TS/S	typescript/s
U.	University

Introduction

This book is for anyone who wants to read poetry with a better understanding of its craft and technique ; it is also a textbook and crib for school and undergraduate students facing exams in practical criticism. Teaching the practical criticism of poetry at several universities, and talking to students about their previous teaching, has made me sharply aware of how little consensus there is about the subject. Some teachers do not distinguish practical criticism from critical theory, or regard it as a critical theory, to be taught alongside psychoanalytical, feminist, Marxist, and structuralist theories ; others seem to do very little except invite discussion of 'how it feels' to read poem *x*. And as practical criticism (though not always called that) remains compulsory in most English Literature coursework and exams, at school and university, this is an unwelcome state of affairs.

For students there are many consequences. Teachers at school and university may contradict one another, and too rarely put the problem of differing viewpoints and frameworks for analysis in perspective ; important aspects of the subject are omitted in the confusion, leaving otherwise more than competent students with little or no idea of what they are being asked to do. How can this be remedied without losing the richness and diversity of thought which, at its best, practical criticism can foster ? What are the basics ? How may they best be taught ?

My own answer is that the basics are an understanding of and ability to judge the elements of a poet's craft. Profoundly different as they are, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pope, Dickinson, Eliot, Walcott, and Plath could readily converse about the techniques of which they are common masters ; few undergraduates I have encountered know much about metre beyond the terms 'blank verse' and 'iambic pentameter', much about form beyond 'couplet' and 'sonnet', or anything about rhyme more complicated than an assertion that two words do or don't. The commonest fault of their own writing is an inability to use any punctuation beyond full-stops and commas (parentheses, colons, semi-colons, dashes, and hyphens might as well not exist) and a consequent

tendency to connect clauses in endless series at the cost of all subtlety. Yet it is exactly techniques of ordering to which (as to the other elements of craft—layout and lineation, diction and syntax, deployments of biography and history) close reading must attend.

To name and define the elements of poetic craft is, of course, in part a set of ideological decisions, but the influence of ideology on metre or rhyme is very much slower than its influence on what is put into metre or made to rhyme. I do not believe a craft-based practical criticism to be incompatible with or opposed to theoretical approaches ; rather, it is a helpful precursor of them all, a foundation-course in reading. To interpret a given use of form, or a rhyme, or some metrical device may involve, for any particular reader, reference to Freud, Marx, de Saussure, or de Beauvoir ; it must first be noticed by the reader, and it is much easier to notice things of which you have some knowledge. And while theoretical criticisms may seek to account for a text without detailed reference to its technique, to how it has achieved its texture, practical criticism—if the term means anything at all—cannot avoid that engagement with technique we call close reading. Close reading is itself only a beginning, to be followed by more distant readings, but it is a sensible place to start.

If what is to be taught is the value and uses of the poet's tools, the method must be their itemisation, description, and demonstration. The basic list of tools represented by my chapter-titles is not in dispute—metre, form, lineation, rhyme, and so on are fundamental constituents of most Western poetry—but to some issues, notably layout and punctuation, I give more attention than is usual because I find it helpful to do so ; to others, notably class- and gender-conscious analysis, I attend less than is now usual because I have little to add to what others have said. These personal choices are balanced out in the suggestions for further reading, and I have generally tried to describe and explain with an even hand.

I use (wherever possible) material in the 5th edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2004) which remains the fullest, most widely used single volume. Full texts of all poems quoted or cited are, wherever possible, provided (or linked) on the companion-website at http://www.oup.com/uk/literature/poetry. To avoid crippling copyright fees and keep the book reasonably short quotations are as brief as possible, use of either the *Norton* or the website is assumed, and readers are intended to have one or other available as they read.

PAGE-REFERENCES OF THE FORM (N999) ARE TO THE *NORTON ANTHOLOGY*. ✐ INDICATES A DIRECTION OR REFERENCE TO THE WEBSITE.

