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Chapter 1

The rhythms of poetry: a first approach

Reading poetry

Poetry is as old and as widespread as human culture. Just to possess a language is enough, it seems, to arouse the desire for utterances more vivid and more memorable than those of daily speech, a need to treat the productions of language as sequences of sounding words rather than strings of inert symbols whose only function is to point to their encoded meanings. What is distinctive about poetry is its exploitation of the fact that spoken language *moves*, and that its movements – which are always movements of meaning and emotion at the same time as movements of sound – achieve a varied onward momentum by setting up expectations that are fulfilled, disappointed, or deferred. These sequences suggest connections with other meaningful movements, in literature, in daily talk, in the world outside language. Speech always *happens*, as a process of unfolding sounds and significations, echoing and anticipating each other, and poetry aims at a precision that makes every word count as something experienced meaningfully through the body at the same time as it is understood by the mind.

The engine that drives this sonorous and meaningful activity is *rhythm*: the continuous motion that pushes spoken language forward, in more or less regular waves, as the musculature of the speech organs tightens and relaxes, as energy pulsates through the words we speak and hear, as the brain marshals multiple stimuli into ordered patterns. To understand and enjoy poetry means responding to, and participating in, its rhythm – not as one of a number of features that make up the poetic experience, but as the heart of that experience.

Read the following sentence – the opening of William Wordsworth's 8,500 line poem *The Prelude,* which I have set out as if it were prose – like the beginning of a long novel, silently, aiming to get the gist of it as efficiently as possible:

(1) O there is blessing in this gentle breeze that blows from the green fields and from the clouds and from the sky: it beats against my cheek, and seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.

Now read it aloud, slowly, letting the sound and movement of the words

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carry you along, pausing briefly at the ends of the lines signaled on the page:

(1a)
```
O there is blessing in this gentle breeze
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky: it beats against my cheek,
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.
```

What is the difference between these two experiences? In the second reading, each line *takes place* as an occurrence with its own integrity and emotional quality. At the end of the first line we pause to comprehend and respond to the opening announcement – the speaker's happiness, and the belief that it comes from the "gentle breeze" – before we move on to discover and take pleasure in the sources of the breeze in the line that follows. The line after this enacts the overflowing exuberance of the speaker's feeling as yet another natural source is added to the list. The movement then halts in mid-line, before starting again with a new description of the physical action of the breeze, rendered verbally as it happens experientially. The final line, like the previous lines, is not simply a statement but is a movement of thought – a far-fetched yet emotionally justifiable speculation. Only in the second of our two readings can the lines be said to function *as poetry*, enacting for us as we speak the words an experience, a happening in time, that is physical and emotional and mental all at once.

Poems are made out of spoken language. A very few of the millions of poems that have been written have an existence only as visual artifacts, but even these derive some of their impact from the *impossibility* of reading them aloud. This is not to say that in all other poems the visual aspect is unimportant. On the contrary, once poems started to be circulated in print as well as recited from memory or from a precious manuscript, their look on the page became significant, and the history of English poetry could be written as a history of the gradually increasing importance of its visual dimension – but always as this interacts with its aural dimension. The commonest way we now experience poetry is not by listening to a reciter or reader, but by reading it on a page in front of us, and we shall see that much poetry, especially recent poetry, capitalizes on this situation.

Of course, we can't always read poetry aloud. If we read on trains or in libraries or shared rooms we have to compromise, but it is still possible to shape the words in silence and to feel the rhythm coursing through the lines as we do so. (We manage this by means of minute muscular movements that are enough to suggest the larger movements that take place in actual speech.) Reading poetry requires *time*; each word needs to emerge and fulfill itself before we go on to the next. A poem is a real-time event. Our habit of skimming for sense when we read a newspaper or a novel, of barely noticing the little words that take us from one kernel of meaning to the next, is a

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great asset in modern civilization, but it doesn't stand us in good stead when it comes to poetry, which simply cannot work *as* poetry if it is read in this way. This is not because poetry is only or primarily sound, but because it is *in* sound – and above all in sound in movement – that its meanings are produced and performed. To remember a poem is not the same as remembering a fact or an experience; it's to remember words spoken in a certain order – and one of the best ways of becoming sensitive to the possibilities of poetic rhythm is to memorize poems in different rhythmic forms.

