Introduction to English Meter

I. **Prefatory Note**

When, some years ago, I wrote a book about English versification, I illustrated its forms and conventions by drawing examples from the widest possible historical range. I cited, more or less equally, Geoffrey Chaucer and the Scottish Chaucerians; the great poets of the Renaissance; John Milton; the Augustan satirists; the English and American Romantics; and the modern masters. I took this approach to demonstrate the continuity of the English metrical tradition over the course of six centuries, as well as to show the shifts, debates, and modifications that have occurred within the tradition.

For this essay, I've picked my examples mainly from twentieth and twenty-first century poets. This choice reflects a wish to highlight the vitality of metrical

composition in recent and contemporary poetry. Though many poets of the past one hundred years have cultivated free verse and have in the process enriched our poetry, no coherent system of prosody has emerged from their experiments. Meanwhile, our traditional system has remained as valuable and viable as ever, and has continued to provide writers, from many backgrounds and different viewpoints, with the opportunity to achieve effects unobtainable in any other literary medium.

As I did in my book about versification, I often cite iambic pentameters to illustrate specific points about English meter. This policy reflects practical considerations rather than an aesthetic judgement in favor of the measure. The Muses cherish the shorter and longer meters--and the non-iambic ones--no less than the iambic pentameter. Yet for reasons discussed in a later section of this essay, iambics suit, with singular flexibility, a number of fundamental and interconnected features of English grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. And of all the iambic measures, the pentameter accommodates the richest variety of rhythm. The line is relatively long and capacious, yet we're able to hold it in the ear and mind as a distinct unit. If you can get a feel for the iambic pentameter, an appreciation of the other iambic meters—plus the less commonly practiced trochaic, anapestic, and dactylic measures—will follow. What's more, an appreciation of the line will give you a purchase on much of the major poetry of our language, from *The Canterbury Tales* to William Shakespeare's plays and sonnets to masterworks of recent times.

Though this essay is longer than surveys of this type usually are, I've attempted to organize it in a way that allows readers to dip in and out of it, according to their interest and convenience. I should also assure readers, if assurance is necessary, that one doesn't need a detailed critical guide to enjoy verse or write it accurately. The best way to learn about the art remains to read great poets and to find one's way among them to those with whom one feels special kinship.

At the same time, however, versification is fascinating in all sorts of ways. It involves not only the rhythms of language but also such topics as grammar, phonetics, and literary and cultural history. The fact that so many of our most memorable poets have investigated the subject, and have spoken warmly of their engagement with it, testifies to its significance and appeal. Given this situation, it seems wiser to risk supplying a superfluity of evidence and description than to offer a more summary treatment that achieves brevity but perhaps does so at the expense of clarity and depth.

Finally, my aim here is not to propound "rules," much less to suggest that I possess the secrets to good writing. Rather, I hope to explain a species of composition that has helped many talented writers articulate interesting and important thoughts and feelings. In recent generations, we have, in the arts,

elevated self-expression so much that we sometimes forget the ways in which technique can enhance it—can make it fresher, acuter, more energetic, and more memorable. An understanding of prosody (and rhetoric and genre) may enable poets to adopt strategies and engage subjects they might not otherwise, and to write poems they never guessed they could. By the same token, readers attuned to technique are likely to gain a richer appreciation of the poems they love.

II. Scansion and the Chief Meters of English Verse, Plus the Distinction Between Metrical Accent and Speech Stress

Since the time of Chaucer (14th c.), English-language poets have written mainly in iambic meters. "Meter" (from the Greek *metron*) means "measure" and refers to the rhythmical organization of verse lines. "Iambic" is a rhythm that alternates between relatively lightly stressed syllables and relatively heavily stressed ones.

Below are short passages from poems (the final one is a complete two-line epigram) that illustrate the chief meters of English verse. All the selections feature iambic rhythm. The lines, however, differ in length. The shortest has two feet and four syllables. The longest has five feet and ten syllables. A "foot" is the basic rhythmic unit of a verse line. In iambic verse in English, this unit consists of a metrically unaccented syllable followed by a metrically accented one. As Robert Frost once remarked, prefacing a proposed collection of his work for younger readers, poets follow "the measured way, … so many feet to the line, seldom less than two or more than five in our language" (*Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays,* edited by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson [New York: Library of America, 1995], 847).

Who knows his will?
Who knows what mood
His hours fulfil?
His griefs conclude?
(J. V. Cunningham, "Meditation on a Memoir," 1-4)

How frightened you were once
—And not so long ago—
When late one night we took
Our pathway homeward through
The churchyard where you saw
Grey gravestones row on row.
(Dick Davis, "Mariam Darbandi," 1-6)

This youth too long has heard the break
Of waters in a land of change.
He goes to see what suns can make
From soil more indurate and strange.
(Louise Bogan, "A Tale," 1-4)

I rang them up while touring Timbuctoo,
Those bosom chums to whom you're known as "Who?"
(X. J. Kennedy, "To Someone Who Insisted I Look Up Someone")

To clarify the structure of these selections, we can scan them. "Scan" comes from the Latin *scandere*, "to climb." The etymology of the word suggests the process of moving up or along, and analyzing step by step, a verse line. Scanning lines involves dividing them into their component feet and assigning a metrical value to each syllable. A metrically unaccented syllable is conventionally noted with an "x," a metrically accented syllable with a "/." Lines are named with reference to their prevailing rhythm and number of feet. Because iambic and other measures in English entail a certain number of metrical accents and a certain number of syllables, we sometimes describe this prosodic system as "accentual-syllabic."

x / x /
Who knows | his will? IAMBIC DIMETER
x / x /
Who knows | what mood
x / x /
His hours | fulfil?
x / x /
His griefs | conclude?

x / x / x /
How fright | ened you | were once IAMBIC TRIMETER
x / x / x /
—And not | so long | ago—
x / x / x /
When late | one night | we took
x / x / x /
Our path | way home | ward through
x / x / x /
The church | yard where | you saw
x / x / x /
Grey grave | stones row | on row.

x / x / x / x /
This youth | too long | has heard | the break IAMBIC TETRAMETER
x / x / x / x /
Of wa | ters in | a land | of change.
x / x] / x / x /
He goes | to see | what suns | can make
x / x / x / x /
From soil | more in | durate | and strange.

x / x / x / x / x /
I rang | them up | while tour | ing Tim | buctoo, IAMBIC PENTAMETER
x / x / x / x / x /
Those bos | om chums | to whom | you're known | as "Who?"

We should bear in mind several points about scansion. First, scansion divides lines according to *units of rhythm, not units of sense*. Scansion, in other words, treats lines merely and abstractly as rows of syllables. It does not consider the ways in which the syllables are clustered into words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Sometimes we find lines in which divisions between feet coincide with divisions between words:

He goes | to see | what suns | can make

But we just as often find lines in which divisions between words and those between feet do not coincide. For instance, in the second line of Kennedy's epigram, "touring" crosses the boundary between the third and fourth feet and "Timbuctoo" crosses the boundary between the fourth and fifth:

I rang | them up | while tour <|> ing Tim <|> buctoo

A second point is that the only requirement of an iamb is that its second syllable be weightier than its first. The *degree* of difference is, for purposes of scansion, irrelevant. Hence, some iambs may consist of two relatively light syllables (as long as the second still is heavier than the first), and other iambs may consist of two relatively weighty syllables (again, as long as the second still is heavier than the first).

We can clarify this point by supplementing the conventional two-level notation of scansion with a numerical four-level register that the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen proposed in 1900 in a public lecture entitled "Notes on Metre" and that George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., developed in their *Outline of English Structure* (2nd printing, Washington D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1956: pp. 35-39.) In this register, 4 stands for strong (or primary) stress; 3 for semi-strong (or secondary) stress; 2 for semi-weak (or tertiary) stress; and 1 for weak (or minimal) stress. "Stress" refers to the prominence of a syllable when uttered and involves such qualities as its loudness, pitch, and the nature of its

vowel. All spoken syllables have at least a little stress; otherwise, we couldn't hear them.

Since English features innumerable gradations of stress, this four-level register involves, like the two-level system, approximations. Any complete articulation has only one maximal stress; so when, for instance, I note below that, in Bogan's phrase "a land of change," the two nouns are both weighty—and may both be registered as 4's—I'm not implying that they have identical primary strength. In our everyday manner of speaking, without even thinking about the matter, we'll give one of the nouns a tad more stress than the other. Most of us will likely favor "change." It's one of a rhyming pair of words and is conceptually critical in the poem, which addresses the misguided drive of purists who, frustrated with normal and mutable experience, endeavor to escape to some absolute and unalterable realm. "Change," that is, is probably the true 4 in its phrase, whereas "land" is more like a 3.6, 3.8, or whatever.

This proviso notwithstanding, the four-level register is subtler than the two-level system and enables us to indicate that, though all iambs feature the same lighter-to-heavier relationship, they can differ from one another in the degree to which they embody that relationship. With the supplementary four-level register, we can indicate that, while all the feet in Bogan's tetrameter are iambs, the second foot is lighter than the others:

1 4 1 2 1 4 1 4
Of wa | ters in | a land | of change

Similarly, we can show that the first foot in this iambic trimeter is fairly heavy:

3 4 2? 4 1 4
Grey grave | stones row | on row.

As this scansion suggests, the line's second foot is perhaps relatively heavy, too. Though compounds like "gravestones," "churchyard," and "pathway" are chiefly accented on their first syllable, some readers may say the second syllable with tertiary or secondary stress. Indeed, many dictionaries (e.g. *Miriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition) mark the second syllable of such words with a symbol indicating intermediate stress. However, stress tends to move increasingly to the first element of disyllabic compounds like these during their process of formation and gradual adoption. And other readers may hear the stress contour of "pathway," "churchyard," or "gravestones" as differing little from that of other fore-stressed disyllables like "sonnet," "practice," or "shakings."

(As has been implied already and as we'll discuss shortly, different readers may give slightly different rhythmical interpretations to a line, and the same reader may even read a line a little differently from one reading to another. But such small differences don't affect the basic meter of the line and its characteristic lighter-to-heavier movement.)

A related point is that we determine whether a syllable is metrically unaccented or accented by comparing it to the other syllable or syllables in the foot in which it appears. We don't weigh it against all the other syllables in the line or poem. Hence, a metrically unaccented syllable at one point in a line may carry more speech stress than a metrically accented syllable at another point, as in this line:

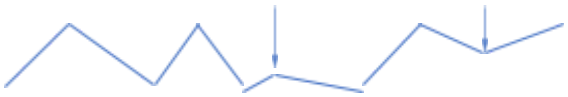
They make the lobby and the street look real
(Henri Coulette, "The Extras," 15)

Here "look," the metrically unaccented syllable of foot five, has more speech stress than "and," the metrically accented syllable of foot three:

```
 1    4      1  4     1  2      1    4      3    4
 x    /      x  /     x  /      x    /      x    /
They make |  the lob | by and | the street | look real
```

Yet the line is still conventionally iambic, since the poet maintains the fundamental lighter-to-heavier fluctuation and since the syllables in each individual foot reflect the lighter-to-heavier relationship characteristic of iambs.

For those of us who like visual aids, it may be helpful to compare iambic lines to mountain ranges. Valleys and peaks alternate. But not every valley is a Grand Canyon, nor is every peak a Mount Everest. And a modest peak at one point may actually be lower than a shallow valley at another:



They make the lobby and the street look real

As an aside, we may note that Coulette's line illustrates one of the reasons that English speech suits iambic rhythm. We tend to place stresses at roughly equal intervals. As linguists tell us, it is difficult to say a succession of syllables with exactly the same degree of stress. When we speak three light syllables in a row, we tend to "promote" the middle one a little, and when we say three weighty ones in a row, we tend to "demote" the middle one. In Coulette's pentameter, the conjunction "and" is relatively light; but it receives a little boost from being preceded by the unaccented syllable of "lobby" and followed by the weak definite article. By the same token, "look" is relatively heavy; but its force is

slightly reduced as a result of its being preceded and followed by other strong monosyllabic words—the noun "street" and the adjective "real."

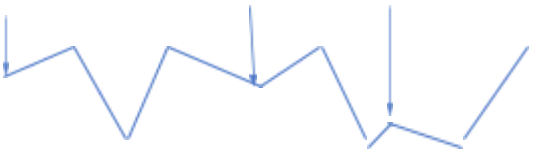
In any case, relatively high valleys and relatively low peaks appear frequently in naturally turned iambic lines. Here are two other examples:

If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
(Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel," 7)

Thieves rapidly absorbed the over-rich
(W. H. Auden, "The Quest," III.3)

Sometimes, a line will have, in several places, a high valley or low peak:

Their paths grown craven and circuitous
(Philip Larkin, "Spring," 13)



Huge gypsy moths fan softly on the screen
(Suzanne Doyle, "Dark Waking," 1)

We may better appreciate these points by clarifying the distinction, made a moment ago in passing, between *metrical accent* and *speech stress*. A syllable is metrically accented when it is stronger than the other syllable (or syllables, in the case of trisyllabic feet) with which it shares its foot. It is metrically unaccented when it's weaker than the other syllable or syllables. (The strength or weakness of a syllable in speech refers to its lexical prominence in the larger articulation--the phrase, clause, or sentence--of which it is part.)

Sometimes, metrical accents and strong speech stresses coincide across a line:

```
1    4      1  4    1      4      1      4  1    4
x    /      x  /    x      /      x      /  x    /
```
Or **rais**e my **eyes** and **read** with **great**er **care**
(Edna St. Vincent Millay, "If I should learn, in some quite casual way," 13)

```
1    4 1     4   1    4    1      4     1   4
x    / x     /   x    /    x      /     x   /
```
A **gran**ite-**sand**ed **butte** im**mersed** in **sage**
(Helen Pinkerton, "Point Lobos, 1950," 11)

However, metrically accented syllables aren't always strongly stressed in speech, and metrically unaccented ones aren't necessarily weakly stressed. Though all iambic pentameters have five metrical accents, some have only four strong speech stresses. One of the iambs will be light, consisting of a weak syllable followed by a semi-weak one—the latter taking the metrical accent:

```
                                    ↓
   1     4   1   4         1     4 1   2    1   4
   x     /   x   /         x     / x   /    x   /
```
Their **voic**es **rise** . . . the **chor**us of the **cane**
(Jean Toomer, "Georgia Dusk," 23)

```
          ↓
  1   4    1    2  1 4   1       4   1   4
  x   /    x    /  x /   x       /   x   /
```
The **time**lessly re**turn**ing, **built** of **tim**e
(Janet Lewis, "Music at a Concert," 2)

```
                ↓
1     4   1   4 1    2     1    4  1     4
x     /   x   / x    /     x    /  x     /
```
A **ghost**ly **fig**ure on the **gar**den **wall**
(Wendy Cope, "By the Round Pond," 2)

Some pentameters have only three strong speech stresses. Two of the iambs in the line will consist of a weakly stressed syllable followed by a semi-weak one—with, again, the latter taking the metrical accent:

```
          ↓                   ↓
  1    4 1    2     1    4 1     2   1   4
  x    / x    /     x    / x     /   x   /
```
The **trib**ute of the **cur**rent to the **source**
(Frost, "West-Running Brook," 70)

Per**spec**tive **keen**er for the **van**ishing
(Edgar Bowers, "Spaces," 23)

Some pentameters have only two strong speech stresses, with three of the metrical accents consisting of semi-weakly stressed syllables:

In your dis**cred**ited as**cend**ency
(Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," 3)

(One could read the first foot of this line as "inverted" or trochaic, with slightly greater stress on "In" than "your"; however, since both syllables in the foot are relatively light, this interpretative issue isn't relevant to our present point, which is that the line overall has only two major speech stresses.)

Though I can't think of any iambic pentameters with nine syllables with weak or semi-weak stress and only one syllable with major stress, we can contrive, with sesquipedalian words, lines with just a single strong speech stress, as is the case with the second line of this made-up pentameter couplet:

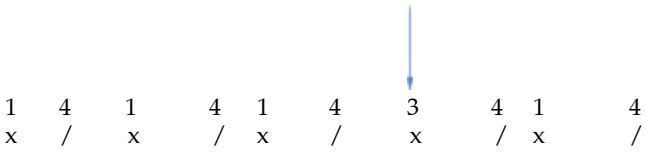
She focused, once she'd taken her degree,
On psychoneuroimmu**nol**ogy.

Only the seventh syllable of "psychoneuroimmunology" has strong stress, though most of us will give semi-strong stress to the prefixes ("psycho-" and "neuro"), and some readers may boost the word's final syllable up to something like semi-strong stress, due to its being involved in the rhyme.