Occasionally, when they represent the readiest source, the 3rd and 4th editions of the *Norton* (1983, 1996) are cited in the form '3N000' or '4N000'. All readers are strongly advised to consult in full any poem cited or excerpted, for unless you look up these poems (looking carefully at how a particular tool is used in an individual poem, seeing how my generalisations relate to the specifics of its use) your understanding will be sketchy. Needing regularly to consult poems, it is best to treat this book as a short guided tour, to be taken at no more than a chapter a day—and only that fast if you are in a hurry. My advice would be to take a month or more, working through each chapter in short but regular sessions, going on to the next only when happy that you have absorbed the last. In face-to-face teaching I normally spread out the chapters over a whole term as one among several subjects (a practice candidates for exams are particularly advised to follow) ; between this first course and exams there would be other courses to deepen students' knowledge and develop their confidence. In short, any student who reads this book cover-to-cover in a sitting (except as revision) will be wasting their time. I also require students facing closed exams regularly to write a timed (1-hour) answer, so they become wholly familiar with the contours of that hour, and their timing of answers quite automatic. This has proven benefits, but if you are facing an exam you and your teachers must decide how much practice you need.

At the end of each chapter I look at the topic of the chapter at work in Derek Walcott's 'Nearing Forty' and two or three other poems drawn from a small canonical group, so that technical readings are built up chapter by chapter. These recurrent poems, from Donne's 'The Flea' to Hill's 'September Song', are invoked only in the chapters they best illuminate, but the sequential development of complementary technical readings makes it easier to understand the interrelation of elements within poems of varying ages. Even for 'Nearing Forty', covered in every chapter, there remain aspects of the poem I ignore : but any reading which did claim to be complete would have to include most (if not all) of what I do say. It may seem odd to privilege a poem about a mid-life crisis for students, but I find it works well in both class and individual teaching, and the growing enthusiasm of students working

on the poem seems to me a valuable proof of practical criticism. It is not only that familiar and accessible poems can be read more deeply with a knowledge of their craft ; such knowledge also makes accessible to any reader poems which may at first seem obscure or unrewarding. 'Nearing Forty' is printed in full on pages 22–3, as it appears in Walcott's *Collected Poems 1948–84* ; the other recurrent poems are printed in full where they are first invoked, and all are on the website.

One of my purposes is to introduce students to the technical vocabulary of poetry and its criticism. This vocabulary, though perhaps offputting, is essential if technical knowledge is to be usable in exams, and to make accurate argument about poetic techniques possible, between students as well as with teachers. Without it practical criticism becomes inevitably long-winded and inexact—imagine trying to discuss music without names for notes, keys, and instruments—so the matter must be tackled ; at the same time it is true there are disputes about nomenclature, terms that are ambiguous or duplicated, and some that are missing. Where there are alternatives to my own choice, or where (in a few instances) I offer *coinages* (terms of my own invention), my decisions are explained in a footnote. As with any professional *lexicon* (the vocabulary of a specific trade or activity) these technical terms are mutually supporting : the more of them you know, the easier it is to learn a new one ; conversely, the first few are often awkward, or defined by unknown others. All technical terms are *italicised* (set in slanting *italic* letters) on their first appearance[1] : to avoid confusion I have therefore <u>not</u> used italics for non-technical words I simply want to stress, but have <u>underlined</u> them. (Titles and foreign words, however, are italicised in the conventional way.) I have tried to introduce technical vocabulary in a helpful order, and where I have had to introduce a term before the chapter which deals with it properly I usually italicise, and in tougher or important cases provide a short definition in the text or a footnote with a reference to the pages where it is dealt with in full. The commonest and most useful technical terms introduced in each chapter are grouped and defined in a sub-glossary at the end of each chapter ; all are defined and indexed in the Glossary at the back. To assist historical awareness all poets' dates are also provided with their index entry.
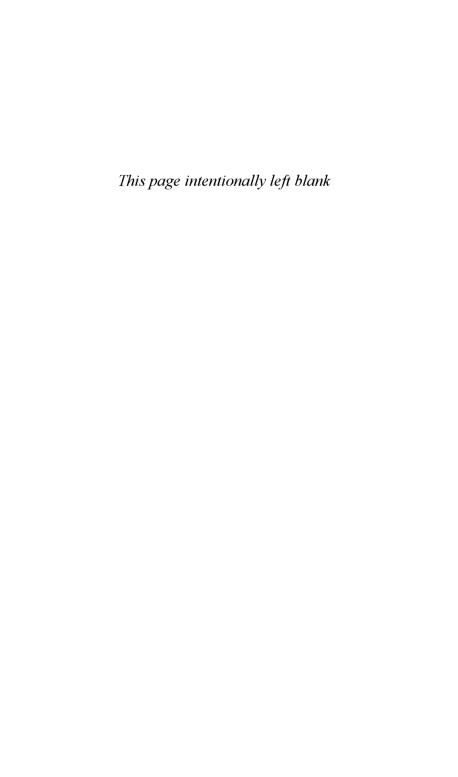
One word I might be expected to have used in a technical sense I have deliberately avoided. An 'image', according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (definition 4), is 'A counterpart, copy M[iddle]