The first rule in appreciating rhythm and movement – a requisite for appreciating poetry – is therefore a simple one: read poems aloud whenever you can (and have others read to you as well). Do this often enough for it to become an automatic impulse whenever you pick up a poem. Then if it's *not* possible to read aloud, you will find yourself enunciating the poem under your breath slowly and with full attention, allowing it to take the same time it would demand if you were using your voice. It's worth remembering that although we talk of someone "reading a poem," it's never simply a matter of a person doing something to a passive textual object. What happens is that the "reader" sets in motion a two-way process, keeping just enough control to carry out the interpretive activity that is necessary, but as far as possible letting the language take charge, having its way, springing its surprises and offering its satisfactions.

Some basic terms

During the course of this book, a number of terms will be introduced, discussed, and exemplified. Here are some preliminary comments on a few of the most important of the terms that will be used. (For a full list of terms and brief definitions, see Appendix 2.)

1. Rhythm

Rhythm is one of the most familiar experiences of our daily lives. We are all constantly making and encountering rhythms. Whenever the muscles of your body engage in a repeated activity a rhythmic movement is set up, and when you watch someone else engaged in such an activity – or hear the sounds that are produced by it – you naturally respond to it rhythmically, sometimes with movements of your own body. Breathing, walking, running, talking: these are all rhythmic activities. *Rhythm is a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived; a series of alternations of build-up and release, movement and counter-movement, tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections.* Rhythm can be both produced and

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perceived by a single person, as when you sing a song or read a poem aloud; or the production and perception can be separate, as when someone sings a song or reads a poem to you. Although strictly speaking the idea of "movement" implies travel in *space*, rhythm is what makes a physical medium (the body, the sounds of speech or music) seem to move with deliberateness through *time*, recalling what has happened (by repetition) and projecting itself into the future (by setting up expectations), rather than just letting time pass it by. Rhythm is *felt* as much as it is *heard* or *seen*.

All languages have their distinctive rhythms, their own ways of harnessing the energies of the body as they unfold in time. The job of the rhythm in any language is to economize on that expenditure of energy by imparting a degree of regularity to it. And poetic rhythm is a heightening and an exploitation of the rhythm of a particular language. To be able to speak English, therefore, is to be familiar with the rhythms that English poetry uses. The further back you go in history, of course, the more likely you are to encounter words that have to be pronounced with somewhat different rhythmic qualities from those we give them today. But even as far back as Shakespeare this applies to only a few words, and with a little practice it's easy to become responsive to the rhythms of the verse written by Chaucer some six hundred years ago. Different accents and dialects produce no major difficulties either. Although a very detailed analysis of rhythm would show up discrepancies, the fundamental features that we will be looking at are common across a wide range of varieties of current English.

The rhythm of the English language is fundamentally a matter of *syllables* and *stresses*, and we will come back to these terms in chapter 2. The point I want to emphasize now is that simply being able to speak and understand English means being able to handle both of these, whether we are conscious of this ability or not. Operating together, syllables and stresses give spoken English the rhythmic drive it needs to keep going: like all rhythms, that is, it enables the muscular movements to happen with a certain evenness and predictability. (Imagine what it would be like trying to saw through a log if the arm and hand muscles, instead of working rhythmically, moved in irregular spasms.) Poems harness that rhythmic drive to their own ends, but they do so by exploiting the language's own potential, not by imposing arbitrary rules on it.

More important than settling on and memorizing a definition of rhythm is learning to read poetry in such a way as to *experience* its rhythm. Poetic rhythm is not a secret property that only the initiated can appreciate; it is the most open and immediate of qualities. If we sometimes miss it, it's because we've learned *not* to hear it in our rush to attend to other things.