Likewise, some iambic pentameters will have more than five relatively prominent speech stresses. Some will have six. One of the iambs will be heavy—will consist of a semi-strong syllable followed by a strong one—with the semi-strong one accordingly being metrically unaccented:

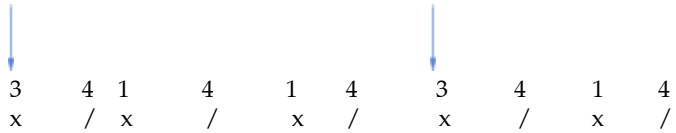
A **red bird flies** a**cross** a **gold**en **floor**
(Wallace Stevens, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," II.1)

I **think** she **al**ways **nursed** a **small mad hope**
(Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 383)



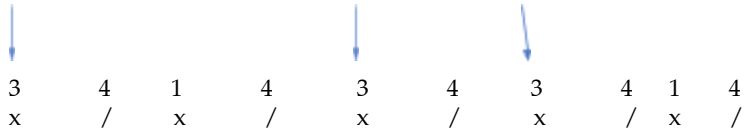
It **veers**, and **veer**ing, **tilts broad-sur**faced **wings**
(N. Scott Momaday, "Buteo Regalis," 5)

Some pentameters feature seven relatively strong speech stresses. Two of the iambs in the line will consist of a semi-strong syllable followed by a strong—with the semi-strong syllables occupying metrically unaccented positions:



Full season's **come**, yet **filled trees keep** the **sky**
(Bogan, "Simple Autumnal," 13)

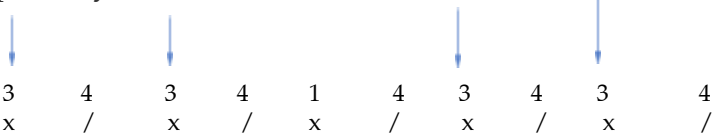
Some have eight relatively prominent stresses, with three semi-strong syllables serving in metrically unaccented positions:



Cheeks cold with **sweat**, **strong hands**, **eyes kes**trel-**keen**
(Walter de la Mare, "Deliverance," 4)

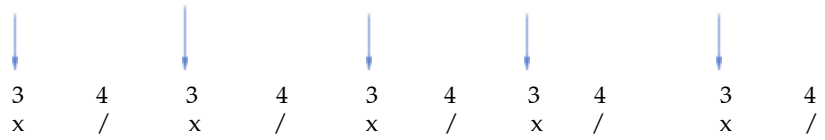
Some pentameters may have nine fairly prominent speech stresses, with four semi-strong syllables serving in metrically unaccented positions, as in the second line from Frost's description, in "The Axe-Helve" (98-99), of the axe that Baptiste, the protagonist, stands on its handle:

Top-heavy with a heaviness his short,



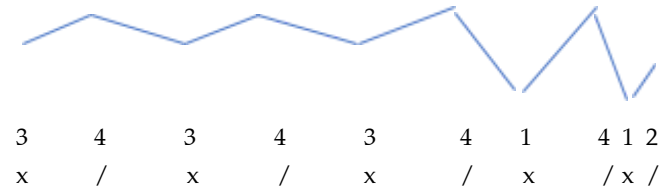
Thick hand made light of, **steel-blue chin drawn down**

And, occasionally we'll find a pentameter with ten prominent speech stresses, as in this line, in which the poet takes us, in five feet, through the seasons—from winter to spring to summer to fall and back to winter again:



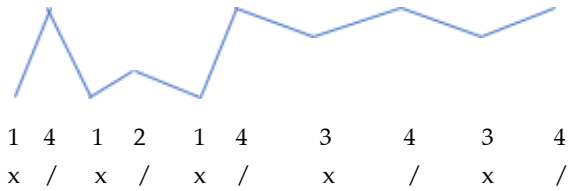
White snow, green buds, green lawn, red leaves, white snow
(Joshua Mehigan, "Here," 8)

Also, although iambic pentameters feature five metrical accents distributed across the line in the even-numbered positions (unless the line features one or more of the metrical variants discussed in the sixth section of this essay), relatively heavy speech stresses may cluster in the first half of the line:



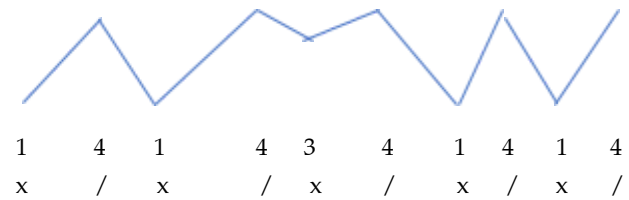
Ruff crisp, **mouth calm**, **hands long** and **del**icate
(Thom Gunn, "Her Pet," 10)

Or in the second half:



Se**ren**ely to pro**claim pure crust, pure foam**
(Larkin, "Essential Beauty," 18)

Or toward the middle:



And **veins** like **small fat snakes** on **ei**ther **hand**
(Frances Cornford, "Childhood," 3)

Any number of other combination are possible, as in the example below, which involves a heavy foot at the start and at the end of the line, with a run of more regular or lighter feet in the middle:

3 4 1 4 1 2 1 4 3 4
x / x / x / x / x /

Gray vault, un**touched** yet by the **sun's first ray**

(Leslie Monsour, "Thoughts while Reading Robert Frost on New Year's Day in Idaho," 11)

At this juncture, I'd like to offer a few words about a matter concerning metrical terminology. (For readers who may be interested, I discuss the matter in greater and more illustrative detail toward the end of the first chapter of *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*.) Some handbooks or summaries of English meter scan relatively light iambs as pyrrhics—feet that consist of two metrically unaccented syllables (xx)—and relatively heavy iambs as spondees—feet that consist of two metrically accented ones (//). Such discussions treat, as metrical variants (or even "deviations" from meter), feet that don't feature a notable weak-strong contrast but that instead involve syllables of more nearly equal stress. Yet such feet normally occur everywhere in iambic verse, at least as it is practiced in Middle English by Chaucer and in Modern English by poets from the 1580s—the heyday of Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser—down to the present. Further, describing such feet as pyrrhics and spondees is not only misleading; it also unnecessarily complicates scansion. In the normal flow of speech, we rarely say adjacent syllables with the same degree of stress. Consequently, it requires continual subjective assessments of rhythm to determine where and when syllables are close enough in their weakness or strength to count as pyrrhic or spondaic; and inconsistencies and confusions almost inevitably ensue.

There is an additional and more general problem with regularly introducing pyrrhics and spondees into the description of English verse. So far as the practice appeals to the existence, in ancient Greek and Latin verse, of pyrrhics and spondees, it misunderstands a key difference between classical prosody and modern English prosody. Ancient meter is quantitative. It measures syllabic length, and this is fixed by phonemic and phonetic rule. Basically, a syllable is long if it has a long vowel or a diphthong, or is followed by two or more consonants. Otherwise, the syllable is short. And we can usually see at once when two shorts or two longs appear adjacently in a line of verse. In contrast, English meter is qualitative. It measures syllabic stress, and this, as we shall see, is not fixed but is often related to or determined by verbal, grammatical, or rhetorical context.

Returning to the main topic of this section of the essay, we should remember that scansion is a form of metrical analysis, not an account of metrical practice. Scansion can help us understand the structure of verse lines by demonstrating their basic rhythmical components. However, accomplished poets do not write poems foot by foot. Rather, they develop an ear for meters and learn how to fit to them words, phrases, clauses, and sentences.

Reading poetry involves a comparable process. Once we've developed an ear for meter, we generally don't pay conscious or frequent attention to it. We feel its current, and we register the shifts and shadings—the rhythmical modulations—that occur within it. But it mostly operates on us subliminally, as the poet Deborah Warren once suggested (*Think Journal*, Spring 2011). What absorbs us as we read—what we're centrally aware of—is what the poet is saying. We follow and focus on the meaning of the living language, in all its varieties of grammatical organization. If we pause to examine the meter, it is usually because of some striking rhythmical effect or because something goes conspicuously wrong: perhaps the poet muffs a line, or a typo spoils its rhythm.

An example from my experience may elucidate this latter situation. Some years ago, I was reading Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Isaac and Archibald" in the Everyman Library selection of his work. The poem consists of several hundred lines of blank verse (i. e., unrhymed iambic pentameter), and Robinson's quiet prosodic skill contributed throughout to my interest and pleasure in the poem. Yet only once was I arrested by the meter. This occurred when, toward the end of the poem, the text misprinted Robinson's accurate pentameter,

The quaint thin crack in Archibald's old voice

as

The quaint thin crack in Archibald's voice

Cheating the pentameter of a syllable and a beat, the misprint made the line take an odd little skip. Whereas the prepositional phrase that Robinson constructed had three disyllabic feet,

x / x / x /
in Arch | ibald's | old voice

in the misprint, the phrase appeared to have only an iamb and an anapest. (An anapest is a foot with two relatively light syllables followed by a heavier one.)

x / x x /
in Arch | ibald's voice

In Robinson's actual line, that is, the secondarily accented final syllable of "Archibald" takes precedence, in foot it appears in, over the minimally accented middle syllable of the name. But the misprinted line, dropping the adjective "old," skids the rhythm straight through the last syllable of "Archibald" to the heavy monosyllabic noun "voice."

A final point we should make explicitly before proceeding to the next section of this essay is that, though scansion describes the meter of a line, it does not prescribe the exact rhythmical shadings that individual readers may give it. As has been noted, these may vary from one reader to another. For that matter, a single reader will not necessarily render a line precisely the same way every time she or he reads it. Consider, in this regard, Richard Wilbur's characterization, in his poem "For C.," of an enduring love between two people:

A passion joined to courtesy and art

Reading this line, we'll all probably place strong stresses on the line's leading lexical elements—the accented syllables of the nouns "passion" and "courtesy," and on the monosyllabic verb "joined" and the monosyllabic noun "art." Likewise, we'll all probably give secondary or tertiary stress to the final syllable of "courtesy." And we'll all probably give only minimal stress to the line's purely functional words—the article "a," the preposition "to," and the conjunction "and"—and to the unaccented second syllable of "passion" and the unaccented second syllable of "courtesy." In other words, we'll all probably read the line as a straightforward iambic pentameter. If we scan it, we'll scan it as five iambs, though perhaps noting that the fourth foot is relatively light.

1 4 1 4 1 4 1 2 1 4
x / x / x / x / x /
A passion joined to courtesy and art

Yet in following this rising-falling pattern, readers may, consciously or unconsciously, give particular weight to this or that metrically accented syllable. One reader may favor the accented syllable of "passion," feeling that the word crucially signifies the romantic impulse that draws people together. (The syllable may also have a little added prominence since it's the only accented syllable in the phrase "A passion.") Another reader might give a little extra stress to "joined," feeling that an enduring love not only entails the ardor and infatuation that sparks it but also must connect with additional qualities if it is to last. Yet another reader might lay special emphasis on the first syllable of "courtesy," catching the Latin and French echoes of the word and its connotations of generous civility. Yet still another reader might dwell principally on "art," with

its suggestion that love, though naturally inspired, is nevertheless something that we make. Such a reader might recall the iambic tetrameter couplet concludes "The End," the final full song on the final album that the Beatles recorded: “And in the end the love you take / Is equal to the love you make.” (Though the 23-second "Her Majesty" was tacked on to the side-2 Medley that closes *Abbey Road*, this was originally a "hidden track" and wasn't listed on the sleeve of the album.) This last reader might also feel that “art” is the line’s most resonant word because it figures in a rhyme and because the word it rhymes with is, strikingly, “heart.” Often, we consider "art" to be the opposite of “heart,” but here Wilbur reconciles the two by the rhyme.

Yet even as each hypothetical reader gives the line a slightly different rhythmical interpretation, all will follow the same fundamental metrical pattern. Several recordings exist on which Wilbur himself reads the poem. The one on his reading for Random House’s “Voice of the Poet” series is especially moving. Wilbur gives all the syllables in the line clear articulation and feeling, and gives the four strongest syllables comparable stress, though perhaps giving a little more emphasis to the first syllable of “passion” and to “joined.” It may be relevant that the latter word is important in Wilbur’s work. He has an abiding faith that the things of this world are interconnected, and he has a genius for metaphor--for joining one thing with another. In “To the Etruscan Poets,” for example, he describes language itself as a “pure matrix, joining world and mind.”

Occasionally, we’ll encounter feet that are metrically ambiguous. That is, one person might reasonably give a metrical beat to a certain syllable in a foot, whereas another person might, just as reasonably, give the beat to another syllable. We’ll address this matter in a later section of this essay.

III. Relationship and Cooperation Between Fixed Meter and Variable Speech Rhythm

As the preceding observations suggest, the fluctuation between lighter and heavier syllables in iambic verse is rarely a uniform ka BOOM, ka BOOM, ka BOOM, ka BOOM, ka BOOM. Very occasionally, a poet may write a line that reproduces the analytic abstraction of the meter—a line that features a succession of two-syllable phrases in which minimally and maximally stressed syllables alternate. Line six of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 106 is one such line, exactly tracking the arithmetic norm of iambic pentameter:

Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow

The concluding line of George Green’s “Lord Byron’s Foot” is another pentameter that corresponds to the arithmetic norm. Green humorously hammers out identical iambs to bring home the theme of his poem:

your foot, your foot, your foot, your foot, your foot!

More common are lines in which the phrases are longer but in which there's still a fairly marked alternation between weakly stressed metrically unaccented syllables and strongly stressed metrically accented ones. The examples cited a little while ago from Millay and Pinkerton illustrate lines of this type. Here's another example:

And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
(Edward Thomas, "Rain," 4)

Yet even this type of line is less common than one might imagine, and for the most part, the fluctuation in English iambic verse involves a more nuanced and fluid lighter-to-heavier movement. Sometimes, the difference of stress levels between syllables is great. Sometimes, it is only slight. And, historically, what good poets do, when they write in iambic meter, is to maintain the fluctuating pattern while continually modulating it from within. They follow the basic form, but realize it in ever-varying ways. Across the metrical grid, they set words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of different lengths and rhythmical shapes.

Here I want to distinguish as clearly as I can the distinction between *meter* and *rhythm*. The distinction is analogous and related to that between metrical accent and speech stress. Meter refers to the general, abstract pattern of the line. Rhythm refers to the specific realization of the pattern in speech. This interplay between meter and rhythm—between the single, fixed impersonal measure and the many ways in which the measure can be realized in personal, idiosyncratic speech—is what gives iambic verse its vitality. Rhythm's continual modulation of meter contributes to enriching and diversifying of our poetry even more than do the metrical variants (e. g., "substitutions" of trochees, anapests, or dactyls in place of iambs, or "feminine endings" at the ends of lines) discussed in the sixth section of this essay.

Though meter and rhythm are distinguishable in analysis, they are integrated in practice. We don't hear meter with one ear and rhythm with another. Rather, we register simultaneously the general metrical pattern and the specific rhythmical manifestations of it. Reading the ten iambic pentameters below, we experience, in their different rhythmical contours, the single meter that informs them:

Perhaps, long hence, when I have passed away,
(Thomas Hardy, "She, to Him," II.1)

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
(William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children," 62)

That tells the more the more it is not told
(Robinson, "The Sheaves," 8)

And, finger after finger, here, the hand
(Stevens, "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," 6)

of love's austere and lonely offices
(Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays, 14)

We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
(Larkin, "The Whitsun Weddings," 28)

Unready, disappointed, unachieved
(Gunn, "The J Car," 43)

My mother's mother, toughened by the farm
(Rhina Espaillat, "Butchering," 1)

Another friend has had another child
(Catherine Tufariello, "Fruitless," 10)

These lines also illustrate a point noted in the previous section of this essay. Sometimes, the rhythmical components of a line—its words, phrases, and clauses—will coincide with a metrical foot or with a sequence of metrical feet. At other times, however, the words, phrases, and clauses will—even as they contribute to fulfilling the meter—ride through and against the foot divisions. They will exhibit arrangements of stress that differ from—even as they fit into—that of the prevailing meter. Janet Lewis puts the matter this way: "Rhythm and meter go together, supporting one another, yet rhythmical units of verse run counter to the metrical as much as they run with it. And that's what makes it interesting. The rhythm and meter comment on each other" (*A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, edited by Annie Finch. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1994: p. 152).