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[1] The names of punctuation-marks, at pp. 111–40, are (for reasons of layout) given in bold.

E[nglish] ; a symbol, emblem, representation 1566 ; a type, typical example, embodiment 1548' : the word has been used by critics in all these and many other ways. So inconsistent has that use been, covering everything from the meaning of a single word to a meaning arising from a whole poem, that 'image' does not seem to me truly a technical term, and I have not found it difficult to avoid. It remains true, though, that almost all the techniques I discuss (metrical, formal, syntactical, whatever) will probably first be apprehended by a reader as components or substructures of an 'image' (of one or another kind) that the poem (or poet) has communicated to them.

There is also one word I probably use too much that doesn't readily fit into a particular chapter : irony. It is notoriously hard to define exactly : common to most definitions is a contrast between what is (or is said or done) and what might be expected to be (or to be said or done) ; difficulty of definition arises because the word always invokes this double state of being and perceiving. The Japanese characters for 'irony' literally mean 'skin-and-muscle', the surface you see and the power hidden beneath it ; my rule-of-thumb definition is that irony is 'the preservation of distance'—the corollary is that whenever you use the word you should be able to specify how and between what and what a distance is being preserved. I find this definition helpful in teaching and recommend it—but a word of warning, for many critics assume this preserved distance is necessarily undermining, antagonistic to one or other pole of the irony, as if the ironic was no more than a sarcastic response to thwarted expectation. In modern writing this is too often the case, but far less so in older work. A Renaissance writer like Donne may be acutely aware of the distance between himself and God, and use irony to figure it : to characterise this agonised relationship as 'undermining' is reductive, and it has nothing whatever to do with sarcasm. Donne knew very well that God was behind him in both senses, albeit sometimes at a distance—so in talking of irony you should remember that its modern sense is often lax and misleading.

Finally, please try to <u>enjoy</u> the poems as you learn to see and hear at work within them the techniques with which they are written. Twain once said that humour is like a frog—you can dissect it but it tends to die in the process ; some have felt the same of poetry, that analysis spoils pleasure. I find the opposite, that understanding redoubles admiration ; in any case, if you don't enjoy what you study, learning will be slow.

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1
Metre

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

JON STALLWORTHY (N2029)

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

JAMES MERRILL, 'The Book of Ephraim', 'F'[1]

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

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

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[1] *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982; New York: Atheneum, 1984), 20.

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

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

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

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

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

> When I doe count the clock that tels the time,

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

> When I doe COUNT the CLOCK that TELS the TIME

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

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

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

> When DAF- | faDILS | beGIN | to PEERE,

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

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

ux   : *iamb*, from which the adjective is *iambic*
xu   : *trochee, trochaic*
xx   : *spondee, spondaic*
uu   : *pyrrhic, pyrrhic*

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

[3] A large initial letter (here the W of 'When') occupying more than one line.

