

Chapter eleven

Musical Devices

Poetry obviously makes a greater use of the "music" of language than does language that is not poetry. The poet, unlike the person who uses language to convey only information, chooses words for sound as well as for meaning, and uses the sound as a means of reinforcing meaning. So prominent is this musical quality of poetry that some writers have made it the distinguishing term in their definitions of poetry. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, describes poetry as "music . . . combined with a pleasurable idea." Whether or not it deserves this much importance, verbal music, like connotation, imagery, and figurative language, is one of the important resources that enable the poet to do more than communicate mere information. The poet may indeed sometimes pursue verbal music for its own sake; more often, at least in first-rate poetry, it is an adjunct to the total meaning or communication of the poem.

There are two broad ways by which the poet achieves musical quality: by the choice and arrangement of sounds and by the arrangement of accents. In this chapter we will consider one aspect of the first of these.

An essential element in all music is repetition. In fact, we might say that all art consists of giving structure to two elements: repetition and variation. All things we enjoy greatly and lastingly have these two elements. We enjoy the sea endlessly because it is always the same yet always different. We enjoy a baseball game because it contains the same complex combination of pattern and variation. Our love of art, then, is rooted in human psychology. We like the familiar, we like variety, but we like them combined. If we get too much sameness, the result is

monotony and tedium; if we get too much variety, the result is bewilderment and confusion. The composer of music, therefore, repeats certain musical tones; repeats them in certain combinations, or chords; and repeats them in certain patterns, or melodies. The poet likewise repeats certain sounds in certain combinations and arrangements, and thus adds musical meaning to verse. Consider the following short example.

120. THE TURTLE

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.

Ogden Nash (1902-1971)

Here is a little joke, a paradox of animal life to which the author has cleverly drawn our attention. An experiment will show us, however, that much of its appeal lies not so much in what it says as in the manner in which it says it. If, for instance, we recast the verse as prose: "The turtle lives in a shell which almost conceals its sex. It is ingenious of the turtle, in such a situation, to be so prolific," the joke falls flat. Some of its appeal must lie in its metrical form. So now we cast it in unrimed verse:

Because he lives between two decks,
It's hard to tell a turtle's gender.
The turtle is a clever beast
In such a plight to be so fertile.

Here, perhaps, is *some* improvement, but still the piquancy of the original is missing. Much of that appeal must have consisted in the use of rime—the repetition of sound in "decks" and "sex," "turtle" and "fertile." So we try once more.

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a plight to be so fertile.

But for perceptive readers there is still something missing—they may not at first see what—but some little touch that makes the difference between a good piece of verse and a little masterpiece of its kind. And then they see it: "plight" has been substituted for "fix."

But why should "fix" make such a difference? Its meaning is little different from that of "plight"; its only important difference is in sound. But there we are. The final *x* in "fix" catches up the concluding consonant sound in "sex," and its initial *f* is repeated in the initial consonant sound of "fertile." Not only do these sound recurrences provide a subtle gratification to the ear, but they also give the verse structure; they emphasize and draw together the key words of the piece: "sex," "fix," and "fertile."

Poets may repeat any unit of sound from the smallest to the largest. They may repeat individual vowel and consonant sounds, whole syllables, words, phrases, lines, or groups of lines. In each instance, in a good poem, the repetition will serve several purposes: it will please the ear, it will emphasize the words in which the repetition occurs, and it will give structure to the poem. The popularity and initial impressiveness of such repetitions is evidenced by their becoming in many instances embedded in the language as clichés like "wild and woolly," "first and foremost," "footloose and fancy-free," "penny-wise, pound-foolish," "dead as a doornail," "might and main," "sink or swim," "do or die," "pell-mell," "helter-skelter," "harum-scarum," "hocus-pocus." Some of these kinds of repetition have names, as we will see.

A syllable consists of a vowel sound that may be preceded or followed by consonant sounds. Any of these sounds may be repeated. The repetition of initial consonant sounds, as in "tried and true," "safe and sound," "fish or fowl," "rime or reason," is **alliteration**. The repetition of vowel sounds, as in "mad as a hatter," "time out of mind," "free and easy," "slapdash," is **assonance**. The repetition of final consonant sounds, as in "first and last," "odds and ends," "short and sweet," "a stroke of luck," or Shakespeare's "struts and frets" (No. 85) is **consonance**.*

Repetitions may be used alone or in combination. Alliteration and assonance are combined in such phrases as "time and tide," "thick and thin," "kith and kin," "alas and alack," "fit as a fiddle," and Edgar

*There is no established terminology for these various repetitions. *Alliteration* is used by some writers to mean any repetition of consonant sounds. *Assonance* has been used to mean the similarity as well as the identity of vowel sounds, or even the similarity of any sounds whatever. *Consonance* has often been reserved for words in which both the initial and final consonant sounds correspond, as in *green* and *groan*, *moon* and *mine*. *Rime* (or rhyme) has been used to mean any sound repetition, including alliteration, assonance, and consonance. In the absence of clear agreement on the meanings of these terms, the terminology chosen here has appeared most useful, with support in usage. Labels are useful in analysis. The student should, however, learn to recognize the devices and, more important, to see their function, without worrying too much over nomenclature.

Allan Poe's famous line, "The viol, the violet, and the vine." Alliteration and consonance are combined in such phrases as "crisscross," "last but not least," "lone and lorn," "good as gold," and Housman's "fleet foot" (No. 214) and "Malt does more than Milton can" (No. 8). The combination of assonance and consonance is rime.