We can appreciate Lewis's point by examining the pentameters just cited. Some feature phrasing that is itself iambic. For example, Hardy's has three distinct articulations. The first and the second each occupy an iambic foot; the third fits into the remaining three feet of the measure.

x / x / x / x / x /
Perhaps # long hence # when I have passed away

Other pentameters in the group, however, consist of words or phrases that have nothing particularly iambic about them. Consider, for instance, the three words

that make up Gunn's line. "Unready" is a three-syllable word, the second syllable of which is accented and the first and third are unaccented. (In this respect, the word suggests an "amphibrach"—a foot, not much used in English verse, that consists of a metrically accented syllable flanked fore and aft by metrically unaccented ones.) "Disappointed" looks like two trochees, assuming we give the word's first syllable secondary stress (as the 11th edition of *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* advises.) And "unachieved" looks like an anapest or, if you give notable stress to its negative prefix, a cretic—a foot (again, not much used in English verse) consisting of two metrically accented syllables flanking a metrically unaccented one. Nevertheless, Gunn fits these three un-iambic words smoothly into the meter.

1 4 1 3? 1 4 1 2? 1 4
x / x / x / x / x /
Unready # disappointed # unachieved

Though no other sequence of these three words would produce unambiguously accurate iambic pentameter, it is noteworthy that Gunn arranges his line with a view not merely to metrical grace but also to logical and emotional truth. He is speaking of a young poet killed by AIDs. The young poet was "unready" to die because of his youth. He was "disappointed" because he was being deprived of the full life that is properly ours as creatures born of nature. But he felt, most keenly, "unachieved" since he had not, as a writer, produced work that confirmed his vocation.

Espaillat's pentameter has mixed phrasal rhythm. The line contains two five-syllable phrases. The first features a rhythm that rises and falls from lighter to heavier syllables. The second part has rhythm falls and rises from weightier to lighter syllables.

x / x / x / x / x /
My mother's mother, # toughened by the farm

Stevens's line is also phrasally mixed in relation to the metrical units it moves across. The line has four phrases. Two have a single syllable. (These in turn differ, in that the first single syllable—"And"—is metrically unaccented, while the second single syllable—"hand"—is metrically accented). Otherwise, the line contains a six-syllable phrase in falling rhythm, "finger after finger," plus an iambic phrase—a definite article followed by a monosyllabic noun ("the hand").

x / x / x / x / x /
And # finger after finger # here # the hand

Even in lines in which the phrases are iambic, interesting rhythmical counter-currents may exist. Consider Tufariello's pentameter. It features three

grammatical units—subject, verb, and object—with the subject occupying the first two feet, the verb the third foot, and the object the final two iambs:

x / x / x / x / x /
Another friend # has had # another child

However, the key word in the line is the repeated "another." (The poem concerns the poet's not having a child herself and feeling this "fruitless" condition all the more because she's living in the fecund tropical climate of southern Florida and because her contemporaries all seem to be having children.) "Another" is a word whose contour is amphibrachic, and it produces a nice rippling counterpoint in the otherwise steadily iambic line.

Be it noted that of the 63 words in the nine pentameters we've been examining, only three are in themselves iambic--are rear-stressed disyllables: "Perhaps" and "away," in Hardy's line, and "austere" in Hayden's. To anticipate a point we'll consider later, the rhythms of our poetry result from the general texture of English as much as they do from the morphology of its individual words.

To focus a moment on temporal matters, different lines in the same meter may be differently paced. For example, a line with mostly monosyllabic words—and with two, three, or more grammatical pauses (sometimes called "caesuras")—will take longer to say than a line that features multisyllabic words and only one (or no) marked grammatical pause.

The opening quatrain of Gunn's double-sonnet "Her Pet" illustrates this point. The poem describes a sarcophagus sculpted by Germain Pilon for Valentine Balbiani, a Franco-Italian noble woman who lived in the sixteenth century. Gunn saw the sarcophagus, currently in the Louvre, photographically reproduced in Michael Levey's *High Renaissance.* Hence Gunn's reference to "the pictured book." Also, Gunn pronounces the woman's surname as trisyllabic—"Balb YAN ee." (To hear and see Gunn read the poem, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM4pn0Daq6g&t=1s.)

I walk the floor, read, watch a cop-show, drink,
Hear buses heave uphill through drizzling fog,
Then turn back to the pictured book to think
Of Valentine Balbiani and her dog:

According to the stopwatch on my iPhone, Gunn reads the first line—with its eight monosyllabic words and one compound disyllabic word, and with its four grammatical pauses—in a little over five seconds. He reads the line with Valentine Balbiani's lovely, flowing name in a little over two seconds.

Phrasing and meter may run and shift in parallel and counter to each other not only within lines but also across them. The poet, that is, can rhythmically counterpoint the meter by carrying the grammatical sense over line-endings. This procedure is called "enjambment," which comes from the French *enjamber*, meaning "to straddle" or "to stride across." In the next-to-last stanza of "The Room," a poem in cross-rhyming iambic tetrameters, Vladimir Nabokov illustrates the procedure while referring to it:

Perhaps my text is incomplete.
A poet's death is, after all,
a question of technique, a neat
enjambment, a melodic fall.

Lines one, two, and four conclude with a full or partial stop. Their grammatical and metrical units coincide. The third line, however, ends with an adjective awaiting its noun. We must read through the line-ending to complete the sense.

Sometimes poets may run over a line relatively lightly. The sense, at the line ending, will be not so much incomplete as suspended, and we as readers may pause or not before proceeding to the next line. This is the case in the second of the lines below (29-32) from Robert Lowell's "Katherine's Dream," a dramatic monologue spoken by a young woman who feels alienated from her religious and social community because she is having an affair with a married man. In her guilt and her anguished exhaustion, she dreams that she stands alone, deserted by her lover, before a Catholic church from which parishioners in pairs (presumably, married couples) are emerging from confession. Addressing her absent lover, she says:

Where are you? You were with me and are gone.
All the forgiven couples hurry on
To dinner and their nights, and none will stop.
I run about in circles till I drop . . .

Though "All the forgiven couples hurry on" is grammatically complete, the phrasal verb ("hurry on") suggests movement, and some of us may read through the line ending and hear the phrasing of the line and the following one as:

All the forgiven couples
hurry on to dinner
and their nights
and none will stop

At other times, an enjambment will be more pronounced, as in Nabokov's stanza and as in the first stanza of Edgar Bowers's "The Astronomers of Mont Blanc":

Who are you there that, from your icy tower,
Explore the colder distances, the far
Escape of your whole universe to night;
That watch the moon's blue craters, shadowy crust,
And blunted mountains mildly drift and glare,
Ballooned in ghostly earnest on your sight;
Who are you, and what hope persuades your trust?

Here the second line ends with an adjective awaiting its noun. A full stop at this point would sound odd. Most of us will read through the line-ending to complete the phrase ("the far / Escape") and the sense. Bowers himself does this. (Please see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XbtfsNp5mw.)

Though enjambment can be awkward in rhymed verse, when it is well managed it provides another rhythmical arrow, so to speak, in the poet's quiver. The device also can serve to reinforce meaning. Lowell's run-over evokes something of the hurry he is describing. And Bowers's enjambment reminds us the universe is expanding—is "escap[ing]"—away from us in all directions.

In blank verse, on the other hand, enjambment is to some degree necessary. A succession of end-stopped blank verse lines may make us feel the absence of rhyme. It helps if, at least occasionally, "the sense [is] variously drawn out from one verse into another," as Milton says in his introduction to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, in this famous epic, Milton makes enjambment almost an auxiliary principle to meter itself. Typical (in technique at least) is the passage below (11.268 – 285), in which Eve laments her and Adam's banishment from Eden. Though having absorbed the loss of Immortality that resulted from their having tasted the forbidden fruit, she is overwhelmed by the additional and unanticipated punishment of being exiled from her home and from all that she has tended there. She grieves not only or even mainly for herself but also for the flowers and other plants that have thrived, thanks to her care. Her heart breaks at the thought that now there will be no one to nourish and love them:

O unexpected stroke, worse than of Death!
Must I thus leave thee, Paradise? thus leave
Thee, Native Soil, these happie Walks and Shades,
Fit haunt of Gods? where I had hope to spend,
Quiet though sad, the respite of that day
That must be mortal to us both. O flowrs,
That never will in other Climate grow,
My early visitation, and my last
At Ev'n, which I bred up with tender hand
From the first op'ning bud, and gave ye Names,
Who now shall rear ye to the Sun, or rank

Your Tribes, and water from th' ambrosial Fount?
Thee lastly nuptial Bowr, by me adornd
With what to sight or smell was sweet; from thee
How shall I part, and whither wander down
Into a lower World, to this obscure
And wild, how shall we breathe in other Air
Less pure, accustomd to immortal Fruits?

As this passage illustrates, enjambments in *Paradise Lost* sometimes serve simply to keep things moving along, whereas at other times they also are expressive of what's happening physically or psychologically to the characters. Toward the end of the passage, Eve's sense of severance from her native environment, and of her imminent descent into a lesser realm, is reinforced by the line turns:

. . . from thee
How shall I part, and whither wander down
Into a lower world, to this obscure
And wild . . .

Appreciating the relationship between meter and rhythm is the key factor in understanding English versification, yet critics and scholars frequently misconstrue the relationship. Without necessarily saying so in so many words, or even realizing what they're doing, they conflate and confuse metrical description with metrical practice and suggest that poets who write in meter doom themselves to a monotonous or metronomic replication of the analytic paradigm of the measure. In essence, they posit that meter and rhythm are antagonists instead of allies. As a corollary, they state or imply that poets who wish to achieve significant rhythm must break with meter.

The sources and varieties of this confusion are complicated. I try to untangle them in *Missing Measures* and *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*. On this occasion, I'll simply repeat the main point of this section of the essay. Fixed meter and variable speech rhythm, though distinguishable in theory, are integrated in practice. In well-crafted verse, their presence is concurrent, both in the sense of their happening together and in the sense of their agreeing. Far from inhibiting rhythm, meter increases its significance. We hear expressive varieties of rhythm more acutely and richly when they play off against and within meter.

IV. Note on Rising Rhythm Across Two Feet

Sometimes, we'll encounter, in iambic verse, two adjacent feet whose syllables represent four rising degrees of stress. (The first example below rhythmically reflects what the poet is describing.)

1 2 3 4
With how | sad steps, | O moon, | thou climb'st | the skies
(Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 31.1)

1 2 3 4
The pal | lor of | girls' brows | shall be | their pall
(Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth, 12)

1 2 3 4
One's glance | could cross | the bor | ders of | three states
(Hart Crane, "Quaker Hill," 26)

1 2 3 4
I'm lit | erar | y and | need met | aphors.
(Erica Dawson, "Chronic," 9)

Occasionally, we'll encounter a line in which this happens twice:

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
Made cour | age, or | made or | der, or | made grace
(Ezra Pound, *Cantos*, 81.143)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
Somewhere | on these | bare rocks | in some | bare hall
(J. V. Cunningham, "For a College Yearbook," 1)

Strictly speaking, the analyzed feet remain iambic, since the second syllable in each is stronger than the first. However, because we have a light iamb followed by a heavy one, the overall rise and fall of the line is briefly suspended in favor of continuous ascent.

These cases represent, incidentally, one of two situations in which most of us can hear those four degrees of stress of which Jespersen speaks and which Trager and

Smith describe in their *An Outline of English Structur*e. The other situation in which we hear, with some surety, four degrees of stress involves a metrical variant we'll examine shortly: the poet substitutes a trochee for an iamb in the first foot of a line or in a foot after a mid-line pause. When the trochee is light, and when following the iamb is heavy, most of us hear a pattern of 2-1-3-4—a pattern of tertiary-minimal-secondary-primary stress. This phenomenon occurs twice in second line of an iambic tetrameter couplet (47-48) from Andrew Marvell's "The Garden." Marvell speaks of the mind's being capable of

Annihilating all that's made
2 1 3 4 2 1 3 4
To a green thought in a green shade.

As can be seen here, this somewhat unusual pattern can create interesting and expressive contrasts with more familiar rhythmical patterns. Following the swift and flowing iambics in the 4-word line about the process of annihilation, Marvell pulls us up with the line of monosyllables in which two of the feet are inverted and which focuses on a specific concept and image rather than on a process.

Frances Cornford puts the 2-1-3-4 pattern to similarly fine contrastive effect at the beginning of the final line of her epigram "On Rupert Brooke":

A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
2 1 3 4
For the long littleness of life.

After the flowing and polysyllabic iambics of line 3, the shift in rhythm—and the littleness of the words with which Cornford makes the shift—drops us from Brooke's heroic vision down to the more mundane reality in which most lives unfold.

Most times when the 2-1-3-4 pattern appears, it does so at the head of the line. Here are two more instances:

2 1 3 4
When a small child, I watched it from a hill
(Yvor Winters, "The Slow Pacific Swell," 3)

2 1 3 4
In a dark time, the eye begins to see
(Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time," 1)

But the pattern may occur within the line, as in this iambic tetrameter with a "feminine ending," an extra metrically unaccented syllable attached to the end of the line. (A later section of this essay discusses this and other metrical variants.)

2 1 3 4
When love, like a frail shell, lies broken
(Bogan, "Juan's Song," 3)

V. Effects of Verbal, Grammatical, and Rhetorical Context on English Meter

In ancient Greek and Latin prosody, which measures syllable length rather than syllable stress, the metrical nature of syllables can be determined, for the most part, on the basis of phonemics and phonetics. As has been mentioned, if a syllable has a long vowel or a diphthong, it is long. If it has a short vowel but is followed by two consonants, it is also long. Otherwise, it is short. Things aren't so simple, however, with our stress-based English meters. We can't neatly categorize the metrical values of syllables as the ancients could, since rhetorical, grammatical, and verbal context affect stress—especially as it relates to monosyllabic words.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that though the majority of words in the English lexicon are multi-syllabic, we mainly employ, in verse as in conversation, monosyllables. Partly this is due to the enduring frequency of the Anglo-Saxon words in English speech. These are more likely to be monosyllabic than words derived from, for instance, French and Latin. The monosyllabic tendency in poetry and speech also results from English's being moderately "analytic." It relies on function words—such as articles, conjunctions, and prepositions—to connect the more lexically significant nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Many of these function words are monosyllabic, including the two that Shakespeare uses the most: "the" (which he employs 28,944 times) and "and" (which he employs 27,317 times). (These data come from https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/stats/.)

Even poems that seem at first blush to be prodigally polysyllabic may turn out, if scrutinized, to be largely monosyllabic. An example is Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." When we recall it, one thing that springs to mind is its enchantingly rich vocabulary—including the "complacencies" of the protagonist's "peignoir"; her "unsubdued elations" and "gusty emotions"; her need for "imperishable bliss"; and the pigeons who make "ambiguous undulations" while sinking "Downward to darkness on extended wings." Yet 630 of the poem's 868 words—73%—are monosyllables. Likewise, the vocabulary of "Lycidas," despite its many polysyllabic mythological allusions, is roughly 75% monosyllabic. I say "roughly" because in this case, it's hard to arrive at an indisputable figure. I

count 1,133 of the 1,479 words as monosyllables, but some of these result from Milton's 17th-century spellings—like "her self" for "herself" and "To morrow" for "tomorrow"—or from contracted word forms—such as "o'er" for "over." These boost the tally of monosyllables. On the other hand, Milton's elisions—his metrical contractions like "to th'" for "to the" and "th' eclipse" for "the eclipse"—subtract from the tally of monosyllables.

Though I haven't made a thorough study of the matter, the low to mid-70s seems to be a common percentage for monosyllables in English poems. And while the figure may tilt one way or another according to the poet's preference for the Anglo-Saxon versus Romanic parts of our lexicon, the form the poet adopts does not seem to have much of an effect. For example, William Carlos Williams's "Widow's Lament in Springtime," which is in relatively short-lined free verse, is 75% monosyllabic (97 monosyllables in 130 words). This same percentage occurs in Sylvia Plath's "Blackberrying" (197 out of 263), which is in relatively long-lined free verse. Despite their formal differences from each other, and their differences from "Sunday Morning" and "Lycidas," the poems involve pretty much the same percentage of monosyllables. For that matter, Stevens's lively imagistic "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (180 monosyllables out of 248 words) has the exactly same percentage of monosyllables as the suave, stately "Sunday Morning." Both are at 73%. (Or 72.58064%, to be precise.)