[4] The named triple and quadruple feet, most uncommon and some very rare, are in full:

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

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

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

Metre

uux : *anapæst, anapæstic*
xuu : *dactyl, dactylic*

one foot per line	:	*monometer*, adjective	*monometric*
two feet per line	:	*dimeter*	*dimetric*
three feet per line	:	*trimeter*	*trimetric*
four feet per line	:	*tetrameter*	*tetrametric*
five feet per line	:	*pentameter*	*pentametric*
six feet per line	:	*hexameter*	*hexametric*
seven feet per line	:	*heptameter*	*heptametric*
eight feet per line	:	*octameter*	*octametric*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Her vaile was artificiall flowers and leaues,
> Whoſe workmanſhip both man and beaſt deceaues.

> Her VAILE | was ART- | iFI- | ciall FLOWERS | and LEAUES,
> Whose WORK- | manSHIP | both MAN | and BEAST | deCEAUES.

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

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[7] Latin 5th declension plurals are formed with long 'u', shown by a macron ; cf. status, statūs.

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

[9] An anapæst in a dactylic line, or a dactyl in an anapæstic, would also be inverted feet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

> There's a great text in Galatians,
>   Once you trip on it, entails
> Twenty-nine distinct damnations,
>   One sure if another fails :

> THERE'S a | GREAT text | IN Ga- | LAtians,
>   ONCE you | TRIP on I IT, en- | TAILS
> TWENty- | NINE dis- | TINCT dam- | NAtions,
>   ONE sure | IF a- | NOTHer | FAILS :

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> It sounds like happiness at a distance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Metre

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

<div align="center">

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

</div>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exemplary Poems

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

> Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
> How little that which thou deny'ſt me is ;
> It ſuck'd me first, and now ſucks thee,
> And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee ;
> Thou know'ſt that this cannot be ſaid   5
> A ſinne, nor ſhame nor loſſe of maidenhead,
>   Yet this enjoyes before it wooe,
>   And pamper'd ſwells with one blood made of two
>   And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

Oh ſtay, three lives in one flea ſpare,   10
Where wee almoſt, yea more then maryed are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is ;
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloiſterd in theſe living walls of Jet.   15
   Though uſe make you apt to kill mee,
   Let not to that, ſelfe murder added bee,
   And ſacrilege, three ſinnes in killing three.

Cruell and ſodaine, hast thou ſince
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence ?   20
Wherein could this flea guilty bee,
Except in that drop which it ſuckt from thee ?
Yet thou triumph'ſt, and ſaiſt that thou
Find'ſt not thy ſelfe, nor mee the weaker now ;
   'Tis true, then learne how falſe, feares bee ;   25
   Juſt ſo much honor, when thou yeeld'ſt to mee,
   Will waſt, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.

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

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

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[14] Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1985), 597, 596.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[15] Though it is theoretically possible to produce alternating lines of 8 and 10 beats with catalectic and hypermetric anapæstic or dactylic trimeters.

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

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

Metre

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Metre

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

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

3. Derek Walcott, 'Nearing Forty', from *The Gulf and Other Poems* (1969) and *Collected Poems 1948–84* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 136–7.

'Nearing Forty' alone is treated in <u>every</u> chapter, and so will be treated more closely here. Before I say anything at all about it please read the poem carefully for yourself. It is printed on the next two facing pages as it appears in Walcott's *Collected Poems 1948–84*.[16]

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[16] I have preserved as far as possible the hierarchy of faces, though the fount is not the same and line-numbers are added. One misprint, the transposition of a semi-colon and a comma in ll. 14–15, has been corrected by collation with the first British edition of *The Gulf* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 67–8.

Index of Poems and Poets Quoted and Cited