Rime is the repetition of the accented vowel sound and all succeeding sounds. It is called **masculine** when the rime sounds involve only one syllable, as in *decks* and *sex* or *support* and *retort*. It is **feminine** when the rime sounds involve two or more syllables, as in *turtle* and *fertile* or *spitefully* and *delightfully*. It is referred to as **internal rime** when one or more riming words are within the line and as **end rime** when the riming words are at the *ends* of lines. End rime is probably the most frequently used and most consciously sought sound repetition in English poetry. Because it comes at the end of the line, it receives emphasis as a musical effect and perhaps contributes more than any other musical resource except rhythm and meter to give poetry its musical effect as well as its structure. There exists, however, a large body of poetry that does not employ rime and for which rime would not be appropriate. Also, there has always been a tendency, especially noticeable in modern poetry, to substitute approximate rimes for perfect rimes at the ends of lines. **Approximate rimes** include words with any kind of sound similarity, from close to fairly remote. Under approximate rime we include alliteration, assonance, and consonance or their combinations when used at the end of the line; half-rime (feminine rimes in which only half of the word rimes—the accented half, as in *lightly* and *frightful*, or the unaccented half, as in *yellow* and *willow*); and other similarities too elusive to name. "A bird came down the walk" (No. 5), "A narrow fellow in the grass" (No. 33), "'Twas warm at first like us" (No. 113), "Toads" (No. 49), and "Mr. Z" (No. 82), to different degrees, all employ various kinds of approximate end rime.

121. THAT NIGHT WHEN JOY BEGAN

That night when joy began
Our narrowest veins to flush,
We waited for the flash
Of morning's leveled gun.

But morning let us pass,
And day by day relief
Outgrows his nervous laugh,
Grown credulous of peace,

5

As mile by mile is seen
No trespasser's reproach,
And love's best glasses reach
No fields but are his own.

10

W. H. Auden (1907–1973)

QUESTIONS

1. What has been the past experience with love of the two people in the poem? What is their present experience? What precisely is the tone of the poem?
2. What basic metaphor underlies the poem? Work it out stanza by stanza. What is "the flash of morning's leveled gun"? Does line 10 mean that no trespasser reproaches the lovers or that no one reproaches the lovers for being trespassers? Does "glasses" (11) refer to spectacles, tumblers, mirrors, or field glasses? Point out three personifications.
3. The rime pattern in the poem is intricate and exact. Work it out, considering alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

In addition to the repetition of individual sounds and syllables, the poet may repeat whole words, phrases, lines, or groups of lines. When such repetition is done according to some fixed pattern, it is called a **refrain**. The refrain is especially common in songlike poetry. Examples may be found in Shakespeare's "Winter" (No. 2) and Campion's "There is a garden in her face" (No. 46).

It is not to be thought that we have exhausted the possibilities of sound repetition by giving names to a few of the more prominent kinds. The complete study of possible kinds of sound repetition in poetry would be so complex that it would break down under its own machinery. Some of the subtlest and loveliest effects escape our net of names. In as short a phrase as this from the prose of John Ruskin—"ivy as light and lovely as the vine"—we notice alliteration in *light* and *lovely*, assonance in *ivy*, *light*, and *vine*, and consonance in *ivy* and *lovely*, but we have no name to connect the *v* in *vine* with the *v*'s in *ivy* and *lovely*, or the second *l* in *lovely* with the first *l*, or the final syllables of *ivy* and *lovely* with each other; but these are all an effective part of the music of the line. Also contributing to the music of poetry is the linking of related rather than identical sounds, such as *m* and *n*, or *p* and *b*, or the vowel sounds in *boat*, *boot*, and *book*.

These various musical repetitions, for trained readers, will ordinarily make an almost subconscious contribution to their reading of the poem: readers will feel their effect without necessarily being aware of what has caused it. There is value, however, in occasionally analyzing a

poem for these devices in order to increase awareness of them. A few words of caution are necessary. First, the repetitions are entirely a matter of sound; spelling is irrelevant. *Bear* and *pair* are rimes, but *through* and *rough* are not. *Cell* and *sin*, *folly* and *philosophy* alliterate, but *sin* and *sugar*, *gun* and *gem* do not. Second, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and masculine rime are matters that ordinarily involve only stressed or accented syllables; for only such syllables ordinarily make enough impression on the ear to be significant in the sound pattern of the poem. We should hardly consider *which* and *its* in the second line of "The Turtle," for instance, as an example of assonance, for neither word is stressed enough in the reading to make it significant as a sound. Third, the words involved in these repetitions must be close enough together that the ear retains the sound, consciously or subconsciously, from its first occurrence to its second. This distance varies according to circumstances, but for alliteration, assonance, and consonance the words ordinarily have to be in the same line or adjacent lines. End rime bridges a longer gap.

122. GOD'S GRANDEUR

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

5

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

10

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)

QUESTIONS

1. What is the theme of this sonnet?
2. The image in lines 3–4 possibly refers to olive oil being collected in great vats from crushed olives, but the image is much disputed. Explain the simile in line 2 and the symbols in lines 7–8 and 11–12.

3. Explain "reck his rod" (4), "spent" (9), "bent" (13).
4. Using different-colored pencils, encircle and connect examples of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme. Do these help to carry the meaning?

