

Language is rich, and malleable. It is a living, vibrant material, and every part of a poem works in conjunction with every other part—the content, the pace, the diction, the rhythm, the tone—as well as the very sliding, floating, thumping, rapping sounds of it.

The Line

THE FIRST OBVIOUS DIFFERENCE between prose and poetry is that prose is printed (or written) within the confines of margins, while poetry is written in lines that do not necessarily pay any attention to the margins, especially the right margin.

The word *verse* derives from the Latin and carries the meaning “to turn” (as in *versus*). Poets today, who do not often write in the given forms, such as sonnets, need to understand what effects are created by the turning of the line at any of various possible points—within (and thus breaking) a logical phrase, or only at the conclusions of sentences, or only at the ends of logical units, etc.

This subject—turning the line—is one that every poet deals with throughout his or her working life. And gladly, too—for every turning is a meaningful decision, the effect of which is sure to be felt by the reader. This

is so whether the poet is working in metrical forms or in free verse.

Discussion of the line, its power generally and the specific parts of that power, is best undertaken through an examination of the metric line, so that is how we will begin.

Length and Rhythm

Begin by considering (absorbing) the following four facts.

1. In metrical verse, each line of the poem can be divided into *feet*, and each foot into *stresses* (syllable sounds), to reveal the overall rhythmic pattern.
2. The process of dividing a line into its metrical feet and each foot into its individual parts is called *scansion*.
3. An *iamb*, or an *iambic foot*, is one light stress followed by one heavy stress. ˘ˑ

EXAMPLE: Ūpón

4. Five iambic feet strung together create an *iambic pentameter* line. ˘ˑ˘ˑ˘ˑ˘ˑ˘ˑ

EXAMPLE: Ūpón | thōsē bōghs | wīchh shāke | āgainst
| the cold, . . .

(William Shakespeare, *Sonnet LXXIII*)

The iambic pentameter (five foot) line* is the most widely used line in English metrical verse. This is the

*Other metrical lines, metrical feet, and the symbols used to indicate them, are given in the boxed material.

sonnet line; it is the line of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. It is also the line of many American poems, including many of the poems of Robert Frost.

Metrical Lines

1. A one-foot line is called *monometer*.
2. A two-foot line is called *dimeter*.
3. A three-foot line is called *trimeter*.
4. A four-foot line is called *tetrameter*.
5. A five-foot line is called *pentameter*.
6. A six-foot line is called *hexameter*. When it is a pure iambic line, it may be called an *alexandrine*.
7. A seven-foot line is called *heptameter*.
8. An eight-foot line is called *octameter*.

Metrical Feet and Symbols

1. *iamb*: a light stress followed by a heavy stress. ˘ˑ
2. *trochee*: a heavy stress followed by a light stress. ˑ˘
3. *dactyl*: a heavy stress followed by two light stresses. ˑ˘˘
4. *anapest*: two light stresses followed by a heavy stress. ˘˘ˑ
5. *spondee*: two equal stresses. ˑˑ

Here are a few *pentameter* lines that may be familiar to you:

Forlorn! | the vé|y word | is líke | a béll . . .
(John Keats, *To a Nightingale*)

Shall Í | cõmpáre | thee to | a sũm|mer's dáy?
(William Shakespeare, *Sonnet XVIII*)

The shát|tered wá|ter máde | a mís|ty dín.
Great wáves | looked ó|vèr ó|thers
cõm|ing in, . . .
(Robert Frost, *Once by the Pacific*)

Bright star! | would Í | wère steád|fast ás | thõu
art—
(John Keats, *Bright Star! Would I
Were Steadfast as Thou Art*)

Here are some *tetrameter* (four foot) lines, each containing four light and four heavy stresses:

Í wán|dered lóné|ly ás | a clóud
That floáts | on hígh | o'er váles | and hílls, . . .
(William Wordsworth, *I Wandered Lonely . . .*)

In Xán|ádu | díđ Kú|blá Khán
A státe|ly pleá|sure-dóme | decrée:
(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*)

Whõse wóods | thesè áre | Í thínk | Í knów.
Hís hóuse | is ín | the vil|lage thóugh; . . .
(Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods
on a Snowy Evening*)

Though the difference in length is only a single foot, pentameter and tetrameter are two quite different things. In the tetrameter lines there is a sense of quickness, sparseness, even a little agitation, which is not evoked in the five-foot lines (which are full, but not over-full, without obvious pressure in any direction).

The *trimeter* (three foot) line can evoke an even more intense sense of agitation and celerity:

The whis|key ón | yóur bréath
Cõuld máke | a smáll | boy dízzý;
Bũt Í | hũng ón | líke deáth:
Sũch wál|tzing wás | nót éasy.
(Theodore Roethke, *My Papa's Waltz*)

On the other side of the five-foot line lies the *hexameter* or *alexandrine* (the first line is of course pentameter; the second line is the alexandrine):

Áwake! | árise! | mý lóve, | and féar|less bé,
Fõr o'ér | the sòuth|ern móors | Í háve | a
hóme | fõr thee.
(John Keats, *The Eve of St. Agnes*)

How important this choice of line length is! Its effect upon the reader is simple, reliable, and inescapable.

The *pentameter* line is the primary line used by the English poets not for any mysterious reason, but simply because the pentameter line most nearly matches the breath capacity of our English lungs—that is, speaking in English—and thus it is the line most free from any special effect.* It fits without stress, makes a full phrase, and leaves little breath at the end. It gives off, therefore, no particular message. It is, one might say, the norm.