Entirely monosyllabic poems--such as Chidiock Tichbourne's "Elegy," Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," and Vikram Seth's "Touch"--are rare. And some critics object to monosyllabic lines as tending to dullness. Alexander Pope, for example, observes in a 1710 letter to Henry Cromwell, "Monosyllable-lines, unless very artfully managed, are stiff, languishing, and hard." And the following year, in his *Essay on Criticism*, he censures poets in whose works "ten low words oft creep in one dull line" (347). (Pope was especially critical of poets who padded lines with "expletives"—little filler words.) Still, many memorable lines in our poetry consist of monosyllabic words:

He was as fresh as is the month of May
(Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "General Prologue," 92)

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love
(John Donne, "The Canonization," 1)

She fled, I waked, and day brought back my night
(Milton, "Sonnet 23" ["Me thought I saw my late espousèd saint"], 14)

Let Spades be Trumps! she said, and Trumps they were
(Pope, *Rape of the Lock*, 3.46)

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
(John Keats, "To Autumn," 23)

That Love is all there is
Is all we know of Love
(Emily Dickinson, "That Love is all there is," 1-2)

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
(Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," 1)

An illuminating instance of the effect of rhetorical context on meter appears in Shakespeare's comment (*Sonnets,* 129.13-14) about the destructive consequences of yielding to illicit sexual passion. (Though I'll focus on the first of the lines below, I should mention with regard to the second that, in Shakespeare's time, "heaven" was said as a monosyllable and could be treated metrically as a monosyllable or a disyllable. Hence, though the line may seem to us to have an extra syllable, for Shakespeare it does not.)

All this | the world | well knows, | yet none | knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Here the third foot of the line I've divided into feet consists of the adverb "well" followed by the verb "knows." Then, two feet later, Shakespeare gives us another foot with the same words transposed. And, paradoxically, both feet are iambs. Shakespeare initially states that everyone *knows* that lust is wrong, and then adds that such knowledge is not always *sufficient* to prevent dishonorable conduct:

All this | the world |well *knows,* | yet none | knows *well*

Shakespeare's friend and rival Ben Jonson does something similar in a poem (*Epigrams*, 86) that he addresses to Henry Goodyere, a privy councilor and bibliophile in the court of James I. Jonson praises Goodyere for forming friendships not simply on the basis of emotional impulse but also from rational esteem; and Jonson says that Goodyere learns virtue from his friends as if they were books and learns virtue from books as if they were friends. Below are the first four of the poem's eight lines. In the fourth, we see Jonson metrically transposing two nouns just as Shakespeare transposed, in his sonnet, an adverb and verb:

When I would know thee, Goodyere, my thought looks
Upon thy well-made choice of friends and books;
Then do I love thee, and behold thy ends
In making thy friends books and thy books friends.

The first time the two nouns appear, the emphasis is on Goodyere's picking and learning from his friends in the reasonable spirit in which we study books, whereas the second time the nouns appear the emphasis is on Goodyere's treating books with the live intimacy that we devote to friends:

In mak | ing thy | friends *books* | and thy | books *friends*.

Note, too, that this line presents another case in which the poet strikes, not once but twice, four rising degrees of stress across two iambic feet:

In making thy friends books and thy books friends.

A line in Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (I.13) provides another instance of the interplay of rhetorical context and metrical interpretation:

The death of one god is the death of all.

A god is a big deal, lexically and otherwise, and when one appears in poems, it is more often than not in a metrically accented position. However, in the line from his supreme fiction poem, Stevens subordinates "god" to the numeric adjective that precedes it, so as to point the contrast and connection between "one" and "all. He hereby suggests (as he also does in "Sunday Morning") that all religions and myths derive from a single fundamental human longing for transcendence and that when one faith dies, all do.

The death of *one* god is the death of *all*.

I'll cite one more example in this connection. It occurs in Shakespeare's *Othello* when Othello tells the nobles of Venice that he and Desdemona fell in love naturally and not as a result of his having practiced a devious magic to enchant her. What happened, he says, is that after they met, she asked him about his past and was moved when he told her of all that he had suffered—his being wounded in battles; his being captured and sold into slavery; and his having wandered far and wide in strange and often hostile lands. Her sympathy, Othello explains, in turn moved him, and love woke in his heart. And Shakespeare has Othello touchingly communicate this feeling (1.3.193-94) by shifting the stresses on the pronouns "she" and "I" and on the verb "loved":

x / x / x / x / x /
She loved me for the dangers I had passed.
x / x / x / x /x /
And I loved her that she did pity them.

Shakespeare's, Jonson's, and Stevens's lines illustrate a key advantage of understanding metrical structure. It enables us to hear what the poet is saying more readily, accurately, and sensitively than we otherwise would.

An example of the way that grammatical context may affect meter appears in Frost's description ("The Egg and the Machine," 5-6) of a railroad-hating man who regrets not having sabotaged some track when he had the chance:

He wished when he had had the track alone
He had attacked it with a club or stone

In foot three of this couplet's first line, "had" changes its metrical nature because the poet writes in the past perfect tense. The first "had" is merely auxiliary, whereas the second "had"—the past participle of "have"—is the main verb:

x /
He wished | when he | had had | the track | alone

Some readers may note that, in the couplet's second line, the auxiliary "had" occupies a metrical beat. This results from its verbal context or environment. At this point, "had" is flanked fore and aft by relatively weak syllables—the pronoun "He" and the unaccented syllable of "attacked"—and is therefore "promoted" slightly and carries a metrical beat:

x / x / x / x / x /
He had attacked it with a club or stone

The preceding remarks imply a point we should state explicitly. Any monosyllabic word in English can serve—given the right verbal, grammatical, or rhetorical context—as metrically accented or metrically unaccented. This is true even of the definite and indefinite articles. Though they are usually metrically unaccented, they can carry a metrical accent. This may occur not only in cases where stress rises over two adjacent feet:

↓
1 2 3 4
that settles a new aura on the place.
(Marilyn Nelson, "Churchgoing," 28)

It also may occur when the article is promoted to a metrical accent on account of being flanked by other light syllables. Because the flanking light syllables must be unambiguously light, the first must be preceded by a strong syllable and the second followed by a strong syllable. Given these conditions, this particular promotion will generally occur in the fourth, sixth, or eighth position in the line:

x / x / x / x / x /
Consider beauty a sufficient end
(Yeats, “A Prayer for My Daughter,” 21)

x / x / x / x / x /
For, dear me, why abandon a belief
(Frost, “The Black Cottage,” 105)

x / x / x / x / x /
Your chivalry demanding the pretence
(Elinor Wylie, “Now I am Orson to your Valentine ,” 10

x / x / x / x / x /
On almost the incendiary eve
(Dylan Thomas, "Death and Entrances," 1)

x / x / x / x / x /
Salt winds that ruffle the surrounding firs
(Wilbur, “The House,” 8)

x / x / x / x / x /
To shape in chaos a congruent form
(Bowers, “The Virgin Mary,” 11)

x / x / x / x / x /
The terms of the analogy are strained
(Clive Wilmer, “Oasis,” 1)

x / x / x / x / x /
Yet still a decent, an authentic life
(James Fenton, “The Skip,” 46)

A while ago, in a Facebook post, A. E. Stallings invited correspondents to produce cases in which “the” serves as metrically accented; and as she and her

correspondents quickly concluded, once you're alerted to the phenomenon, you start finding it everywhere. Her own "Lost and Found," for example, features a line (35.7) in which the definite article is in the metrically accented position of the foot two. (It also appears as the metrically unaccented syllable in the fifth foot.)

x / x / x / x / x /
To live in the sublunary, the swift

In another of the poem's lines (22.7) the indefinite article appears in the metrically accented position of the second foot. (This line, I should mention, has an extra unaccented syllable at its end—a common variant in iambic verse that the next section of this essay will discuss.)

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
And gave me a reflection where I sought her

VI. Principal Metrical Variants in Iambic Verse

Historically, iambic verse features two main metrical variants. The first involves the "substitution" of a trochee (a foot consisting of a metrically accented syllable followed by a metrically unaccented one) at the beginning of the line. The metrical accent in the trochee may consist of a strong monosyllabic word, or a di- or poly-syllabic word with significant stress on its first syllable:

/ x x / x / x / x /
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn
(Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers," 30)

/ x x / x / x / x /
Held by a neighbor in a subway train
(Millay, "If I should learn, in some quite casual way," 4)

/ x x / x / x / x /
Interdependence of the seed and hive
(Bogan, "Animal, Vegetable and Mineral," 6)

/ x x / x / x / x /
After a time, all losses are the same
(Catherine Davis, "After a Time," 1)

/ x x / x / x / x /
Measuring, weighing, biding time, I pray
(R. S. Gwynn, "Psyche," 10)

Trochaic substitutions can also appear elsewhere in the line, though such substitutions are less frequent than those that occur in the first foot. In pentameters, the most common place that these latter substitutions appear is in the third or fourth foot, usually following a pause in sense, which is often but not always marked by punctuation:

x / x / / x x / x /
To laugh or fail, | diffi | dent, wonder-starred
(Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Children of the Poor," 1.8)

x / x / x / / x x /
The doused coals fume and hiss | after |your meal
(Anthony Hecht, "The Book of Yolek," 1)

Sometimes, a line features both a first-foot trochee and a trochee after a mid-line pause:

/ x x / / x x / x /
Brutal | and brief, | sorry |with lust and need
(Bowers, "Schools," 23)

The second common variation in iambic verse is the so-called feminine (or "hypermetrical") ending—the addition or appearance of an extra metrically unaccented syllable at the end of a line. (The line from Caki Wilkinson offers another instance of an article's serving as a metrical accent.)

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
(Frost, "Directive," 8)

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
(Wilfrid Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth," 1)

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
And he replies, *I've noticed an improvement*
(Caki Wilkinson, "The Stones," 18)

Feminine endings usually involve syllables with weak stress. However, the extra syllable may have tertiary or even secondary stress, as long as the preceding syllable, which marks the customary termination of the line, has primary stress:

/ x x / x / x / x / (x)
All that I can be sure of is the mill-wheel
(Wilbur, "The Mill," 31)

At times, the feminine ending may even have a little more prominence than one of the metrically accented syllables within the line. This may happen in Wilkinson's line, in which "an" is promoted a metrical beat and the final syllable of "improvement" is, though weakly stressed, longer than "an." Something similar may occur in the pentameter immediately below. It also entails the promotion of an indefinite article within the line, and it ends with a compound ("police dog"), to whose final element some of us will probably give significant stress, even though it doesn't carry the chief accent in the compound:

x / x / x / x / x / (x)

The suspect's father petted a police dog
(Mehigan, "A Questionable Mother," 10)

Sometimes, a line will have both a trochaic first foot and a feminine ending. This in fact happens in the line from Wilbur cited a moment ago. Here are three additional examples:

/ x x / x / x / x /(x)
King as he is, he can't be king *de facto*
(Robinson, "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," 4

/ x x / x / x / x / (x)
Nothing attracts like those who do not want us
(Susan McLean, "Loving Mr. Spock," 10)

/ x x / x / x / x /(x)
Paleolithic artwork presupposes
(Joseph Harrison, "Ice Age Art," 15)

Occasionally, a line will have a trochaic substitution after a mid-line pause, as well as a trochaic first foot and a feminine ending:

/ x x / x / / x x / (x)
Busied with private dreams, earthen, unspoken
(Cunningham, "On Correggio's Leda," 1)

In his essay "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," Roman Jakobson suggests that these two variants evolved because, situated at the beginnings and endings of lines—or following a mid-line pause--they do not disrupt any ongoing rhythmical flow. At the beginning of the line, there's generally a grammatical juncture or a pause in movement, and consequently the reader's ear can assimilate a variation there without difficulty. No developing pattern of rhythm is broken. (The same is true of the mid-line trochee—the trochee that follows a pause after the second or third foot.) Similarly, the extra unaccented

syllable at the line end does not interrupt the fluctuating iambic rhythm, but rather just continues one syllable beyond where it customarily ends.

Regardless of how these variants evolved, they've proved, especially the opening trochee and feminine ending, to be of great practical assistance to poets. Many English words of two or more syllables start with a heavy syllable or end with a light one. Though such words can be integrated into the middle of the iambic line, it is useful also to have the option of setting them at the head of the line or at the end of it. The conventions of the trochaic first foot and of the feminine ending allow poets these alternative placements. Consider the following line (115) from Frost's "Generations of Men":

Making allowance, making due allowance

This line twice features the fore-stressed disyllabic word "making" and the middle-stressed trisyllabic word "allowance." The second time "making" appears, it is integrated iambically into the interior of the line; however, the convention of the trochaic first foot lets Frost position the word at the line-beginning as well. When "allowance" first appears, Frost merges it into the iambic rhythm of the line's interior; but the convention of the feminine ending permits Frost to employ the word at the line-ending, too:

/ x x / x / x / x / (x)
Making | allow | ance, mak | ing due | allowance

As this analysis indicates, in most cases when poets introduce into their verse first-foot or mid-line trochees, or hypermetrical endings, they do so simply for the sake of prosodic convenience; but the variations can also produce expressive effects. Because we register the expressive effects of feminine endings mainly in rhymed verse, I treat such effects not here but in the essay about rhymes and stanzas on this website. For the present, I'll illustrate only expressive effects resulting from trochaic substitutions.

One such effect appears in Charles Gullans's "John Wilkes." Wilkes was an 18th-century Whig politician who boldly championed liberty and freedom of the press during the reign of George III but whose hotheadedness and skirt-chasing undermined his career. In eight cross-rhyming pentameter quatrains, Gullans's poem explores Wilkes's character. Here are the fourth and fifth stanzas. (In the next-to-last line of the passage, Gullans evidently treats "contemptuous" as three syllables by elision--*con-temp-shwəs*--with the contiguous third and fourth vowel sounds of the word glided together.)

"I have no minor vices," though a boast,
Was license to quick, brittle fools to laugh;
Then teaching what hyperbole may cost,
His wit pursued him like an epitaph.

No hypocrite, his vices all well known,
"Godless, but never womanless an hour,"
Hard and contemptuous, still the man had grown
Hating restriction and abusive power.

This passage, like the larger poem, runs mostly in nicely modulated iambics but the last three lines open with trochees. These give the lines, at their outset, a propulsive emphasis and help convey something of Wilkes's admirably tough passion and less admirable arrogance and inflexibility.

The inverted first foot also seems particularly apt in "Common Form," Rudyard Kipling's epigram about (and spoken by) the young troops slaughtered in WWI:

If any question why we died,
/ x x / x / x /
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Kipling could have converted the trochee to an iamb by a number of rear-accented disyllables or two-word phrases (e.g., "respond," "reply," "just say"); but the inverted foot gives the line more punch.

Though the majority of trochaic substitutions in English iambic verse appear in the first foot of the line or after a mid-lines pause, they occasionally occur in the second foot of the pentameter. Such is the case in the opening line of Gwen Harwood's sonnet "Beethoven, 1798." (The line also has a feminine ending.)

x / / x x / x / x / (x)
He sings, | often | at night. | His voice | is shocking

Perhaps the inversion is meant to suggest the abrupt character of the composer, though it may be that the variant simply pleased the poet's ear.

Harwood's second-foot inversion follows a grammatical pause, and this is generally the case with second-foot trochaic substitutions. Another example is line 11 of from another sonnet, Yvor Winters's "Apollo and Daphne":

x / / x x / x / x /
And she, | rooted | in Time's slow agony

Here the inverted foot seems intended to be expressive. Winters is speaking of Daphne, who—fleeing Apollo--suddenly metamorphoses into a laurel tree. And

the trochaic substitution aids in conveying the girl's transformation from heart-racing swiftness to hard immobility. The rhythm of the remainder of the inversion reinforces this sense, with the succession of three heavy syllables ("Time's slow ag-"), followed by the falling away of the light final foot.

Historically, poets rarely end iambic lines with trochees. Whatever else has preceded it, the final foot resolves the rhythm. Yet Robert Bridges points out (*Milton's Prosody*, revised final edition, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921: 41-42) several apparent fifth-foot trochees in *Paradise Lost*; and two classic American poems in blank verse seem, at least at first blush, to have a line with a trochee in the final foot.

The first of these poems is Frost's "Birches." In the line (25) with the apparent final-foot trochaic substitution, Frost speaks of the kind of boy who might be moved to adopt the solitary pastime of swinging on birch trees:

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball

Today, we pronounce "baseball" with primary stress on the first syllable, and since Frost places the word in the ninth and tenth positions of the line, most of us would probably treat the last foot as a trochee. This, despite the fact that the effect of an inversion here is awkward—almost, we might say, a rookie mistake:

x / x / x / x / / x
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball

Yet there are reasons to doubt that Frost heard "baseball" as a trochee. As with many such compounds, the word existed as a two-word phrase and as a hyphenated compound before its fused, single-word version prevailed. For instance, Jane Austen uses the two-word version in the first chapter of *Northanger Abbey* (composed 1790s; published 1818) when she describes the young Catherine Morland. Catherine, Austen explains, is tom boy and "prefer[s] cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running around the country . . . to books." (In Austen's day, baseball was a version of a bat-ball-and-base game also called "rounders.") Likewise, the first governing body (formed in 1857) for the sport in the United States called itself "The National Association of Base Ball Players."