We should not leave the impression that the use of these musical devices is necessarily or always valuable. Like the other resources of poetry, they can be judged only in the light of the poem's total intention. Many of the greatest works of English poetry—for instance, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and *Paradise Lost*—do not employ end rhyme. Both alliteration and rhyme, especially feminine rhyme, if used excessively or unskillfully, become humorous or silly. If the intention is humorous, the result is delightful; if not, fatal. Shakespeare, who knew how to use all these devices to the utmost advantage, parodied their unskillful use in lines like "The preyful princess pierced and pricked a pretty pleasing prickett" in *Love's Labor's Lost* and

Whereat with blade, with bloody, blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast

in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Swinburne parodied his own highly alliterative style in "Nephelidia" with lines like "Life is the lust of a lamp for the light that is dark till the dawn of the day when we die." Used skillfully and judiciously, however, musical devices provide a palpable and delicate pleasure to the ear and, even more important, add dimension to meaning.

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123. WITH RUE MY HEART IS LADEN

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had.
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.

5

A. E. Housman (1859–1936)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *rue* (1).
2. What, where, or why are the "brooks too broad for leaping" and the "fields where roses fade"?
3. What are the connotations here of "golden"? Does the use of "golden" (2), "lad" (4), and "girls" (7) remind you of any earlier poem? (If not, see No. 238.) How does this submerged allusion enrich the poem?
4. Point out and discuss the contribution to the poem of alliteration, end rime (masculine and feminine), and other repetitions.

124. WE REAL COOL

The Pool Players.

Seven At The Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks (b. 1917)

QUESTIONS

1. In addition to end rime, what other musical devices does this poem employ?
2. Try reading this poem with the pronouns at the beginning of the lines instead of at the end. What is lost?
3. English teachers in a certain urban school were once criticized for having their students read this poem: it was said to be immoral. Was the criticism justified? Why or why not?

125. AS IMPERCEPTIBLY AS GRIEF

As imperceptibly as grief
The summer lapsed away,
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like perfidy.

A quietness distilled 5
 As twilight long begun,
 Or nature spending with herself
 Sequestered afternoon.

The dusk drew earlier in,
 The morning foreign shone— 10
 A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
 As guest who would be gone.

And thus, without a wing
 Or service of a keel,
 Our summer made her light escape 15
 Into the beautiful.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

QUESTIONS

1. What are the subject and tone of the poem? Explain its opening simile.
2. Discuss the ways in which the approximate rimes, alliteration, and the consonant sounds in the last stanza contribute to the meaning and tone.
3. What possible meanings have the last two lines?

126. THE HARBOR

Passing through huddled and ugly walls,
 By doorways where women haggard
 Looked from their hunger-deep eyes,
 Haunted with shadows of hunger-hands,
 Out from the huddled and ugly walls, 5
 I came sudden, at the city's edge,
 On a blue burst of lake—
 Long lake waves breaking under the sun
 On a spray-flung curve of shore;
 And a fluttering storm of gulls, 10
 Masses of great gray wings
 And flying white bellies
 Veering and wheeling free in the open.

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967)

QUESTIONS

1. Define as precisely as possible the contrast in content between the first five and the last seven lines of the poem. What qualities are symbolized by the gulls? What judgment is made by means of the contrast?
2. This poem is in free verse (without meter), and does not rhyme. But you should be able to find examples of assonance in almost every line. Underline or draw circles around the repeated vowels. What vowel sound dominates the first five lines? Does the pattern change in the last seven? If so, what function is served by this change?
3. What consonant sounds are most prominent in the first five lines? Is there a change in the last seven? Why?

127. PARTING, WITHOUT A SEQUEL

She has finished and sealed the letter
At last, which he so richly has deserved,
With characters venomous and hatefully curved,
And nothing could be better.

But even as she gave it
Saying to the blue-capped functioner of doom,
"Into his hands," she hoped the leering groom
Might somewhere lose and leave it.

5

Then all the blood
Forsook the face. She was too pale for tears,
Observing the ruin of her younger years.
She went and stood

10

Under her father's vaunting oak
Who kept his peace in wind and sun, and glistened
Stoical in the rain; to whom she listened
If he spoke.

15

And now the agitation of the rain
Rasped his sere leaves, and he talked low and gentle
Reproaching the wan daughter by the lintel;
Ceasing and beginning again.

20

Away went the messenger's bicycle,
His serpent's track went up the hill forever,
And all the time she stood there hot as fever
And cold as any icicle.

John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974)

QUESTIONS

1. Identify the figures of speech in lines 3 and 22 and discuss their effectiveness. Are there traces of dramatic irony in the poem? Where?
2. Is the oak literal or figurative? Neither? Both? Discuss the meanings of "vaunting" (13), "stoical" (15), "sere" (18), and "lintel" (19).
3. Do you find any trite language in the poem? Where? What does it tell us about the girl's action?
4. W. H. Auden has defined poetry as "the clear expression of mixed feelings." Discuss the applicability of the definition to this poem. Try it out on other poems.
5. A feminine rime that involves two syllables is known also as a **double rime**. Find examples in the poem of both perfect and approximate double rimes. A feminine rime that involves three syllables is a **triple rime**. Find one example of a triple rime. Which lines employ masculine or **single rimes**, either perfect or approximate?

128. ROW

Slap. Clap.
 The lake's back
 laps the flat
 boat. Croak,
 goes a frog, 5
 croak. Flo-
 tillas of vanilla
 water lilies
 float. Moats
 of air flare, filled 10
 with day-diamonds,
 flame. Tame
 turtles lurch
 like dreadnoughts
 across murky 15
 floors. Oars
 dig dingles
 in the sun-shingled
 roof of the water.
 Pines shine, 20
 singing their green creeds.