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2. Verse

Almost all poetry is written in verse, as opposed to prose. Prose follows only the rules of the English language, but verse introduces some additional principle or principles that heighten our attention to its rhythms. A few poems have been written in prose, and we might also want to apply the word "poetry" to parts of some novels – James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance – on the basis of their attention to the movement and sounds of language. But in this book we are concerned with poetry written in verse, of which there are two major types, metrical verse and nonmetrical, or free, verse. (Freedom is, of course, a relative matter, and there is no reason why free verse shouldn't be as carefully controlled as metrical verse.) "A verse" can mean either "a line" or "a stanza"; because of the ambiguity, the term is not used in this book.

3. Free verse

Free verse, which became common in the twentieth century after some isolated earlier examples, is, in one sense, the simplest kind of verse. It uses a very straightforward device to bring about a focus on the movement of the language: the introduction into the continuous flow of prose language, which has breaks determined entirely by syntax and sense, of another kind of break, shown on the page by the start of a new line, and often indicated in a reading of the poem by a slight pause. When we read prose, we ignore the fact that every now and then the line ends and we have to shift our eyes to the beginning of the next line. We know that if the same text were printed in a different typeface, the sentences would be broken up differently with no alteration in the meaning. But in free verse, the line on the page has an integrity and function of its own. This has important consequences for the movement and hence the meaning of the words.

Here are two examples of free verse, by Walt Whitman and Denise Levertov, each consisting of one descriptive sentence from a longer poem:

(2) The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon,
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.

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(3)
```
The new day rises
as heat rises,
knocking in the pipes
with rhythms it seizes for its own        4
to speak of its invention -
the real, the new-laid
egg whose speckled shell
the poet fondles and must break           8
if he will be nourished.
```

What these two examples show is that the category "free verse" (like the category "metrical verse") embraces widely differing uses of rhythm. The first example uses long lines that correspond to the main divisions of the sentence, while the second cuts up the sentence at places where we wouldn't normally pause, resulting in a very different rhythm. All kinds of free verse depend on the intrinsic rhythmic characteristics of spoken English, but they exploit it in a variety of ways.

4. Meter and metrical verse

Most rhythms – whether in language or elsewhere – are not organized into longer repeated units. They begin, project themselves forward, peter out, change, or stop, but they don't fall into regular patterns made up of groups of rhythmic pulses. I walk forward, slow down, break into a run, come to a sudden halt; the muscles of my body go through a series of rhythms, working with and against one another in complex relationships, without any sense that I could *count* the movements I make, or if I could, that the numbers would be significant. I read aloud from a newspaper, and my speech obeys the rhythmic norms of the English language, determined entirely by the sentences I read and not by any system of repeating sequences. The free verse lines just quoted are given their rhythm by the interaction between the rhythms of the language itself and the line-divisions marked on the page; there is no further principle of organization or subdivision.

If, however, you read the following lines by William Blake aloud, letting their individual rhythm emerge, you will find that they develop a swing of their own. A different impulse of rhythmicality emerges to mesh with that of the language itself, and perhaps even alter it (by making you read the last two words more deliberately than in prose, perhaps):

(4)
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Never pain to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.
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The words have been chosen by the poet in such a way that the rhythm which is produced when they are read with their normal pronunciation falls into a pattern of repeating units, a *meter*. The word suggests the measuring that is implicit in such units: the units are countable, and the number is significant. *Meter is an organizing principle which turns the general tendency toward regularity in rhythm into a strictly-patterned regularity, that can be counted and named.*

We don't have to do any work to *make* Blake's lines metrical; the poet has already done the work in his arrangement of words, his placing of syntactic boundaries, and his organization of lines, and we merely have to follow his lead. If the sense seems to require a pause, or a quickening, we can provide either of these without fear that the metrical pattern will dissolve – it is built into the words, and will continue to make itself felt. For instance, you may feel that although the first sentence goes on after the first line, the meaning demands quite a long pause after the first "love." Read it in this way, and you will find that the rhythmic pattern is merely postponed, not broken. Equally, you might want to read straight on from the third to the last line; again, the organization of the rhythm does not suffer. Meter is not a metronome ticking away while we read; it is a quality of the poet's chosen language, both emerging from and having an effect on that language.