The hyphenated form of the word grew more common in the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay on "Courage" in *Society and Solitude* (1870), writes of the young men who served in the Civil War: "Tender, amiable boys, who had never encountered any rougher play than a base-ball match or a fishing excursion, were suddenly drawn up to face a bayonet charge or capture a battery." "Baseball" established its primacy only with the increasing popularity of the professional teams at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. (Some historians mark the

beginning of the modern game with the first World Series, played in 1903 between the Boston Americans—later called the Boston Red Sox—and the Pittsburgh Pirates.)

As often happens when a two-word phrase gradually coalesces into a single word, the main accent shifts from what was originally the independent noun back to what was originally the noun's adjective. Frost played baseball as a boy. He was a pitcher, and as an adult, he frequently compared poetry and poets to pitching and pitchers. "A small poem is like the five or six balls a pitcher pitches to a given batter," he writes in his "The Poet's Next of Kin at College" essay. "There is a little system--a little set of pitched balls; a little set of sentences." Elsewhere, he notes that, just as pitchers only pitch every four or five days and don't always have their best stuff, poets are inspired only intermittently and, even then, don't always produce a really good poem: "Poets are like baseball pitchers. Both have their moments. The intervals are the tough things" (*New York Post*, 18 May 1958). And as might well have been the case with others who learned the game in the 1870s and 1880s, Frost seems to have heard "baseball" with its adjectival element subordinated to its substantive component. Even in his later years, when he read "Birches" aloud (e. g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBw-OaOWddY), he favored stressing the second syllable: basebáll.

(I'm indebted for information about Frost's devotion to baseball to Donald J. Sheehy, an excellent Frost scholar and co-editor of the multi-volumed Harvard edition of Frost's letters.)

Though we likely mistake the poet's intentions if we read as trochaic the final foot in Frost's line, in the case of the second classic American poem, the fifth-foot foot inversion seems to be indisputable. This poem is Stevens's "Sunday Morning." The final-foot trochee occurs in that passage (23-30) in which Stevens suggests that his protagonist should not place her faith in an abstract god who "come[s] /Only in silent shadows and in dreams," but should instead seek transcendence in herself and in her experiences of this world:

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
x /x / x /x / / x
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

A heavy pause precedes “gusty,” and Stevens may have heard, in the suspension, a phantom metrically unaccented syllable that sustained the iambic rhythm. This interpretation would produce a pentameter with a feminine ending. (I’ll use a carat to represent the hypothetical phantom syllable.)

x / x / x / x / ^ / (x)
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty

Yet no other line in the poem has a feminine ending, which should perhaps caution us against positing one here. (Stevens does end line 7 in the second stanza with “heaven”; but as we noted in connection with Shakespeare’s 129th Sonnet, poets have conventionally treated this word as a monosyllable or disyllable at their convenience.) Overall, Stevens’s poem is beautifully regular. He deftly modulates the line throughout, but (taking into account a few conventional elisions) there is nothing that is metrically unusual in the poem’s 120 lines and 600 feet, except for this gusty foot and an anapestic substitution in the first foot of the last line of the fourth stanza.

x x / x / x / x / x /
By the consummation of the swallow’s wings

In introducing a line-closing trochee, Stevens may have been prompted by context. He is speaking of how strong emotion sweeps us away, and the unexpected “gusty” trochee blows the conventional line-ending iamb over on its head. He also may have been influenced by an aural parallelism in the passage. After asserting that divinity must exist in things his protagonist can directly experience, he lists examples of them. To help us grasp this list, he divides its individual units from each other by semicolons. The first two units in the list begin with fore-stressed disyllables (“Passions,” “Grievings”) that comprise trochees in the first feet of the lines in which they appear; and he may have felt that it was rhythmically right for him to start the third unit, too, with a fore-stressed disyllable, even though the trochaic substitution it produced came at an unusual place rather than in the more conventional setting of the first foot of the line.

A situation in which we may be faked into trochaic interpretations of what are likely iambic feet involves disyllabic phrases or compound words that take primary stress on their first syllable and secondary stress on the second. Such phrases or compounds as “birth-mark,” “I Ching,” “cardboard,” “book case,” and “race car” can comfortably occupy a metrically accented position followed by a metrically unaccented one, even when the syllable that comes right after the compound is relatively weak—is, say, a preposition or conjunction:

/ x x / x / x / x /
Bearing his bastard birth-mark on my face
(Langston Hughes, “Mulatto,” 2)

x / x / x / x / x /
The open *I Ching* by his sunlit plate
(Belle Randell, “The Confirmation of Our Inscrutable Friend,” 5)

x / x / x / x / x /
A sheet of cardboard from a packing case
(Robert Wells, “Asleep,” 1)

x / x / x / x / x /
A crowded book case and an empty bed
(Rachel Wetzsteon, “Love and Work,” 28)

/ x x / x / x / x /
With a toy race car and computer games
(Kevin Durkin, “In the Next Cubicle,” 4)

That is, though our eyes might suggest that “-mark on,” “Ching by,” “-board on,” “case and,” and “car and” are trochees, our ears probably hear no disruption of iambic rhythm. Though I am reluctant to accord meter the prerogative to override natural pronunciation, perhaps the prevailing rhythm in cases like this absorbs the slight tug against it. Or perhaps because the first syllable of the compound is strong and fits the meter--and because the second syllable, though semi-strong, falls off from the first--our ear isn’t baffled by the placement of the compound, and we give a bit more ompf to the preposition or conjunction that follows it.

A special case involves trisyllabic compounds like “strawberry,” “grandmother,” “bookkeeping,” and “daylily,” which have primary stress on the first syllable, secondary stress on the second, and weak stress on the third. These sometimes appear in an iambic context that doesn’t perfectly suit them. This happens with “schoolmasters” in that passage early in Yeats’s “Adam’s Curse,” in which Yeats comments that a poet is likely to be dismissed as

. . . an idler by the noisy set
x / x / ? ? x / x /
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world. . . .

So, too, in this description of the anomalous loveliness of swans on a creek in a run-down area in Cork, Ireland, we see “rowhouses” set into the fourth, fifth, and sixth positions of an iambic pentameter:

Their grace and beauty disproportionate
x / x / ? ? x / x /
To nearby rowhouses and package stores
(Norman Williams, "Prince Philip to Quit Exclusive Men's Club Because It Serves Swan," 3-4)

I much admire both of these poems and didn't scrutinize the lines in question until, in writing this essay, I took up the topic of how trisyllabic compounds whose syllables decrease in stress over the course of the word fit or don't fit into iambic meter. For me, Yeats's and Williams's lines work, and I think that this is because, prior to these lines, the poets have clearly and flexibly established the meter, so that metrical expectation helps carry us over the compounds, just as it helps us assimilate the disyllabic compounds we examined a moment ago.

Further, these trisyllabic compounds *almost* run with the meter. The second and secondarily stressed syllable is weaker than the metrically accented syllable that precedes it, and though the third syllable is weaker than second, it is not dramatically weaker. And the weakness of the third syllable is made additionally inconspicuous because it in turn is followed by another weak syllable.

A less ambiguous case involves phrasal verbs that consist of a monosyllabic base verb followed by an adverbial particle--"go down," "come in," "cry out," "put off," etc. When in our reading we encounter phrasal verbs we may initially think that the base verb carries the main stress. But because the particle is part of the verbal phrase, and because we tend to place stress at the end of phrases, the particle may well prove to be the metrically accented element.

Tennyson's "The Brook" supplies an example of this. This poem is in quatrains that alternate between tetrameters and trimeters—the trimeters having feminine endings. The brook speaks the poem and, in the two stanzas below, it recounts its journey from highlands into a low-lying river. In the final two lines of the description, the brook first sets a metrical accent on the independent verb "go," then metrically subordinates "go" to the adverbial "on" in the phrase "go on."

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorpes, a little town,
And half a hundred bridges.

Till last by Philip's farm I flow
To join the brimming river,
x / x / x / x /
For men may come, and men may go
x / x / x / (x)
But I go on for ever.

And if I'm hearing correctly the pentameters below, the adverbial particles—"to," "out," "by," and "in"—take metrical precedence over their verbs:

x / x / x / x / x /
The doors clap to, the pane is blind with showers
(A. E. Housman, "The chestnut casts his flambeaux, . . . " 3)

x / x / x / x / x /
From which one tender Cupidon peeped out
(T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," 80)

x / x / x / x / (x)
While engineers scrape by in cheerless garrets
(Wendy Cope, "Engineers' Corner," 3)

x / x / x / x / x /
As we drink in the night's festivities
(Melissa Balmain, "Two Julys, [Seven Months]" 14)

This last example can serve to illustrate how a phrasal verb may be differently accented from a sequence involving a monosyllabic verb followed by a prepositional phrase. In the case of the latter—a case, that is, in which we observe that we're drinking "amidst" or "during" the night's festivities—we'd say:

x x / x
As we drink in the night's festivities

But when "in" functions as an adverb in the phrasal verb "drink in"—that is, "absorb avidly"—we likely say:

x / x /
As we drink in the night's festivities

Occasionally, a poet writing in iambic pentameter will substitute a trochee in every foot. Shakespeare does this in Lear's anguished cry over Cordelia's corpse (*King Lear*, 5.3.307)

Never, never, never, never, never

In "The Odometer," Robert B. Shaw puts, to good comic effect, this same succession of trochees. Shaw remembers a day when he and his two brothers were boys and noticed, while riding with their parents in the family's old Chrysler, that the mileage gauge read 99,999. The boys held their breath, anticipating that "they would see a Hundred Thousand / announce itself." However, the car's odometer had, as was standard with most cars before around 1990, only five digits; so what came up instead was:

zero, zero, zero, zero, zero

VII. Why Distinguishing Rhythmical Modulations from Metrical Variants May Help Clarify Prosodic Description

If meter gives English iambic verse its order, two things supply it with its variety. The first is rhythmical modulation, which, while conforming to and cooperating with meter, diversifies it in continual and ever-shifting ways. The second is the introduction of the kinds of metrical variants we examined in the previous section of the essay. This difference between rhythmical modulations and metrical variations pertains to the more general distinction between rhythm and meter. Rhythmical modulations do not affect metrical pattern. They simply realize it—bring it to life—in one or another of many possible ways. Metrical variants, on the other hand, do affect metrical pattern. They change or suspend the normative structure, however briefly.

Bearing in mind this difference between rhythmical modulations and metrical variants can help us better understand and more accurately explain English versification. What we describe with the two conventional scansion marks—"x" and "/"—is the meter of a line and such metrical variants as may occur within it. However, we cannot, using the two conventional marks, account for the line's rhythmical modulations. To indicate these, we must resort to an additional register, such as the four-level numerical system, or to visual aids like the mountain ranges that supplement some of the scansions in this essay. And even these tools can't precisely represent the rhythms of English verse, which involve virtually limitless gradations of stress and which may entail, as we saw when we examined the line from Wilbur's "For C.," subtle interpretative shadings that may vary from one reader to another or that may vary from one occasion to another in the experience of a single reader.

As I mentioned earlier, poetry handbooks and glossaries unfortunately don't always distinguish between rhythm and meter, much less between rhythmical modulations and metrical variants. And without realizing (usually) what they're doing, such texts attempt, with the two conventional scansion marks, to render rhythm as well as--or instead of--meter. To achieve this, they often (as I also mentioned earlier) liberally season their scansions with pyrrhics and spondees. I can't pretend to be a perfect prosodist, and I appreciate that there are valid ways of conducting metrical description that differ from mine. But it seems to me that it is helpful to bear in mind the difference between actual and specific metrical variants, which we can unambiguously register in scansion, and rhythmical modulations, which continuously and variously occur within the prevailing metrical structure and which inevitably baffle our attempts to render them with absolute exactitude and consistency.

VIII. Metrically Ambiguous Feet

On occasion, a foot will allow different metrical interpretations. Such a case occurs in the fourth foot of the celebrated line from *Hamlet*:

To be, | or not | to be: | that is| the question.

In most of the productions of *Hamlet* that I've attended, the actor playing the prince has spoken the fourth foot as a trochee—*that* is. This reading of the line fits well with the political and philosophical elements of the play, and communicates the importance of "the question": Should Hamlet passively bear the ills of his situation, or should he fight against them, even though they're overwhelming and almost sure to annihilate active opposition? This trochaic interpretation appears in such fine performances in recent decades by Kenneth Branagh, Adrian Lester, and Tom Hiddleston. They aren't hammy in delivering the line. They don't milk the "that" in the way that my italics above might suggest. But they give "that" more stress than "is." (Lester's rendering of the soliloquy may be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muLAzfQDS3M.)

Yet an iambic reading of the foot—that *is*—is also possible if the actor feels that Hamlet's chief concern here is less with the question *per se* than with its immediacy—its pressure upon him in the here and now. Laurence Olivier adopts this latter interpretation in his 1948 movie version of the play. He pauses slightly after *is*, giving it a little extra weight and meaning. And this choice accords with his famously Freudian reading of *Hamlet*. He approaches the play as chiefly a psychological drama, in which the prince, in addition to the other problems facing him, is beset by Oedipal resentment of his late father and by sexual desire for his mother. These feelings are suffocating him. He desperately wants to resolve them. (One can view and listen to Olivier's version of the soliloquy at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ks-NbCHUns. Tellingly, he sets the scene outdoors, high on the battlements of Elsinore as the sea crashes on the rocks far beneath him. It's as if his Hamlet can achieve sanity and freedom only by escaping the court below, whose dark and gloomy passages represent the perplexities of mind besetting him.)

As interesting a crux as the fourth foot of the line is, either reading of it is metrically conventional since poets and their audiences have historically regarded that a trochee after a mid-line pause is as admissible as an iamb.

Sometimes, when both syllables of the first foot are light, either can be stressed: our personal preference or sense of the context, even if this is only subconscious, will determine whether we read a trochee or an iamb. Generally involving monosyllabic function words, such situations occur relatively

frequently in Robinson's verse. Earlier, I cited a line of this type from "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" (3):

In your discredited ascendency

Here are several more such lines from that passage (165-219) in Robinson's *Captain Craig* in which the Captain argues against attributing human traits and assumptions to God (or, as he also terms it, "The First Intelligence"):

In our competitive humility (169)
When we have earned our spiritual ears (188)
And at the fairest and the frenziedest (201)
And with a calm Socratic patronage (213)

In the first two examples, we'll probably read "In our" and "When we" as trochees if we feel that the condition or process is of primary interest, whereas we'll probably read the feet as iambs if we feel pronouns are more important (i.e, feel that the people who embody condition or process are more important.) How one hears the third and fourth examples seems to depend on our sense or interpretation of the syntax. I hear a trochee if I pause after the conjunction but hear an iamb if I read straight through, without pausing, into the prepositional phrase.

In the fourth foot of the third line of Stallings's "Glitter," we find another case in which, as in the opening of Hamlet's soliloquy, an ambiguous foot occurs after a midline pause:

You have a daughter now. It's everywhere
And often in the company of glue.
You can't get rid of it. It's in her hair:
A wink of pink, a glint of silver-blue.

When reading the poem normally (i. e., without thinking of the meter), I hear, in the third line, "It's in" as a light iamb. Stepping back, I can explain this reading to myself as being in keeping with the poet's skillful presentation of the ubiquity of her subject. When you have young children, especially daughters in their first years at school, they and you can't escape glitter. It does get *in* everything. But stepping even further back, I can imagine that a different reader might reasonably shade stress to "It's," since this reading keeps the eye or ear fixed to the subject itself—the glitter.

Yet in all the cases cited, either reading is fine, metrically speaking. As has been noted, a trochee at the head of the line, or after a mid-line pause, is historically common and admissible in iambic verse. The variants wrinkle the measure but disrupt it only temporarily and minimally.

IX. Loose Iambic Verse

"All that can be done with words is soon told. So also with meters—particularly in our language where there are virtually but two, loose iambic and strict iambic." (Frost, *Collected Poems, Plays, and Prose*, 776)

Loose iambic verse features lines with extra metrically unaccented syllables. To put it another way, loose iambic involves iambic verse in which anapestic feet are here and there substituted for iambic feet. (An anapest is a foot with two metrically unaccented syllables, followed by a metrically accented syllable.)