Ralph Pomeroy (b. 1926)

QUESTIONS

1. What activity is the speaker engaged in? What meanings has the title?
2. What kinds of imagery prevail in the poem?

3. Find examples of internal rime, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and approximations or combinations thereof. What one line does *not* contain, in itself or in combination with the preceding or following line, one of these sound repetitions? What are the only two words (other than articles and prepositions) used twice in the poem? Where does punctuation generally occur? Have these questions or their answers any significance?
4. What is a "green creed" (21)?

129. COUNTING-OUT RHYME

Silver bark of beech, and willow
Bark of yellow birch and yellow
Twig of willow.

Stripe of green in moosewood maple,
Color seen in leaf of apple,
Bark of popple. 5

Wood of popple pale as moonbeam,
Wood of oak for yoke and barn-beam,
Wood of hornbeam.

Silver bark of beech, and hollow 10
Stem of elder, tall and yellow
Twig of willow.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

QUESTIONS

1. List all instances of alliteration, assonance, consonance, half-rime, internal rime, and word repetition.
2. How serious is the purpose of this poem?
3. What is a "counting-out rhyme"? Can you remember any from your childhood? What here is being counted?

130. TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car 5
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
 her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, 10
 alive, still, never to be born.
 Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
 under the hood purred the steady engine.
 I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red; 15
 around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
 then pushed her over the edge into the river.

William Stafford (b. 1914)

QUESTIONS

1. State precisely the speaker's dilemma. What kind of person is he? Does he make the right decision? Why does he call his hesitation "my only swerving" (17), and how does this connect with the word "swerve" in line 4?
2. What different kinds of imagery and of image contrasts give life to the poem? Do any of the images have symbolic overtones?
3. At first glance this poem may appear to be without end rhyme. Looking closer, do you find any correspondences between lines 2 and 4 in each stanza? Between the final words of the concluding couplet? Can you find any line-end in the poem without some connection in sound to another line-end in its stanza?

131. NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

Nature's first green is gold,
 Her hardest hue to hold.
 Her early leaf's a flower;
 But only so an hour.
 Then leaf subsides to leaf.
 So Eden sank to grief,
 So dawn goes down to day.
 Nothing gold can stay.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the paradoxes in lines 1 and 3.
2. Discuss the poem as a series of symbols. What are the symbolic meanings of "gold" in the final line of the poem?
3. Discuss the contributions of alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and other repetitions to the effectiveness of the poem.

Chapter twelve

Rhythm and Meter

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

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

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

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

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

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

The basic metrical unit, the *foot*, consists normally of one accented syllable plus one or two unaccented syllables, though occasionally there may be no unaccented syllables, and very rarely there may be three. For diagramming verse, various systems of visual symbols have been invented. In this book we shall use a short curved line to indicate an unaccented syllable, a short horizontal line to indicate an accented syllable, and a vertical bar to indicate the division between feet. The basic kinds of feet are thus as follows:

*Though the words *accent* and *stress* are generally used interchangeably, as here, a distinction is sometimes made between them in technical discussions. *Accent*, the relative prominence given a syllable in relation to its neighbors, is then said to result from one or more of four causes: *stress*, or force of utterance, producing loudness; *duration*; *pitch*; and *juncture*, the manner of transition between successive sounds. Of these, *stress*, in English verse, is most important.

Examples	Name of foot	Name of meter*
$\bar{in}-\bar{ter},$ $\bar{the} \bar{sun}$	Iamb	Iambic
$\bar{en}-\bar{ter},$ $\bar{went} \bar{to}$	Trochee	Trochaic
$\bar{in}-\bar{ter}-\bar{vene},$ $\bar{in} \bar{a} \bar{hut}$	Anapest	Anapestic
$\bar{en}-\bar{ter}-\bar{prise},$ $\bar{col}-\bar{or} \bar{of}$	Dactyl	Dactylic
$\bar{true}-\bar{blue}$	Spondee	(Spondaic)
\bar{truth}	Monosyllabic foot	

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

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

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

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

132. VIRTUE

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

*In the spondee the accent is thought of as being distributed equally or almost equally over the two syllables and is sometimes referred to as a hovering accent. No whole poems are written in spondees or monosyllabic feet; hence there are only four basic meters: iambic, trochaic, anapestic, and dactylic. Iambic and trochaic are **duple meters** because they employ two-syllable feet; anapestic and dactylic are **triple meters** because they employ three-syllable feet.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave, 5
 Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;
 Thy root is ever in its grave,
 And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses, 10
 A box where sweets compacted lie;
 My music shows ye have your closes,
 And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul, 15
 Like seasoned timber, never gives;
 But though the whole world turn to coal,
 Then chiefly lives.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *bridal* (2), *brave* (5), *closes* (11).
2. How are the four stanzas interconnected? How do they build to a climax? How does the fourth contrast with the first three?

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

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

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

For thou| must die. 4

Surveying what we have done so far, we may with some confidence say that the prevailing metrical foot of the poem is iambic; and we may reasonably hypothesize that the second and third lines of each stanza

are tetrameter (four-foot) lines and the fourth line dimeter. What about the first line? Line 1 contains eight syllables, and the last six are clearly iambic:

Sweet day, | $\overset{\sim}{\text{so}}$ $\overline{\text{cool}}$, | $\overset{\sim}{\text{so}}$ $\overline{\text{calm}}$, | $\overset{\sim}{\text{so}}$ $\overline{\text{bright}}$. |

1

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

$\overline{\text{Then}}$ $\overline{\text{chief-}}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\text{ly}}$ $\overline{\text{lives}}$. |

16

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

$\overset{\sim}{\text{But}}$ $\overline{\text{though}}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\text{the}}$ $\overline{\text{whole}}$ | $\overline{\text{world}}$ $\overline{\text{turn}}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\text{to}}$ $\overline{\text{coal}}$. |

15

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

$\overline{\text{The}}$ $\overline{\text{bri-}}$ $\overset{\sim}{\text{dal}}$ $\overset{\sim}{\text{of}}$ $\overline{\text{the}}$ $\overline{\text{earth}}$ $\overset{\sim}{\text{and}}$ $\overline{\text{sky}}$,

2

$\overline{\text{Thy}}$ $\overline{\text{root}}$ $\overset{\sim}{\text{is}}$ $\overline{\text{ev-}}$ $\overset{\sim}{\text{er}}$ $\overset{\sim}{\text{in}}$ $\overline{\text{its}}$ $\overline{\text{grave}}$.