As with the free-verse poet, part of what the poet has done is to divide the sentence up into lines on the page. This is less significant here because the language itself sets up a metrical pattern that divides at those places – which are also signaled by rhymes. We can show the difference by rewriting this example and one of the earlier free-verse examples without the line-breaks:

(4a) Never pain to tell thy love, love that never told can be; for the gentle wind does move silently, invisibly.

(3a) The new day rises as heat rises, knocking in the pipes with rhythms it seizes for its own to speak of its invention – the real, the new-laid egg whose speckled shell the poet fondles and must break if he will be nourished.

We would be unable to reconstruct the line-divisions in the second example, but it would be an easy task in the first – and not only because of the rhymes.

Though not all meters are as clear-cut as the one Blake uses in this example, it is always the case that the units into which metrical verse is divided are determined by its own internal structure, whereas the units of free verse

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are determined by the layout on the page. The less clearly marked the meter, the more the responsibility falls on the reader to indicate the line-ends in pronunciation. Different readers do this in different ways, and only the slightest of modifications to a normal reading – such as a slowing-down on the final syllable or a brief pause after the last word – will usually be enough.

Like rhythm, meter is not limited to a single medium. In principle, any rhythmic movement can be made metrical: if I push the saw with extra vigor on every fourth stroke I am setting up a simple meter. (Even the alternation of stronger forward and weaker backward strokes in normal sawing might be called a meter, of a very elementary kind.) Meter is, of course, a fundamental feature of most Western music. It is signaled by the time-signature at the beginning of a piece of music, and by the bar-lines that divide up the work, but more importantly it emerges from the structure of notes and rests – patterns of duration, melody, dynamics, and harmony – that make up the texture of sound. Meters can also be produced in a number of languages whose physical properties are very different from each other.

Although in theory any principle of organization based on the counting of units could be considered a meter, we are concerned only with those systems that produce an *intensification and regularization of the normal rhythm of the language* – and as we shall discover, only a very few of the theoretically possible systems of meter achieve this result. The lines by Blake just quoted are an example of one of the most common of such systems, and the fact that a reader can tell they are in a meter without having to do any counting shows how well it does its job of intensifying and regularizing. What we experience is precisely the rhythm of spoken English becoming more insistent and more even in its pulses (two aspects of the same process).

Most of the basic metrical patterns that occur over and over again in English poetry can be found in the poetry of many other languages, and in much of Western music. It must be stressed that meter is not abstract or theoretical, although sometimes it is talked about as if it were; it is not *opposed* to rhythm but is a way of *organizing* rhythm. But while the meter of the poem is something it shares with other poems, rhythm involves many factors besides meter, and is unique to a particular poem. We will find that the field of meter is classified according to a number of overlapping categories: meter in general; stress meter and syllable-stress meter; duple and triple meter; four-beat and five-beat meter; and so on. These different metrical possibilities give rise to different kinds of *verse*: stress verse and syllable-stress verse, duple and triple verse, and so on for all the other types of meter. *Versification* is the art of writing in verse; *metrics* or, more traditionally, *prosody*, is the study of that art.

The fact of a poem's being written in a meter doesn't mean that it enters a realm of special difficulty: far from it, since the majority of the meters used

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by poets are fundamentally very simple and very familiar. The bulk of English verse is metrical, and this includes both literary epics and folk ballads, sonnet sequences and nursery rhymes. Readers who turn to literary verse are almost always already proficient at reading popular verse, and therefore have a solid foundation on which to build. The most valuable way of doing this is by reading as much poetry as possible in a variety of meters, trying to bring out the rhythmic structure (chanting the lines, if necessary) so that the metrical patterns and possibilities of English verse become second nature.