Loose iambics have been used mostly in rhymed verse in shorter measures. Shorter measures are less likely than longer ones to be undermined by extra unaccented syllables. When the verse turns in a tight compass, the rhyme and the regular beat-count usually suffice to maintain the line's identity. Thomas Hardy's "The Wound," which has an iambic dimeter base, exemplifies the loose iambic mode:

```
x   /          x x   /
I climbed | to a crest,
        x       /       x   /
        And, fog- | festooned,
   x   /     x     /
The sun | lay west
          x   x    /      x       /
        Like a crim | son wound:

  x     x     /        x     /
Like that wound | of mine
        x       /       x       /
        Of which | none knew,
 x  x     /    x    x   /
For I'd giv | en no sign
           x  x    /           x      /
        That it pierced | me through.
```

Though six of this poem's sixteen feet are anapests, the iambic current is clear. And because the ear can easily locate the two metrical beats in each line, and because rhymes point the line-endings, the additional light syllables do not obscure the measure.

Other outstanding poems in loose iambic dimeter include Bogan's "Knowledge" and Mark Van Doren's "Good Night." Fine poems in loose iambic trimeter include Yeats's "Fiddler of Dooney," Auden's "A Permanent Way," and Wilbur's "The Ride." Excellent poems in loose iambic tetrameter include Yeats's "The Song of the Old Mother," Frost's "Need of Being Versed in Country Things," and

Janet Lewis's "No-Winter Country." Loose iambic poems which mix lines of different length include Hardy's "The Oxen" (tetrameters and trimeters), and Gavin Ewart's amusing "2001: The Tennyson/Hardy Poem" (tetrameters and dimeters).

Historically, poets have been sparing about introducing extra syllables into the pentameter. The line is so flexible to begin with that additional elements may make it sag. Yet trisyllabic substitutions in pentameters occur with increasing frequency from the Romantic poets onward. In certain modern poems, such substitutions—sometimes in combination with other metrical variants—become so frequent as to nearly dissolve the meter. Stevens, in many of his later poems (e. g., "Credences of Summer," "The Rock," "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"), illustrates this development. Stevens also employs a more controlled loosened iambic pentameter in beautiful late pieces like "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." Frost puts a loosened pentameter to similarly good effect in "Mowing" and "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations." And Hardy's "Afterwards" features a cross-rhyming quatrain whose first and third lines are loose iambic hexameters and whose second and fourth lines are loose iambic pentameters.

X. Notes on Elision

Under certain phonetic conditions, English poets may, if it suits their metrical convenience, contract two adjacent or contiguous vowels or syllables into one. The general term for this practice is "elision," which comes from the Latin *elidere*, "to strike out." The Greek equivalent is *synaloepha*, "to unite or blend two syllables into one."

As I discuss in *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*, elision in English verse is a thorny topic. On the one hand, elisions occur in everyday speech. In a language as accentual as English, the stronger stressed syllables are especially prominent, while weakly stressed ones are left vulnerable to clipping, slurring, or syncopation. More specifically, a number of words like "interest," "casual," and "toward(s)" admit of syllabically dual pronunciations (*in-tə-rest* vs. *in-trest*; *ka-zha-wəl* vs. *kazh- wəl; tə-ward(z)* vs. *tward(z)*). Other English words have no absolutely fixed syllabic value. These include quite a few that end in semi-vocalic *r*, *n*, or *m*. Are "heaven," "even," "iron," "fire," "hour," "power," "chasm," and "prism" one syllable or two? Historically, lexicographers and poets have mostly treated them as one, while acknowledging that the semi-vowel creates at least a semi-second syllable; and many speakers give the semi-vowel full pronunciation. (In his *Milton's Prosody*, Bridges calls such words "hypermonosyllables.") It should come as no surprise that poets in English should avail themselves of these ambiguities and even take pleasure in manipulating them.

On the other hand, some elisions in our poetry have derived less from native pronunciation than from practices of ancient Greek and Latin poets and of poets in modern Italian and French. Because the poets who chiefly employed such elisions wrote during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries--and because we consequently lack recorded testimony of exactly how they read their lines--we can't judge this point with absolute certainty. But this latter class of elisions is generally considered to be more purely a matter of prosodic convention and less a reflection of actual English speech.

In any case, I shall try to explain, as simply as possible, elisions we may encounter in English verse.

Basically, there are two main types. The first involves the actual omission of the elided element. There are in turn two particularly common forms that this type takes. One is transverbal. It entails vowels that face each other across a gap between words. In such cases, the first vowel is elided. In some manuscripts of Chaucer, and in some texts from the early decades of the sixteenth century, the words involved in the elisions are run together. For instance, in the Corpus Christi College, MS 061, of *Troilus and Criseyde*, in the sixth line of the first stanza, "to endite" is amalgamated to "tendite." (At this point, Chaucer is asking the fury Thesiphone [Tisiphone] to aid him in telling his tragic tale.)

Thesiphone thow help me for tendite

(A digital copy of the manuscript may be found at https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/dh967mz5785.)

Current editions like *The Riverside Chaucer* follow the convention that became common in the second half of the sixteenth century and that continued unabated till the nineteenth. The words aren't run together. Rather, the omitted vowel is replaced, as it were such elisions in ancient Greek, and as are such elisions in modern French and Italian, by an apostrophe:

Thesiphone, thow help me for t' endite

Below are other examples of this type of elision. In scanning the lines, I'll register the elisions with arrows. While elisions of this type mostly occur in metrically unaccented positions, they can appear in metrically accented ones. This happens in the lines from Donne's verse epistle to Henry Wotton and from Cowper's *The Task*, though in the latter the metrically accented syllable--the first syllable of "unimpeachable"--has only secondary speech stress.

```
   >     /     x     /x  / x    /    x     /
Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
```

(Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, 129.1)

x / x / > / x / x /
Upon my flesh t' inflict another wound
(Jonson, "To Heaven," 22)

x / x > x / x / x /
Or under th' adverse icy poles thou pine
(Donne, "To Sir Henry Wotton" 12)

x / > / x / x / x /
And show th' immortal labors in my verse
(Joseph Addison, "Letter from Italy to Lord Halifax," 94)

x > x / x / x / x /
By th' unimpeachable and awful oath
(William Cowper, *The Task*, 5 [The Winter Morning Walk], 549)

Speakers at earlier stages of our language day evidently slurred more than we do ētoday, and these transverbal elisions were likely not as removed from actual speech as they might at first appear to us. Also, even in modern times, we speakers of English tend to slur or link adjacent open vowels. I well remember how, in elementary school phonics classes, my classmates and I were instructed to lengthen the *e* of the definite article when the word that followed it began with a vowel. Our teachers impressed on us that, while it was perfectly okay to say "thə ground" and "thə foot," we should say "thē air" and "thē elbow." The reason for this practice is that if we leave the *e* short, it may blend into or merge with the vowel that follows it. By the same token, we add an "n" to the indefinite article when it precedes a word beginning with a vowel. We say, for example, "a table" and " a satire" but "an airchair" and "an elegy." If we don't add the *n* in the latter cases, the article sloshes into the following word.

English poets in the Renaissance and seventeenth century also sometimes elide through initial *h*. This form of elision appears to have been one of those that reflects earlier and/or foreign prosodic convention and not actual habits in English speech. In classical Latin (evidently) and in French (definitely) *h* is mute. Eliding through initial *h* is natural. The French, for example, don't say, *le homme*, *le hôtel*, and *la horreur* but l*'homme, l'hôtel,* and *l'horreur*. However, the situation is more complicated in English. Though *h* is silent in a number of words--and though dialects like Cockney drop initial *h's*--we generally sound initial *h*, especially if it's followed by a vowel (as in *habit, happen, hat, here, hero, hidden, hit, holy, hope, hot,* and *hurt*). And it appears likely that Renaissance and seventeenth century English poets who elide through *h* are largely following the practice of poets in French and in Latin. (At this time, Latin was still the common language of educated Europe, and poets like Donne, Herbert, and Milton wrote Latin poems as well as English ones.)

Here are some elisions through initial *h*'s. (In Milton's line, the *w* in "whom" is silent. The line also features four degrees of rising stress across its third and fourth feet.)

x / x / x / > / x /
As when from flowry meads th' hill's shadow steals
(Donne, *Elegies* 19 ["To His Mistress Going to Bed"], 14)

x > x / x / x / x /
But th' holy men of God such vessels are
(George Herrbert, "The Priesthood," 25)

> / x / x / x / x /
T' whom thus the Portress of Hell Gate replied
(Milton *Paradise Lost*, 2.746)

That such elisions were purely a matter of prosodic convention and not reflective of pronunciations like *th'ill, th'oly*, and *T'omb* is further suggested by fact that the same poets, in similar verbal environments, do not elide through initial *h* when doing so would hurt rather than help meter.

/ x x / x / x / x /
Loath to go up the hill or labor thus
(Donne, "The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World," 281)

x / x / x / x / x /
The holy lines cannot be understood
(Herbert, "The Church-Porch," 10)

x / x / x / x / x /
To whom the Goblin full of wrath replied
(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.688)

The second common form of elision in which the omitted element is replaced with an apostrophe involves words within which two lightly stressed vowels are separated by one of the liquid consonants (*l* or *r*) or by one of the nasal ones (*n* or *m*). In such cases, poets sometimes syncopate out the first light vowel:

x / x / x / x / x /
The milky poison of each ven'mous weed
(William Mure, *Dido and Aeneas,* 3.108)

x / x / x / x / x /
In all the zones, the temp'rate, hot, and cold
(Anne Bradstreet, "In Honour of Du Bartas," 61)

x / x / x / x / x /
And Swift expires a driv'ler and a show
(Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, 318)

x / x / x / x / x /
Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
(Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village," 51)

Sometimes, poets will not introduce the apostrophe in such cases but will offer syncopated spellings of the word. (We saw a case of this in Donne's line about "flowry meads.") Milton abounds in contracted forms of this type. In the lines below from "Lycidas," for example, "watery" appears as "watry" and "reckoning" as "reckning." As wags have noted, the first example might lead listeners to think that Lycidas had received diluted Guiness at his local pub.

x / x / x / x / x /
He must not float upon his watry bier
(12)

x / x / x / x / x /
Of other care they little reckning make
(116)

The second main type of elision involves contiguous vowels--usually weakly stressed--within a word. Though we hear at least hints of both vowels in such cases, the first is reduced to a semi-vocalic *y* or *w* and produces in the process something like a single gliding syllable. The line below features two such glides, the first a *y*-glide and the second a *w*-glide. (I take the terms "*y*-glide" and "*w-glide*'' from Bridges and his book on Milton's prosody.)

x / x / > / x / > /
The cock's shrill clarion or the echoing horn
(Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," 19)

That is, for meter's sake, Gray treats the line as something like:

The cock's | shrill clar | yon or | the ech | wing horn

Additional lines with y-glides appear below. In the lines, Shakespeare treats "hideous" not as *hi-de-us* but as more like *hid-yus*; Dryden treats "deviate" not *de-ve-ate* but as closer to "dev-yate"; and Shelley treats "radiance" not as *ra-de-ance* but as more like *rad-yance*.

x / x / x / x / > /
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night
(Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, 12.2)

x / x / x / > / x /
But Shadwell never deviates into sense
(John Dryden, "MacFlecknoe," 20)

/ x x / > / x / x /
Stains the white radiance of Eternity
(Percy Pysshe Shelley, "Mourn Not for Adonais," 463)

And here are several lines with *w*-glides. Interestingly, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* gives and presumably accepts both the unelided and elided pronunciations of the words involved. (However, it gives only unelided pronunciations of the *y*-glided words just cited.)

x /x / x / x / > /
Whose agëd honor cites a virtuous youth
(Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.3.206)

/ x x / > / x / x /
Here in perpetual agony and pain
(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.861)

x / x / > / x / x /
An intellectual hatred is the worst
(Yeats,"A Prayer for My Daughter," 57)

That is, in Shakespeare's line, for *vər-chə-wəs* read *vərch-wəs*. In Milton's line, for *pər-pe-chə-wəl* read *pər-pech-wəl.* In Yeats's line, for *in-tel-lek-chə-wəl* read *in-tel-lek-shwəl*.

Sometimes, *y*- or *w*-glides occur transverbally. Readers of Renaissance verse will remember that the phrase "many a" is commonly treated as disyllabic, with the second and third syllables merging. Line eight of Shakespeare's 30th sonnet ("When to the sessions of sweet silent thought") features this glide. (Shakespeare contracts as well "the expense" to "th' expense," as he does in Sonnet 129.)

x / > / x / > / x /
And moan th' expense of many a vanished sight

Instances of transverbal *y*-glides appear with some frequency in Jonson's and Donne's poems, and the poets often indicate them with apostrophes, though in these cases the apostrophe doesn't knock out a letter.

x / x / x / > / x /
And we will have no Pooly', or Parrot by
(Jonson, "Inviting a Friend to Supper," 36)

x > x / x / x / x /
We play' in another house, what should we fear
(Donne, *Elegies*, I [Jealousy], 30)

Earlier poets also sometimes glide (or apparently glide) through *w*'s and *y's* within words like "shadowy" and "bellowing" and "flying" and "saying""

x / > / x / x / x /
With shadowy forests and with champaigns riched
(Shakespeare, *King Lear,* 1.1.64)

x / x / x / > / x /
Blue Neptune storms, the bellowing deeps resound
(Pope, *Rape of the Lock,* 5.50)

x / x / x > x / x /
How quick they wheeled and flying behind him shot
(Milton, *Paradise Regained*, 3.323)

x > x / x / x / x /
So saying, a noble stroke he lifted high
(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 6.189)

We can briefly mention several other types of contraction that we may encounter in English poetry, especially prior to 1800 or so. One of these involves what rhetoricians call "aphaeresis." This entails clipping away an initial vowel or syllable, as in *'gainst* for *against, 'scape* for *escap*e, *'fore* for *before*. Such contractions are now mostly archaic, though we still use some, including the one for *because*. ("I stopped reading Steele's essay 'cause it got too technical.") In Renaissance and seventeen-century verse, we also find contractions involving a preposition plus an article. Such contractions include *i'th'* for *in the; o'th'* for *of the*; *to th'* for *to the*. These evidently occurred in colloquial Elizabethan pronunciation. They appear in Shakespeare's plays equally in prose passages and in passages in verse. Handbooks class such contractions under the heading of "apocopation," which means the clipping of a final letter from a word. Other now largely archaic contractions include *ne'er* for *never*, *e'er* (or *ere)* for *ever*, *o'er* for *over*.

Though elision is not, practically speaking, a major element in English versification, it is interesting from a theoretical standpoint. Since the Romantic period, we have become more interested in the Germanic and accentual properties of our language and poetry. However, prior to the Romantics, our poets looked chiefly to French, Italian, or Latin models. And especially as

compared to the rigorously quantitative metric system of antiquity, English meter was regarded as relatively easy and simple. Its flexible rhythms and adaptable monosyllables weren't always seen as wonderful resources but as prosodic training wheels that enabled any old Jack or Jill to cycle through a sonnet. (It's odd today to think that for much of our literary history, the rap against our traditional meter was not that it was too confining but that it wasn't strict enough.) In this earlier literary environment, maintaining exact syllable count seemed the least an English poet could do. Elision helped poets like Milton and Marvell, Dryden and Pope, meet and sustain this requirement. Also, prior to the elocutionary reforms of the eighteenth century, English pronunciation was less settled than it became, and earlier poets felt a greater need than later poets did to spell out their metrical intentions with regard to syllabically ambiguous words and phrases.

Moreover, elision remains important in the study of verse today if for no other reason than that contemporary editions of earlier poets often feature modernized spellings that remove the original apostrophes and variant spellings. Unless we're aware of the historical practice of elision, the alterations may leave us confused as to metrical structures of the poems we read. When reading, in current anthologies, line 30 of Milton's "Lycidas" and line 20 of Phillis Wheatley's "On Imagination,"we might mistakenly think that the poets intended us to hear the lines as having 13 syllables:

Toward heaven's descent had sloped his westering wheel

The empyreal palace of the thundering God

But in fact Milton and Wheatley seem to have originally intended regular iambic pentameters. Both noted two elisions orthographically; and Milton evidently wants us hear "Toward" as *w*-glided (*Tward*), while Wheatley appears to want us to hear "empyreal" as a trisyllable, with the third syllable entailing *y*-glide (*em-pēr-yal*):

x / x / x / x / x /
Toward Heav'ns descent had sloapt his westring wheel

> / > / x / x / x /
Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God

Though the metrical apostrophe has long since fallen out of fashion, poets have continued to count or not count elidable syllables, as suits their metrical convenience. Hence, when we see modern or contemporary poets writing lines that appear to have extra light syllables, we should be alert to the possibility that they regard the light syllables as being contractible in speech or by convention.