7

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

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

The $\overline{\text{bri-}}$ $\overline{\text{dal}}$ of $\overline{\text{the}}$ $\overline{\text{earth}}$ and $\overline{\text{sky}}$, 2
 Thy $\overline{\text{root}}$ is $\overline{\text{ev-}}$ $\overline{\text{er}}$ in $\overline{\text{its}}$ $\overline{\text{grave}}$. 7

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

$\overline{\text{Sweet}}$ $\overline{\text{rose}}$, $\overline{\text{whose}}$ $\overline{\text{hue}}$, $\overline{\text{an-}}$ $\overline{\text{gry}}$ and $\overline{\text{brave}}$. 5

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

$\overline{\text{Bids}}$ the $\overline{\text{rash}}$ $\overline{\text{gaz-}}$ $\overline{\text{er}}$ $\overline{\text{wipe}}$ $\overline{\text{his}}$ $\overline{\text{eye}}$. 6

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

$\overline{\text{On-}}$ $\overline{\text{ly}}$ $\overline{\text{a}}$ $\overline{\text{sweet}}$ and $\overline{\text{vir-}}$ $\overline{\text{tu-}}$ $\overline{\text{ous}}$ $\overline{\text{soul}}$. 13

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

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

$\overline{\text{Sweet}}$ $\overline{\text{spring}}$, $\overline{\text{full}}$ of $\overline{\text{sweet}}$ $\overline{\text{days}}$ and $\overline{\text{ros-}}$ $\overline{\text{es}}$, 9
 $\overline{\text{My}}$ $\overline{\text{mu-}}$ $\overline{\text{sic}}$ shows $\overline{\text{ye}}$ $\overline{\text{have}}$ $\overline{\text{your}}$ $\overline{\text{clos-}}$ $\overline{\text{es}}$. 11

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

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

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

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

3. Scansion is not an altogether exact science. Within certain limits we may say that a certain scansion is right or wrong, but beyond these limits there is legitimate room for disagreement between qualified read-

ers. Line 11 of "Virtue" provides the best example. Many metrists—those wanting scansion to reflect as closely as possible the underlying pattern—would mark it as perfectly regular: a succession of four iambs. Others—those wishing the scansion to reveal more nearly the nuances of a sensitive reading—would find that three sensitive readers might read this line in three different ways. One might stress "ye"; a second, "your"; and a third, both. The result is four possible scansions for this line:

My mu- sic shows ye have your close- es,	11
My mu- sic shows ye have your close- es,	11
My mu- sic shows ye have your close- es,	11
My mu- sic shows ye have your close- es.	11

Notice that the divisions between feet have no meaning except to help us identify the meter. They do not correspond to real divisions in the line; indeed, they fall often in the middle of a word. We place them where we do only to yield the most possible of a single kind of foot; in other words, to reveal regularity. If line 14 is marked

Like sea- soned tim- ber, nev- er gives,	14
---	----

it yields four regular iambs. If it were marked

Like sea- soned tim- ber, nev- er gives,	14
--	----

there would be an unaccented "left-over" syllable, three trochees, and a monosyllabic foot. The basic pattern of the poem would be obscured.

4. Finally—and this is the most important generalization of all—perfect regularity of meter is no criterion of merit. Beginning students sometimes get the notion that it is. If the meter is smooth and perfectly regular, they feel that the poet has handled the meter successfully and deserves all credit for it. Actually there is nothing easier than for any moderately talented versifier to make language go *ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum*. But there are two reasons why this is not generally desirable. The first is that, as we have said, all art consists essentially of repetition and variation. If a meter alternates too regularly between light and heavy beats, the result is to banish variation; the meter becomes mechanical and, for any sensitive reader, monotonous. The second is that, once a basic meter has been established, any deviations from it become highly significant and provide a means by which the poet can use meter to reinforce meaning. If a meter is too perfectly regular, the probability is that the poet, instead of adapting rhythm to meaning, has simply forced the meaning into a metrical straitjacket.

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

There are several ways by which variation can be introduced into the poet's use of meter. The most obvious way is by the substitution of other kinds of feet for regular feet. In our scansion of line 9 of "Virtue," for instance, we found a spondee, a trochee, and another spondee substituted for the expected iambs in the first three feet (plus an unexpected unaccented syllable left over at the end of the line). A less obvious but equally important means of variation is through simple phrasing and variation of degrees of accent. Though we began our scansion of "Virtue" by marking lines 3, 10, and 14 as perfectly regular, there is actually a considerable difference among them. Line 3 is quite regular, for the phrasing corresponds with the metrical pattern, and the line can be read *ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum*. Line 10 is less regular, for the three-syllable word "compact" cuts across the division between two feet. We should read it *ta-dum ta-dum ta-dump-ty dum*. Line 14 is the least regular of the three, for here there is no correspondence between phrasing and metrical division. We should read this line *ta-dump-ty dump-ty, dump-ty dum*. Finally, variation can be introduced by grammatical and rhetorical pauses. The comma in line 14, by introducing a grammatical pause, provides an additional variation from its perfect regularity. Probably the most violently irregular line in the poem is line 5,

Sweet rose, | whose hue, | an- gry | and brave, | 5

for here the spondaic substitution in the first foot, and the unusual trochaic substitution in the middle of a line in the third foot, are set off

and emphasized by grammatical pauses, and also (as we have noted) the unaccented "whose" is considerably heavier than the other two unaccented syllables in the line. It is worth noting that the violent irregularity of this line (only slightly diminished in the next) corresponds with, and reinforces, the most violent image in the poem. Again, meter serves meaning.