5. Beat

The most fundamental feature of any rhythm that is organized as a meter is the *beat*, a burst of energy that is part of a repeating and structured pattern. *Metrical language is language written in such a way as to make possible the experiencing of beats.* It would be less accurate to say the "hearing" of beats, because it is an important fact that beats are not just heard: what makes a particular sound a beat is the way that it engages with the body and not just the ears and brain. We say that a stretch of language has beats when, on hearing it or reading it aloud, we sense an impulse to move at regularly occurring places – to bring down the hand, to nod the head, to tap the foot. The oldest meaning of the word "beat" is "strike repeatedly," and its later use in discussions of music and poetry still carries something of that sense of repeated physical action. What was described as the "swing" of the Blake lines quoted earlier is the effect of the beats that emerge as we read it. It's important to note that a beat never exists in isolation – it is always part of a patterned series, since it is only in such a series that beats can be produced.

In between two beats there is invariably a lull, a moment of slack often felt as either an after-effect of the previous beat or a build-up of tension leading to the next beat. This moment can be just a pause, or it can have a pulse (or sometimes more than one pulse) of its own – and if it does, we refer to the weaker pulses as *offbeats*. An offbeat is a kind of beat, but it is clearly distinguishable from a full beat by being less powerful, and by being rhythmically linked to a full beat before or after it. The alternation of beats and offbeats gives rise to a much stronger rhythm than a simple series of beats, and is the basis of all English meter. As we shall see, different types of offbeat play an important role in giving meters their specific character.

6. Some other terms

All poems (apart from prose poems, which we are not dealing with here) are divided into *lines*. The lines may be continuous, or divided into *stanzas* (groups of lines, usually with the same pattern of line-lengths and often the

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same pattern of rhymes). When a continuous poem is divided into irregular subdivisions, these are called *verse paragraphs*. If the end of a line coincides with a break in the syntax (usually, though not always, indicated by punctuation), it is called an *end-stopped line*. If the syntactic unit carries on over the end of the line into the next one, it is called a *run-on* line. All the lines in example (2) above are end-stopped; most of the lines in example (3) are run-on.

The names of the commonest metrical lines in the literary tradition are taken from Greek prosody (though their meanings when applied to English verse are different). The two most common lengths of line are the four-beat line, or *tetrameter* (from the Greek prefix tetra-, four), and the five-beat line, or *pentameter* (from the Greek prefix penta-, five). Other names will be defined later in the book.

Rhyme is a familiar phenomenon, involving the repetition of the stressed vowel of a word and any sounds that follow it, combined with a difference in the consonant immediately preceding it: "bee"/"free"; "lake"/"take"; "dressy"/"messy"; "kick it"/"stick it." It is used as a structural device in English verse to mark the end of metrical units or lines. A *rhyme-scheme* is a pattern of rhymes. To represent a rhyme-scheme in shorthand, every different rhyme is given a different letter of the alphabet: *aabbccdd* (couplets), *abab* (a quatrain with alternating rhymes), *abbaabbacdecde* (one type of sonnet).

When a poetic line runs smoothly because it fulfills the demands of the meter in the most straightforward way, it displays *regularity* or *simplicity*. We could also simply say that it is *highly rhythmical*. When it diverges from the simplest pattern of alternation enshrined in the meter there is an increase in *irregularity* or *complexity*. We can also describe this variation in terms of the degree of *relaxation* or *tension*, since meter is built out of readers' expectations, and when expectations are only partly met the language seems to be pulling away from the anticipated patterning.

To identify the meter of a poem by means of a system of visual symbols is to *scan* it, thus producing a *scansion*. The main purpose of scansion is to indicate clearly the basic rhythmic structure of a line or group of lines. It is not an attempt to represent a specific reading with all its nuances (though a scansion will often suggest one kind of reading in contrast to other possible readings). We can make a scansion more or less detailed, depending on the specific purpose it is being used for. One of the difficulties in analyzing meter is that the terms and symbols we use and the diagrams we draw tend to suggest, quite erroneously, that meter is largely a matter of space and of seeing. We need to bear in mind constantly that what we are dealing with is primarily a matter of *the movement of meaningful sound through time* – psycho-

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