For instance, when Larkin writes in "The Whitsun Weddings," a poem principally in iambic pentameter,

. . . sun destroys
The interest of what's happening in the shade

we might guess that he is treating "interest" and "happening" not in full three-syllable form but in syncopated disyllabic form: *in-trest* and *hap-ning*:

x / > / x / > / x /
The interest of what's happening in the shade

And when we listen to him read his poem aloud, this is what he does. (We can hear him read the poem at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9eTF6QNsxA.)

A related but different situation arises in line nine of Larkin's "The Trees," a poem in iambic tetrameter. Describing the motion and sound of newly leafed-out trees, Larkin says:

Yet still the unresting castles thresh

Reading the poem aloud (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM6n3SXSyeA), Larkin lengthens the *e* before "unresting" and pronounces all nine syllables in the line. Hence we may scan the line as having an anapestic substitution in its second foot:

x / x x / x / x /
Yet still | the unrest | ing cas | tles thresh

Yet this is the only trisyllabic foot in the entire 12-line poem, and we may wonder if Larkin also had, in the back of his mind, the possibility of treating, for metrical purposes, the two light vowels of the second foot as being subject to elision (*th' un-*). If you grow up, as Larkin did, reading poets of the past, you absorb their practices, elision among the rest, without thinking much about them unless a particular occasion sparks your curiosity or compels your attention.

Talking with poets over the years, I've found that those who treat elidable syllables as elided still hear a trace of the omitted element, while those who object to gliding or slurring--regarding them as relics of the slovenly past--and who give full pronunciation to potentially elidable elements, nevertheless feel the elements to be slight and, in Richard Wilbur's phrase, "*almost* elided."

The situation is a little like the old Certes commercial, in which one of the Certes Twins insists that Certes is a candy mint, while the other Twin insists that it is a breath mint, until a voice off camera tells them, "Stop! You're both right! New

Certes is two mints in one!" When we read Wallace Stevens's pentameter ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," V.1)

In the high west there burns a furious star

we might imagine one Twin saying, "*Furious* is elided and disyllabic and neatly fits the meter," while the other Twin says, "*Furious* is trisyllabic and results in an anapestic fifth foot." Ultimately, both interpretations are valid. Prosodically speaking, *furious* is two mints in one. (Were I supplying the off-camera voice, I'd add that the line's first two feet exhibit the 2-1-3-4 stress pattern, which is one reason I should never attempt a career in advertising. The Certes commercial may be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8zwnXjIjPM.)

In any case, because the syllables involved in elisions (or possible elisions) are generally very light, it perhaps matters little whether we scan them as fully pronounced or glided together.

Just as earlier poems feature elisions, some of which we find odd today, so they feature expanded word forms that are no longer current. Renaissance poets may give full syllabic value to the vowels in *-tion*, which we now pronounce *-shun*. Donne, for instance, treats "tribulation" as quintasyllabic, rhyming it with "son." (I'll mark, with an umlaut, the additional sounded vowel.)

x / x / x / x / x /
Ye whose just tears or tribulatiön
("Ascension," 3)

A related case involves unaccented *-science*, which we now pronounce *-shen(t)s* but which earlier poets sometimes treat as having two full vowels:

x / x / x / x / x /
Between his purpose and his consciënce
(Shakespeare, *King John*, 4.2.79)

Semi-vowels may sometimes be given full syllabic value, too, as Shakespeare does with *l* and *r* in the following examples. (I'll insert a bracketed schwa before the semi-vowels to help indicate their articulation.)

x / x / x / x / x /
And strength by limping sway disab[ə]led
(*Sonnets*, 66)

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
That croaks the fatal ent[ə]rance of Duncan
(*Macbeth*, 1.5 40)

Before leaving this subject, we should recall a point made earlier. Elision is, in English poetry, *optional*. English poets have historically been at liberty to treat contractible syllables as contracted or uncontracted, according to their metrical convenience. Sometimes, in the same line, the poet will treat the same syllables or words in contracted and uncontracted forms. This happens in the line below from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and here the elided form is not merely convenient but expressive. Friar Lawrence is warning Romeo that his abrupt and untempered passions may lead to sudden and catastrophic results. And the friar enforces his point by first characterizing Romeo's passions--his "delights"--with the three-syllable version of "violent," and then using the contracted form of the adjective to suggest the potentially life-curtailing effects of those passions:

x /x / x / x > x /
These violent delights have violent ends
(2.6.9)

XI. Why Has Iambic Been the Main Rhythm in English Verse?

People unfamiliar with poetry sometimes say that it's absurd or arbitrary to write in meters because we don't speak in them. But we often do. This is especially the case with iambics, into which English speech tends naturally to fall. Here, for example, are a few iambic trimeters from real or possible conversations. The fourth and final one has a feminine ending.

We're trying to improve.
Don't let him bully you.
Bill Russell was the best.
A postcard's like a sonnet.

Here are a few iambic tetrameters. (Again, the final example has a feminine ending.)

Perhaps you should encourage her.
How many questions did I miss?
If you've got ivy, you've got rats.
Both vaccines work against the virus.

And here are a few iambic pentameters, the last having a feminine ending.

The Titans haven't won a Super Bowl.
I hope I'm worthy of the compliment.
We need to get our children back in school.
Alexa doesn't always understand me.

Some poets and readers develop such good ears that they can instantly identify metrical utterances when others deliver them in passing and by chance. I hasten to add that those who have this talent should display it with caution and avoid indulging it in situations in which it may not be appreciated. If a friend or spouse says, "Will you please promise not to talk so much?" or "Don't tell me you forgot the shopping list!" she or he may get upset if you delightedly respond, "That's an iambic pentameter!"

Iambic rhythm suits English due mainly to three factors.

First, we generally, in speaking, place stresses at roughly equal intervals. This enables our listeners to understand us more readily and distinctly than they would if we spoke all our syllables and words at a single, uniform level or tone. Doing the latter might produce mechanical or robotic purity, but it would quickly tire and numb the ears and minds of those who heard us.

More specifically, we normally avoid delivering a succession of syllables at a single level of loudness or pitch. As we've noted, one consequence of this tendency is that when we say a run of three relatively weak syllables, we slightly "promote" the one in the middle. Conversely, we usually "demote" a weighty word if it is flanked by other weighty words. This process facilitates the absorption, into binary rhythm, of syllables that are relatively close to one another in level of stress.

The second factor that contributes to the prevalence of iambic rhythm is that most multisyllabic words in English alternate between stronger and weaker syllables or between weaker and stronger ones. Words in the former category include "table," "synthesize," "obligation," "philosophical," and "superannuated." Words in the latter category include "exalt," "intrinsic," "procrastinate," "environmental," and "encyclopedia." (For a more detailed analysis of this subject, please see Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle's *The Sound Pattern of English*.) To be sure, not all multisyllabic English words follow an alternating pattern. For instance, "nevertheless" and "pediatrician" have notable stress on their first and fourth syllables, and weaker stress on the others. Also, there exists that class of compounds that we examined in connection with metrical variants—compounds like "strawberry," "trailblazer," and "teakettle." These exhibit a pattern—strong stress, secondary stress, and weak stress—that doesn't readily suit binary meters, particularly the iambic. But, relatively speaking, these multi-syllabic words that don't feature alternating rhythm are exceptions and not the rule in English.

Multisyllabic English words that start with a heavy syllable and then fall to a lighter one outnumber those that begin with a light syllable and rise to a heavier one. This situation partly reflects our historical inclination to move stress to the

front of multisyllabic words we adopt from other languages. This is particularly so in the many disyllables that come to us from French. The French place the accent on the final syllable of words, and so did the English when French words first came into their language after the Norman conquest. But in time *cou**leur***, *ac**cent**, na**tur***, etc., became for English speakers ***col**or **ac**cen*t, and ***nat**ure*.

Our tendency to fore-stress multisyllabic words might lead us to infer that our verse would be more receptive to trochaic rhythm rather than to iambic rhythm; however, this apparently trochaic-favoring feature of our lexicon is neutralized by the third factor. This is the analytic character of English. Rather than indicating grammatical relationships, as synthetic languages like Greek, Latin, and Old English do, with lots of flexional affixes, we use function words—articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and the like—to show grammatical relationships and to establish syntactical connections. These function words often appear at the beginnings of phrases and clauses and tilt them in an iambic direction, even when the lexically significant words are monosyllabic or are multisyllabic words that fall from heavier to lighter syllables.

We can appreciate the combined effect of these three factors—the promotion-demotion phenomenon, the alternating stress of most English multisyllabic words, and our frequent use particles—by examining two iambic pentameters from Yeats's "Among School Children":

The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history . . .

No word here is in itself iambic. The major words are heavy monosyllables ("learn," "sing"); fore-stressed disyllables ("children," "cipher," "study"); or trisyllables with a light middle syllable ("reading-books," "history"). Yet the words blend smoothly into the meter. "Children" blends because it is introduced by the definite article. "Learn" fits since it follows the light syllable of "children." And though "cipher" is fore-stressed, and though "sing" is a heavy monosyllable, both are infinitive and preceded by the preposition "to"; and the infinitives and coordinated by "and," which is promoted to a metrical accent as a result of appearing between the light second syllable of "cipher" and the preposition "to":

x / x / x / x / x /
The children learn to cipher and to sing

As for the second line, even though the verb and its two objects seem to countervail iambic rhythm, they mesh with the meter because "study" is introduced by "to"; because "reading-books" is preceded by the unaccented second syllable of "study"; and because "reading-books" and "history" are coordinated by "and":

x / x / x / x / x /
To study reading-books and history

XII. Trochaic, Anapestic, and Dactylic Meters

Of non-iambic rhythms in English poetry, trochaic is the most widely practiced, and we can begin this part of our essay by examining it.

As has been mentioned, a trochee is a foot consisting of a metrically accented syllable followed by a metrically unaccented one. Historically, tetrameter is the measure commonly adopted by poets writing trochaics. And as surely as night follows day, discussion of *The Song of Hiawatha* should follow that last statement, since Longfellow's poem is the most famous work in English in trochaic tetrameter. However, *Hiawatha* is not, in its genesis and technique, characteristic of the ways that poets have historically employed the measure or of the uses to which they've put it. So I'd like to defer addressing it for the time being and offer instead some background information about the meter.

Though Chaucer introduces a version of the trochaic tetrameter here and there in his octosyllabic poems like *The House of Fame*, the measure doesn't come into its own till the 1580s and 1590s, when it becomes one of the go-to measures for the era's great songwriters. Philip Sidney is generally credited as having been the first to develop the measure. He introduces it in five of the songs (four, eight, nine, 10, and 11) of *Astrophel and Stella*. In these songs, he mixes together what would become the two common forms of the line: the full 8-syllable version, and a version that drops the final unaccented syllable. The latter version is sometimes described as "catalectic," a term derived from the Greek *katalektikos*, meaning "incomplete." The full version of the line is sometimes called "acatalectic."

Below are three stanzas from the eighth song from *Astrophel and Stella*. At this point, Stella pledges her love to Astrophel, and pleads with him to be satisfied with the pledge and not press her, against the claims of Honor, to have sex with him. Each stanza consists of two trochaic tetrameter couplets, the first couplet having clipped or catalectic lines, the second having full or acatalectic ones. I'll use a caret to indicate the missing or clipped syllable of the catalectic lines.

/ x / x / x / ^
"If to secret of my heart
/ x / x / x / ^
I do any wish impart,
/ x / x / x / x /
Where thou art not foremost placëd
/ x / x / x / x
Be both wish and I defacëd.

/ x / x / x / ^
"If more may be said, I say
/ x / x / x / ^
All my bliss in thee I lay;
/ x / x / x / x
If thou love, my love content thee,
/ x / x / x / x
For all love, all faith, is meant thee.

"Trust me, while I thee deny,
In myself the smart I try*; *experience, suffer
Tyrant Honor doth thus use thee;
Stella's self might not refuse thee."

Subsequent poets who employ the measure include Thomas Lodge, who writes in full acatalectic lines in, for instance, "Now I find thy looks were feignëd" Another fine lyric entirely in acatalectic trochaic tetrameters is "Woeful heart with grief oppressëd" from John Dowland's *Second Book of Songs*. Thomas Campion's "Shall I come, sweet Love, to thee," from his *Second Book of Airs*, is an excellent example of a lyric entirely in clipped lines. Lodge shifts regularly back and forth between acatalectic and catalectic tetrameters in "Pluck the fruit, and taste the pleasure." Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and The Turtle" is largely in catalectic trochaic tetrameter, though several of its lines are acatalectic.

Ben Jonson particularly favored the clipped line—the catalectic trochaic tetrameter—using it in his graceful "Epitaph on Elizabeth, L. H." ("Wouldst thou hear what man can say"). He also employs it for eight of his ten pieces in his *Celebration of Charis*, occasionally introducing full trochaic lines. And he adopts the measure as well in two of his most famous songs—"Come, my Celia, let us prove" from *Volpone* and "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair" from *Cynthia's Revels*, though two lines in each song are full trochaic tetrameters.

Another great practitioner of the clipped trochaic tetrameter is Robert Herrick, who adopts it for a number of his epigrams, including his memorial lines for Prue Baldwin, who managed his household when he was vicar at Dean Prior in Devonshire.

/ x / x / x / ^
In this little urn is laid
/ x / x / x / ^
Prudence Baldwin (once my maid)
/ x / x / x / ^
From whose happy spark here let
/ x / x / x / ^
Spring the purple violet.

Yvor Winters liked the catalectic trochaic tetrameter, too, and used it in a number of his poems, including the last piece he collected, the title of which, "Two Old-Fashioned Dream Songs," recalls the lyric tradition extending back to the Renaissance. However, Winters's best-known poem in the clipped line is "Before Disaster," subtitled "Winter, 1932-3." This poem concerns driving on the Bayshore Highway, an extremely dangerous proto-freeway—it had no median divider!—south of San Francisco. In describing the hurtling, heedless cars, Winters communicates the peril and anxiety of the waning days of Herbert Hoover's Administration. (Though Franklin Delano Roosevelt had won the presidential election on November 8, 1932, he wasn't inaugurated until March 4, 1933.) At the time, the country was deep in the Depression, and ominous developments were unfolding in Europe. (In January of 1933, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor of Germany.) Here's the poem's first paragraph:

/ x / x / x / ^
Evening traffic homeward burns,
/ x / x / x / ^
Swift and even on the turns,
/ x / x / x / ^
Triple weight in drifting rows,
/ x / x / x / ^
Fixed relation and repose.
This one edges out and by,
Inch by inch with steady eye.
But should error be increased,
Mass and moment are released;
Matter loosens, flooding blind,
Levels drivers to its kind.

Some prosodists like to think of the clipped lines not as trochaic catalectic but as "headless" iambic. Such prosodists construe the line as lacking its first syllable rather than its final one. They would treat Winters's lines, for instance, as

^ / x / x / x /
Evening traffic homeward burns,
^ / x / x / x /
Swift and even on the turns,

When a poet uses clipped lines regularly, the falling rhythm is, to my ears, pronounced. I therefore personally think of such lines as trochaic. However, either interpretation seems valid, and readers may choose whichever makes the best sense to them.

Other excellent poems in rhyming catalectic trochaic tetrameter include Thomas Stanley's "The Grasshopper," Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Best"; Robinson's "The Companion," Gunn's "Words for Some Ash," and Mehigan's

"Psalm." Robinson's and Gunn's poems are in rhymed stanzas; Browning's is fully rhymed, though the rhymes occur in no particular order. Stanley's and Mehigan's poems are in couplets.

No survey of trochaic tetrameter would be complete without mention of Ambrose Philips and the *Odes* in the measure that he addressed to the children of his patrons. Philips's case is not entirely a happy one. He and Alexander Pope were bitter rivals, and Pope and his cohort ferociously ridiculed the *Odes* and the manner in which Philips used the trochaic tetrameter. Pope's friend Henry Carey gave Philips the trochaic nickname "Namby-Pamby," (See Carey's "Namby-Pamby; Or a Panegyric on the New Versification.") And Pope himself, in *Peri Bathous; Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry*, ironically celebrated Philips as "the greatest master" of "THE INFANTINE"—a poetic effect that is achieved, Pope explained, "when a poet grows so very simple as to think and talk like a child."