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

We must not forget, of course, that poetry need not be metrical at all. Like alliteration and rime, like metaphor and irony, like even imagery, meter is simply one resource the poet may or may not use. His job is to employ his resources to the best advantage for the object he has in mind—the kind of experience he wishes to express. And on no other basis can we judge him.

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE

Of the four standard meters, iambic is by far the most common. Perhaps 80 percent of metered poetry in English is iambic. Anapestic meter (examples: "The Chimney Sweeper," No. 74, and "In the garden," No. 95) is next most common. Trochaic meter (example: "Counting-Out Rhyme," No. 129) is relatively infrequent. Dactylic

meter is so rare as to be almost a museum specimen ("Bedtime Story," No. 222, in stanzas of three tetrameter lines followed by a dimeter line, is the sole example in this book).

Because of the predominance of iambic and anapestic meters in English verse, and because most anapestic poems have a high percentage of iambic substitutions, Robert Frost has written that in our language there are virtually but two meters: "strict iambic and loose iambic."* This is, of course, an overstatement; but, like many overstatements, it contains a good deal of truth. "Strict iambic" is strictly duple meter: it admits no trisyllabic substitutions. Trochees, spondees, and, occasionally, monosyllabic feet may be substituted for the expected iambs, but not anapests or dactyls. The presence of a triple foot has such a conspicuous effect in speeding or loosening up a line that the introduction of a few of them quite alters the nature of the meter. Herbert's "Virtue" is written in "strict iambic" (most of its feet are iambic; and, with the dubious exception of "virtuous," it contains no trisyllabic feet). "In the garden" and "The Chimney Sweeper" (after its difficult first stanza) are anapestic (most of their feet are anapests). But e.e. cummings's "if everything happens that can't be done" (No. 136), though by actual count it has more iambic feet than anapestic, *sounds* more like "The Chimney Sweeper" than it does like "Virtue." It would be impossible to define what percentage of anapestic feet a poem must have before it ceases seeming iambic and begins seeming anapestic, but it would be considerably less than 50 percent and might be more like 25 percent. At any rate, a large number of poems fall into an area between "strict iambic" and "prevailing anapestic," and they might be fittingly described as iambic-anapestic (what Frost called "loose iambic").

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

*"The Figure a Poem Makes," *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, 1966), pp. 17-18.

it and rhythmical prose. Probably more than 50 percent of published contemporary poetry is written in free verse.

To add one further variation, a number of contemporary poets have begun writing "prose poems," or poems in prose (example: Carolyn Forché's "The Colonel," No. 206). It is too early to determine whether this is a passing fashion or will be a lasting development.

EXERCISES

1. An important term which every student of poetry should know (and should be careful not to confuse with *free verse*) is *blank verse*. **Blank verse** has a very specific meter: it is *iambic pentameter, unrimed*. It has a special name because it is the principal English meter, that is, the meter that has been used for a large proportion of the greatest English poetry, including the tragedies of Shakespeare and the epics of Milton. Iambic pentameter in English seems especially suitable for the serious treatment of serious themes. The natural movement of the English language tends to be iambic. Lines shorter than pentameter tend to be songlike, not suited to sustained treatment of serious material. Lines longer than pentameter tend to break up into shorter units, the hexameter line being read as two three-foot units, the heptameter line as a four-foot and a three-foot unit, and so on. Rime, while highly appropriate to most short poems, often proves a handicap for a long and lofty work. (The word *blank* implies that the end of the line is "blank," that is, bare of rime.)

Of the following poems, four are in blank verse, four are in free verse, and two are in other meters. Determine in which category each belongs.

- a. Portrait d'une Femme (No. 24).
 - b. Last Stand (No. 89).
 - c. Ulysses (No. 63).
 - d. Base Details (No. 28).
 - e. Excerpt from *Macbeth* (No. 85).
 - f. "Out, Out—" (No. 84).
 - g. Journey of the Magi (No. 92).
 - h. The Telephone (No. 110).
 - i. Mirror (No. 17).
 - j. Love Song: I and Thou (No. 65).
2. Another useful distinction is that between end-stopped lines and run-on lines. An **end-stopped line** is one in which the end of the line corresponds with a natural speech pause; a **run-on line** is one in which the sense of the line hurries on into the next line. (There are, of course, all degrees of end-stop and run-on. A line ending with a period or semicolon is heavily end-stopped. A line without punctuation at the end is normally considered a run-on line, but it is less forcibly run-on if it ends at a natural speech pause—as between subject and predicate—than if it ends, say, between an article and its noun, between an auxiliary and its verb, or between a preposition and its object.) The use of run-on lines is one way the poet can make use of grammatical or rhetorical pauses to vary his basic meter.