In his *Life* of Philips, Samuel Johnson rightly says that Philips didn't deserve such censure. He wrote well on occasion. One of the *Odes,* "Supplication for Miss Carteret in the Small-Pox," is moving in its sympathy for its subject; and Philips's "Winter Piece"--a verse epistle in heroic couplets that he wrote while traveling in Europe--contains a memorable description of an ice storm in Copenhagen. At the same time, however, the *Odes* do sometimes remind us of the fine line between the delicate and the inane. Below is a passage that illustrates this point. It's from Philips's "To Miss Charlotte Pulteney in Her Mother's Arms." (Some of Philips's odes are in full trochaic tetrameter; others are in the catalectic form; still others mix the two. Philips adopts the catalectic line here.)

Timely blossom, infant fair,
Fondling of a happy pair,
Every morn and every night,
Their solicitous delight,
Sleeping, waking, still at ease,
Pleasing without will to please,
Little gossip, blithe and hale,
Tattling many a broken tale,
Singing many a tuneless song,
Lavish of a heedless tongue,
Simple maiden, void of art,
Babbling out the very heart, . . .

As has been noted, poets writing rhyming trochaic tetrameters sometimes alternate regularly between acatalectic and catalectic lines. Samuel Johnson's "Short Song of Congratulation" and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" are well-known examples of poems that adopt this procedure. Here are the first two stanzas of the latter. (In line 5, Longfellow treats "real" as disyllabic.)

/ x / x / x / x
Tell me | not, in | | mournful | numbers,
/ x / x / x / ^
Life is | but an | empty | dream!—
/ x / x / x / x
For the | soul is | dead that | slumbers,
/ x / x / x / ^
And things | are not | what they | seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Joni Mitchell's "Marcie," a memorable portrait of a lonely young woman in New York City, is another outstanding lyric that alternates between full and clipped trochaic tetrameters. Here's the final stanza, which relates Marcie's disappearance:

Marcie leaves and doesn't tell us
Where or why she moved away.
Red is angry, green is jealous,
That was all she had to say.
Someone thought they saw her Sunday,
Window-shopping in the rain;
Someone heard she's bought a one-way
Ticket and went west again.

(The meter of the bridge of "Marcie," however, differs from that of the verses.)

Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, published in 1855, is the best-known poem in English in trochaic tetrameter, though, as was indicated above, it is not really characteristic, historically speaking, of the uses to which English poets have put the line. While Longdfellow's "Psalm of Life," which dates from 1838, draws on the main tradition, Longfellow took as his model for *Hiawatha* the *Kalevala*, the Finnish folk epic compiled by Elias Lönnrot and published in 1835. Though there is some dispute about how best to characterize the prosody of the *Kalevala*, its basic structure is trochaic tetrameter. The poem doesn't feature conventional rhyme but instead reinforces the metrical pattern with parallelism and alliteration. *Hiawatha* incorporates these characteristics into the English trochaic tetrameter, as can be seen in the hero's lament (20.169-81) after his wife dies during the terrible winter famine toward the end of the poem:

/ x / x / x / x
"Farewell," said he, "Minnehaha!"
/ x / x / x / x
"Farewell, O my Laughing Water!
/ x / x / x / x
All my heart is buried with you!
/ x / x / x / x
All my thoughts go onward with you!
Come not back again to labor,
Come not back again to suffer,
Where the Famine and the Fever,
Wear the heart and waste the body.
Soon my task will be completed,
Soon your footsteps I shall follow,
To the Islands of the Blessèd,
To the Kingdom of Ponemah
To the Land of the Hereafter!"

Because the four-beat line is quite emphatic, it's possible to mix iambic and trochaic tetrameters together and still maintain a sense of metrical coherence. Landmark exercises in this mode include Milton's "*L'Allegro*" and "*Il Penseroso*." Here's a well-known passage (33-48) in the former. Milton is addressing Euphrosyne, the goddess of Mirth. The first line in the passage alludes to the etymology of "trochee," which in Greek (*trochaios*) meant "running" or "tripping."

Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastic toe,
And in thy right hand lead with thee
The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty;
And if I give thee honor due,
Mirth, admit me to thy crew
To live with her, and live with thee
In unreprovëd pleasures free;
To hear the lark begin his flight,
And singing startle the dull night,
From his watch-towr in the skies
Till the dappled dawn doth rise;
Then to come in spite of sorrow
And at my window bid good morrow
Through the sweet-briar, or the vine
Or the twisted eglantine.

Some of these couplets (e.g. 33-34) consist of two catalectic trochaic tetrameters. Others (e. g., 35-36) consist of two iambic tetrameters. In some (e.g., 37-38) an iambic tetrameter is answered by a catalectic trochaic tetrameter. In others (e.g., 45-46) an acatalectic trochaic tetrameter is answered by an iambic tetrameter with a feminine ending.

A longer trochaic line that English poets (particularly in the nineteenth century) sometimes use is the trochaic octameter. Famous poems in this measure include Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and Robert Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's," in both of which the lines are regularly catalectic. In the latter poem, an imaginary Englishman of Browning's time apostrophizes the eighteenth-century Venetian composer. The poem is in rhyming tercets. The second tercet appears below.

/ x / x / x / x / x / x / x / ^
Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
/ x / x / x / x / x / x / ^
What, they lived once thus at Venice, where the merchants were the kings,
/ x / x / x / x / x / x / ^
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the seas with rings.

Some prosodists consider the trochaic octameter to be a doubled trochaic tetrameter, with every odd-numbered line being full (acatalectic) and unrhyming line, while every even-numbered line is clipped and rhyming. Such prosodists suggest, that is, that Browning's poem might reasonably be lineated thus:

Here you come with your old music,
and here's all the good it brings.
What, they lived once thus at Venice,
where the merchants were the kings,
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges
used to wed the seas with rings.

Without denying the reasonableness of this explanation of the measure, I believe that skillful poets who work in it are likely to produce more complicated (or at least somewhat different) rhythmical effects than they might with the straightforward four-beat line. Browning, for example, sometimes avoids setting caesuras after the fourth foot and instead or also distributes the grammatical pauses in earlier and later parts of the octameter. (In the passage above, this occurs in the line about Saint Mark's cathedral.)

A lovely recent poem in trochaic octameter is Dick Davis's"Teresia Sherley." Set in tercets like Browning's poem, Davis's is spoken by its title character, who was Persian noblewoman (born ca. 1590?- died 1668) who married the English diplomat Robert Sherley. Though the marriage was by all accounts happy, Davis describes Lady Sherley as struggling to negotiate her way between her native culture, which she has been forced by marriage to abandon, and her husband's culture, to which she has tried to adapt but which has not always been welcoming. In the poem's final tercet, she wakes early in the morning in Sussex, England, where she and her husband lived for some years. She reflects that she is

Neither Persian, no, nor English, as I see dawn's light erase
Dearest darkness and its phantoms . . . and I'm ready now to face
All of morning's minor duties, all that's weirdly commonplace.

Well-known poems in English in anapestic measure include Matthew Prior's "Jinny the Just," Isaac Watts's "The Sluggard," Jonathan Swift's "Clever Tom Clinch Going to Be Hanged," and Byron's "Destruction of Sennacherib," all of which are written in tetrameters. Here's the first stanza of Watts's poem:

x x / x x / x x / x x /
'Tis the voice of the sluggard; I heard him complain,
x x / x x / x x / x x /
"You have waked me too soon, I must slumber again."
x x / x x / x x / x x /
As the door on its hinges, so he on his bed
x x / x x / x x / x x /
Turns his sides and his shoulders and his heavy head.

In this poem, as with poems in non-iambic measures generally, meter tussles at points against normal accentuation. In Watts's first three lines, he harmonizes meter and natural speech, but we readers must help him with the fourth line. Presented with the line in isolation, we would likely give significant stress to the verb "Turns" and would probably not accent the pronoun "his" at the expense of the heavy first syllable of "heavy." To sustain the measure, we must keep the tune of the anapestic tetrameter firmly in mind and hammer out the beats accordingly, even when this emphasis conflicts with how we usually would deliver certain words or phrases.

A memorable modern poem in anapestic tetrameter is Siegfried Sassoon's bitterly satirical World War I poem, "The General":

x x / x x / x x / x x /
"Good morning; good morning!" the General said
x x / x x / x x / x x /
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
x x / x x / x x / x x /
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead
x x / x x / x x / x x /
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
x x / x x / x x / x x /
"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
x x / x x / x x / x x /
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
• • • • • • • •
x x / x x / x x / x x /
But he did for them both with his plan of attack.

The opening line in this poem features a variation common in anapestic verse: the first metrically unaccented syllable of the line is dropped.

Some prosodists construe anapestic lines lacking their first syllable as amphibrachic—the amphibrach being a foot consisting of a metrically accented syllable flanked fore and aft by metrically unaccented ones (x/x). This explanation may appear particularly plausible when applied to anapestic poems that not only drop their first syllable but also feature feminine endings. Take, for instance, the opening of Swift's poem about Tom Clinch, which describes the passage of a condemned highwayman from Newgate Prison to the gallows at Tyburn and which satirizes the custom of treating executions as public entertainments.

```
x     / x     x      /          x     x    /   x     x      /  (x)
As clever Tom Clinch, while the Rabble was bawling,
  x       /   x      x          /  x      x    / x   x      /(x)
Rode stately through Holborn, to die in his Calling;
  x    /    x    x     /       x x    / x  x     /
He stopt at the George for a Bottle of Sack,
x        /  x      x   /    x x      /   x  x        /
And promis'd to pay for it when he came back.
```

Wouldn't it make sense, a champion of amphibrachs might ask, to treat these lines not as anapestic tetrameters lacking their first syllable but as amphibrachic tetrameters, the first two being complete and the second two being catalectic?

```
x     / x      x       /          x       x    /  x       x     /   x
As clever | Tom Clinch, while | the Rabble |was bawling,
  x       /   x        x         /  x       x   / x     x      / x
Rode stately | through Holborn, |to die in |his Calling;
  x    /    x      x    /       x     x   / x    x    /     ^
He stopt at | the George for | a Bottle | of Sack,
x        /  x        x   /    x     x      /   x     x       /     ^
And promis'd | to pay for | it when he | came back.
```

However, if poems in this form also have (as they usually do) full anapestic lines, amphibrachic interpretations run into a descriptive problem. We may illustrate it by citing a couplet a bit further along in "Clever Tom Clinch":

But, as from the Windows the Ladies he spy'd,
Like a Beau in the Box, he bow'd low on each Side;

If we describe these lines as amphibrachic catalectic, we're obliged to scan the first foot of the second line of the couplet as having, in place of the expected amphibrach, a four-syllable foot patterned xx/x.

x x / x x / x x / x x / ^
Like a Beau in | the Box, he | bow'd low on |each Side . . .

As far as I know, readers and poets don't recognize such a foot as existing in English. So it seems simplest to stick with anapests when we describe rising triple rhythm, though if others find amphibrachs helpful or fetching, they should adopt them.

The other significant trisyllabic rhythm in English poetry is the dactylic (heavy-light-light). It has been less commonly used than the trochaic and anapestic, though in the nineteenth century such poets Robert Southey, Longfellow, and Arthur Hugh Clough conducted interesting experiments with the measure. Longfellow's *Evangeline* was a great hit in its day, and it remains a very moving poem. It stands head and shoulders above his other long poems, just as his "Jewish Cemetery at Newport" stands head and shoulders above his other lyrics.

Shorter poems in dactylics include Thomas Hood's "Bridge of Sighs," a virtuosic (if creepy) exercise in dimeters about a woman who drowned herself. Here are several characteristic lines (27-30):

/ x x / x x
Still, for all slips of hers,
/ x x / xx
One of Eve's family—
/ x x / x x
Wipe those poor lips of hers
/ x x / x x
Oozing so clammily.

Byron's "Song of Saul Before his Last Battle" features dactylic tetrameter couplets. (Byron drops the final two metrically unaccented syllables, a procedure sometimes called "brachycatalexis.") Byron's "When We Two Parted" has a mix of anapestic and dactylic dimeters.

Along with the other trisyllabic measures, some prosodists include the amphimacer, also called the cretic (accented-unaccented-accented). Though this foot does not figure prominently in English verse, an adage that my mother taught me as a child (and that has comforted me through many projects and activities) is in cretic monometer:

Inch by inch,
Life's a cinch.
Yard by yard,
Life's damn hard.

I discuss these less commonly used meters—as well as Old English accentual meter and experimental verse modes such as syllabics and free verse—in *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*. Readers interested in these modes can consult that book or such works as Derek Attridge's *Rhythms of English Poetry*; Alfred Corn's *The Poem's Heartbeat*; Babette Deutsch's *Poetry Handbook*; John Drury's *Poetry Dictionary*; Annie Finch and Alexandra Oliver's *Measure for Measure: An Anthology of Poetics Metres*; Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*; Stephen Fry's *Ode Not Taken*; Ronald Greene and Stephen Cushman's *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edition; Charles Hartman's *Verse*; John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason*; Mary Kinzie's *Poet's Guide to Poetry*; James McAuley's *Versification: A Short Introduction*; Robert Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry*; George Saintsbury's *Historical Manual of English Prosody*; Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum's *Prosody Handbook*; Lewis Turco's *New Book of Forms*; and Miller Williams's *Patterns of Poetry*.

XIII. Advantages of Meter

Before closing, I'd like to summarize or reiterate some advantages of metrical composition. To begin with, meter can make a singular appeal to the ear, mind, and memory. It can give language elegance and liveliness, enabling the poet to unite verbal fluidity with stable form. Working together, the idiosyncratic personal voice and the normative metrical pattern continually transform and are transformed by each other. The metrical pattern gives the personal voice a resistant grace and solidity, while the personal voice infuses the pattern—in itself merely an abstract schema—with vigor and suppleness. Moreover, against ground-bass of meter, shades of accent can be more sensitively registered than is possible in non-metrical media, and the relative weight and speed of words and phrases may be more acutely felt. Also, because meter operates concurrently with grammar, the poet can play the two off of each other in interesting ways. By making lines end at and coincide with grammatical junctures, the poet can highlight or emphasize meaning. Conversely, by running sentence structure over the end of a line—by setting metrical units at variance with syntactical ones—the poet can extend or shift meaning. So, too, meter can help poets move between different levels of style. Meter can give staying power and rhythmical interest to lower-keyed passages, and its steady undercurrent may help to support material that features a greater elevation or dignity of tone.

Meter (and the related devices of rhyme and stanza) can also encourage poets to think and write more richly and acutely than they otherwise might. When you're trying to secure a cadence, locate a rhyme, or shape an argument to a stanzaic arrangement, you find yourself looking at things from different angles and considering alternative words and phrases. Sometimes, first thoughts are the best. But other times, form helps you venture more deeply into your subject and clarify its significance. Likewise, eloquence and aptness may on occasion come

spontaneously; but when they don't--when your initial efforts seem doubtful or uninspired--you may come up with something better in the process of testing out different phrases and sentences against the frame of your meter. As Edgar Bowers used to say, meters are like magnets. They attract words and ideas. They can stimulate your smarter and better self and draw from you capacities for expression you didn't realize you had.

Metrical composition is, moreover, fun. Craft presents difficulties, but when its challenges are successfully met, the result is a wonderful and cheering reconciliation of order and freedom, stability and surprise. Though in recent generations many poets have set aside the traditional tools of poetic art, song writers--from Bob Dylan to Lennon and McCartney to Dolly Parton to Run-DMC to Lin-Manuel Miranda--have continued to employ them freshly and inventively and have continued to delight and move wide and receptive audiences. Meter isn't, I realize, to everyone's taste, and free verse, in its all current modes, has beauties of its own. But fine traditional versification has a special sprightliness and drive and will likely remain as viable in our literary future as it has been in our literary past.

Lastly, fine verse can help us face aspects of life that might otherwise defeat our courage. Many of us shrink from acknowledging, much less confronting, the kinds of terrible cruelty and heartbreaking love that Shakespeare examines in *King Lear*. Yet such experiences are part of reality. If we avert our eyes from them, we diminish ourselves and our ability to ameliorate our human condition. Shakespeare's poetry fortifies us. Thanks to his play's memorable lines and dramatic exchanges—its swift story-telling and skillfully plotted reversals of fortune—we're better able to look at truth while retaining and enlarging our sympathies for others as we and they move through time. As Janet Lewis puts it, in her tribute "To the Poet, Clayton Stafford, for His Verse":

> O measured line and sure,
> The fact too hard to face
> We cherish and endure
> Through thine ennobling grace.

(Originally written and uploaded to this site in 2020, this essay was slightly revised and corrected in May of 2022.)