- a. Examine "Sound and Sense" (No. 147) and "My Last Duchess" (No. 83). Both are written in the same meter: iambic pentameter, rimed in couplets. Is their general rhythmical effect quite similar or markedly different? What accounts for the difference? Does the contrast support our statement that the poet's choice of meter is probably less important than the way he handles it?
- b. Examine "The Hound" (No. 40) and "The Dance" (No. 155). Which is the more forcibly run-on in the majority of its lines? Describe the difference in effect.

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133. "INTRODUCTION" TO SONGS OF INNOCENCE

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me:

"Pipe a song about a Lamb."
So I piped with merry cheer.
"Piper, pipe that song again."
So I piped; he wept to hear.

5

"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;
Sing thy songs of happy cheer."
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

10

"Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read."
So he vanished from my sight,
And I plucked a hollow reed,

15

And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

20

William Blake (1757-1827)

QUESTIONS

1. Poets have traditionally been thought of as inspired by one of the Muses (Greek female divinities whose duties were to nurture the arts). Blake's

Songs of Innocence, a book of poems about childhood and the state of innocence, includes "The Chimney Sweeper" (No. 74) and "The Lamb" (No. 196). In this introductory poem to the book, what function is played by the child upon a cloud?

2. What is symbolized by "a Lamb" (5)?
3. What three stages of poetic composition are suggested in stanzas 1-2, 3, and 4-5 respectively?
4. What features of the poems in his book does Blake indicate in this "Introduction"? Name at least four.
5. Mark the stressed and unstressed syllables in lines 1-2 and 9-10. Do they establish the basic meter of the poem? If so, is that meter iambic or trochaic? Or could it be either? Some metrists have discarded the distinction between iambic and trochaic, and between anapestic and dactylic, as being artificial. The important distinction, they feel, is between duple and triple meters. Does this poem support their claim?

134. IT TAKES ALL SORTS

It takes all sorts of in- and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling.

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

QUESTIONS

1. What is the poet saying about the nature of his poetry?
2. Scan the poem. Is it iambic or trochaic? Or could it be either? How does this poem differ from Blake's "Introduction" in illustrating the ambiguity of the distinction between the two meters?

135. EPITAPH ON AN ARMY OF MERCENARIES

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.

A. E. Housman (1859-1936)

QUESTIONS

1. The Battle of Ypres (October 31, 1914), early in World War I, pitted a small army of British "regulars" against a much larger force of German volunteers. German newspapers described the conflict as one between young German volunteers and British "mercenaries." Housman first published this poem in the *London Times* on October 31, 1917, the third anniversary of the battle. Who are "These" (1)? Is the tone of the poem one of tribute or one of cynical scorn for "These"? How does the poet use the word "mercenary"?
2. In scanning Herbert's "Virtue," we discovered two lines that had an unaccented syllable left over at the end which we did not count in determining the meter. How does this poem differ from "Virtue" in its use of such lines? The meter of this poem is iambic tetrameter. Does this sufficiently describe its metrical form?

136. IF EVERYTHING HAPPENS THAT CAN'T BE DONE

if everything happens that can't be done
 (and anything's righter
 than books
 could plan)
 the stupidest teacher will almost guess 5
 (with a run
 skip
 around we go yes)
 there's nothing as something as one

one hasn't a why or because or although 10
 (and buds know better
 than books
 don't grow)
 one's anything old being everything new
 (with a what 15
 which
 around we come who)
 one's everyanything so

so world is a leaf so tree is a bough
 (and birds sing sweeter 20
 than books
 tell how)
 so here is away and so your is a my
 (with a down
 up 25
 around again fly)
 forever was never till now

now i love you and you love me
 (and books are shuter
 than books
 can be) 30
 and deep in the high that does nothing but fall
 (with a shout
 each
 around we go all) 35
 there's somebody calling who's we

 we're anything brighter than even the sun
 (we're everything greater
 than books
 might mean) 40
 we're everything more than believe
 (with a spin
 leap
 alive we're alive)
 we're wonderful one times one 45

e. e. cummings (1894–1962)

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the last line. Of what very familiar idea is this poem a fresh treatment?
2. The poem is based on a contrast between heart and mind, or love and learning. Which does the poet prefer? What symbols does he use for each?
3. What is the tone of the poem?
4. Which lines of each stanza regularly rhyme with each other (either perfect or approximate rhyme)? How does the poet link the stanzas?
5. What is the basic metrical scheme of the poem? What does the meter contribute to the tone? What line (in the fourth stanza) most clearly states the subject and occasion of the poem? How does meter underline its significance?
6. Can you suggest any reason why the poet did not write lines 2–4 and 6–8 of each stanza as one line each? What metrical variations does the poet use in lines 6–8 of each stanza and with what effect?
7. In scanning "Virtue" (No. 132) we spoke of a circular process in which normal reading establishes the metrical pattern which then partially determines how the poem should be read. Whether, for instance, we read a word like *fire* as one syllable (rhyming with *hire*) or two syllables (rhyming with *liar*) may depend on the meter. The word *every* can be pronounced as having two syllables (*ev'ry*) or three (*ev-er-y*). How should it be pronounced in lines 14 and 38? In lines 18 and 41?

137. OH WHO IS THAT YOUNG SINNER

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
Oh they're taking him to prison for the color of his hair.

'Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;
In the good old time 'twas hanging for the color that it is;
Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable color of his hair.

Oh a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid
To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;
But they've pulled the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare,
And they're taking him to justice for the color of his hair.

Now 'tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet,
And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,
And between his spells of labor in the time he has to spare
He can curse the God that made him for the color of his hair.

A. E. Housman (1859-1936)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *poll* (10), *oakum* (13). Portland (14), an English peninsula, is the site of a famous criminal prison.
2. What kind of irony does the poem exhibit? Explain.
3. What symbolic meanings are suggested by "the color of his hair"?
4. This poem represents a kind of meter that we have not yet discussed. It may be scanned as iambic heptameter:

Oh w̄ho | is̄ th̄at | yoūng s̄in-ner | with̄ thē hand-cuffs | on̄ his̄ wrists?

But you will probably find yourself reading it as a four-beat line:

Oh w̄ho | is̄ th̄at | yoūng s̄in-ner | with̄ thē hand-cuffs | on̄ his̄ wrists?

Although the meter is duple insofar as there is an alternation between unaccented and accented syllables, there is also an alternation in the degree of stress on the accented syllables: the first, third, fifth, and seventh stresses being heavier than the second, fourth, and sixth; the result is that the two-syllable feet tend to group themselves into larger units. We may scan it as follows, using a short line for a light accent, a longer one for a heavy accent:

Oh who | is that young sin | ner with the hand | cuffs on his wrists? |
 And what | has he been af | ter that they groan | and shake their fists? |
 And where | fore is he wear | ing such a con | science strick-en air? |
 Oh they're tak | ing him to pris | on for the col | or of his hair. |

This kind of meter, in which there is an alternation between heavy and light stresses, is known as **dipodic** (two-footed) **verse**. The alternation may not be perfect throughout, but it will be frequent enough to establish a pattern in the reader's mind. Now scan the last three stanzas. For another example of dipodic verse, see "Midway" (No. 223).

138. DOWN BY THE SALLEY GARDENS

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
 She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.
 She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
 But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.
 In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
 And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.
 She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;
 But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *salley* (1), *weirs* (7).
2. This poem introduces an additional kind of metrical variation—the metrical pause or rest. Unlike grammatical and rhetorical pauses, the metrical pause affects scansion. If you beat out the rhythm of this poem with your hand, you will find that the fourth beat of each line (possibly excepting lines 3 and 7) regularly falls *between* syllables. A **metrical pause**, then, is a pause that replaces an accented syllable. It is usually found in verse that has a pronounced lilt or swing. The first line of Yeats's poem may be scanned as follows (the metrical pause is represented with an x):

Down by | the sal- | ley gar-dens^x | my love | and I | did meet. |

The third line might be scanned in several ways, as the following alternatives suggest:

She bid | me take | love eas- | y, as | the leaves | grow on | the tree, |
 She bid | me take | love eas- | y,^x as | the leaves | grow on | the tree. |

Scan the rest of the poem.

139. HAD I THE CHOICE

Had I the choice to tally greatest bards,
To limn their portraits, stately, beautiful, and emulate at will,
Homer with all his wars and warriors—Hector, Achilles, Ajax,
Or Shakespeare's woe-entangled Hamlet, Lear, Othello—Tennyson's
 fair ladies,
Meter or wit the best, or choice conceit to wield in perfect rhyme,
 delight of singers;
These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter,
Would you the undulation of one wave, its trick to me transfer,
Or breathe one breath of yours upon my verse,
And leave its odor there.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *tally* (1), *limn* (2), *conceit* (5).
2. What poetic qualities does Whitman propose to barter in exchange for what? What qualities do the sea and its waves symbolize?
3. What kind of "verse" is this? Why does Whitman prefer it to "meter" and "perfect rhyme"?

140. THE AIM WAS SONG

Before man came to blow it right
 The wind once blew itself untaught,
And did its loudest day and night
 In any rough place where it caught.

Man came to tell it what was wrong: 5
 It hadn't found the place to blow;
It blew too hard—the aim was song.
 And listen—how it ought to go!

He took a little in his mouth,
 And held it long enough for north 10
To be converted into south,
 And then by measure blew it forth.

By measure. It was word and note,
 The wind the wind had meant to be—
A little through the lips and throat. 15
 The aim was song—the wind could see.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

QUESTIONS

1. Frost invents a myth about the origin of poetry. What implications does it suggest about the relation of man to nature and of poetry to nature?
2. Contrast the thought and form of this poem with Whitman's.
3. Scan the poem and identify its meter. How does the poet give variety to a regular metrical pattern?

141. METRICAL FEET

Tro-chée | trips from | long to | short.

From long to long in sol-emn sort

Slow Spon-dee stalks; | strong foot! | yet ill a-ble

Ev-er to | come up with | Dac-tyl tri-syl-la-ble.

I-am-bics march | from short | to long;

With a leap | and a bound | the swift An-a-pests throng.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)

QUESTIONS

1. The scansion markings for lines 1–3 have been deliberately left incomplete by your editors. Why? How would you complete the marking?
2. The meter of this poem cannot be fully named because there is no prevailing foot. (Two lines, however, are metrically identical. Which two?) Can the poem be assigned a consistent line length—trimeter, tetrameter, or pentameter?
3. If you have trouble remembering the metrical feet, memorize this.

EXERCISE

The following passage, a scene in the Garden of Eden, is excerpted from Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. The poem is written in blank verse, but the *visual* signs of its metrical form (line spacing, capital letters at line beginnings) are here removed. Using your ear and your knowledge of the poem's meter, decide where the line breaks occur, and indicate them with a slash mark.

Now came still Evening on, and Twilight gray had in her sober livery all things clad; Silence accompanied, for beast and bird, they to their grassy couch, these to their nests were slunk, all but the wakeful nightingale; she all night long her amorous descant sang; Silence was pleased; now glowed the firmament with living sapphires: Hesperus that led the starry host, rode brightest, till the Moon rising in cloudy majesty, at length apparent Queen, unveiled her peerless light, and o'er the dark her silver mantle threw.