All deviations from the norm do, however, emit messages. Excitement of all kinds, with its accompanying physical and psychic tension, “takes our breath.” Any line shorter than pentameter indicates this. The reader is brought to a more than usual attentiveness by the shorter line, which indicates a situation in some way out of the ordinary. Tetrameter can release a felt agitation or restlessness, or gaiety, more easily and “naturally” than pentameter, and so on.

For when the prevailing mood is one of confidence and leisure, we take the time for length and breadth, going into details, nuance, even anecdotes perhaps. We might set a match to a pile of leaves, for example, and stand back and describe what happens in this manner. But when something is critical, painful, even worrisome, we have no time for such inessentials—should the bon-

*Of course even if this is so there must quickly have come into being historical and cultural influences as well—that is, once the pentameter line was established, and great works created in it, other poets coming along would naturally think to model their poems upon such a mighty form.

fire leap beyond our control, we would run from it, shouting the single word “Fire!” as we go.

The longer line (longer than five feet) suggests a greater-than-human power. It can seem by its simple endurance—beyond ordinary lung capacity—grandiose, prophetic. It can also indicate abundance, richness, a sense of joy. Underlying whatever freight of language (statement) it carries, it emits a sense of an unstoppable machine.

Robinson Jeffers’s long lines often resonate with the feeling of prophecy, as does much of Whitman’s work. Ginsberg’s energy is often cradled appropriately in the lavishness of long lines.

In metrical verse, the lines may be all of the same length (number of feet), but in many cases the pattern includes lines of varying length, thus complicating the whole mechanism. The stanza (discussed in detail beginning on p. 60) generally used by Emily Dickinson (it is also the stanza form of the Protestant hymn, of much of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner*, as well as many other lyric poems) places a tetrameter line first followed by a trimeter line, then again a tetrameter and a trimeter. The foot (with occasional exceptions) is iambic, and frequently the phrasing holds through a two-line segment, as follows:

It was | not Death, | for I | stood up,
And all | the Dead, | lie down—
It was | not Night, | for all | the Bells
Put out | their Tongues, | for Noon.

(No. 510)

Even in this four-line passage, one can begin to notice the many elements working toward the tone of intensity so common in Dickinson's poems. A tetrameter line, agitating in itself, begins the piece. The tension is increased by cutting the length of line two by a foot and also by concluding the phrase begun in line one within this shorter span. Then, a similar two lines: tetrameter and trimeter again, creating another single phrase. The repetition, so frequently a device of pleasure, here evokes claustrophobia, a sense of ritual—a terrible formality. One is reminded of Dickinson's own phrase: "After great pain, a formal feeling comes—" (from No. 341). Also, of course, the sounds of the words are at work, and the similarity of line-end sound (down / noon), and the breathlessness of the dash. Everything, that is, is at work toward the effect of the piece—nothing is static, or neutral.

Constancy

The reader, as he or she begins to read, quickly enters the rhythmic pattern of a poem. It takes no more than two or three lines for a rhythm, and a feeling of pleasure in that rhythm, to be transferred from the poem to the reader. Rhythm is one of the most powerful of pleasures, and when we feel a pleasurable rhythm we hope it will continue. When it does, the sweet grows sweeter. When it becomes reliable, we are in a kind of body-heaven. Nursery rhymes give this pleasure in a simple and wonderful way.

This quick response to the prevailing rhythmic pattern is true of "free" verse as well as metrical verse, even though the pattern in free-form poems is less mathematically measurable than it is in metric verse.

Beginning writers need to remember how potent these patterns are. Rhythm underlies *everything*. Put one word on a line by itself in a poem of otherwise longish lines and, whether you mean it to be or not, it has become a critical word. All attention is drawn to it. It must mean something very important to be placed where it breaks the rhythm with such a slap and crack.

Alter the line length or the established rhythm when you want to, or need to, or choose to, to change the very physiological mood of the reader. Change the line length or rhythm arbitrarily, or casually, and you have puzzled and sensually irritated the reader—thrown him from his trance of interest and pleasure. And if pleasure is not an important function of the poem, why, I ask, did Wordsworth mention the word "pleasure" forty-two times in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*?

Of course when I speak of rhythm I don't mean a rhythm so strict or metronomic that it merely repeats itself exactly. Remember, language is a living material, full of shadow and sudden moments of up-leap and endless nuance. Nothing with language, including rhythmic patterns, should be or can be entirely exact and repetitious, nor would we like it if it were. Which brings us to the next subject, the necessary variations.

Variation

Lines of good poetry are apt to be a little irregular. A prevailing sense of rhythm is necessary, but some variation enhances the very strength of the pattern. The singsong poem is a dull poem.* Variation wakes us up with its touch of difference, just as a cadence of drums in a marching band keeps two things going at the same time: a strict and regular beat and a few contrapuntal accents, flourishes, even silences. This liveliness keeps us interested and "on our toes." Within the poem, irregularities may occur for the sake of variation; they may also occur because of stresses required by the words themselves, for accuracy, for emphasis, etc.

In addition, there may well be some variation between the way *I* read a line of a poem, and the way *you* read it. Neither of us has to be wrong; we may *both* be within the bounds of the reasonable. Perhaps it is partly this individual inflection with which each of us reads a poem that creates a personal bonding to it. It is a situation far more complicated, and interesting, than one in which only right or wrong is possible.

Look again at one of the lines offered as an example of iambic pentameter.

Forlorn! | the véry word | is like | a bēll

(John Keats, *To a Nightingale*)

*But there is always the miraculous exception to the rule. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* was written in regular iambic tetrameter—all sixteen lines, all sixty-four metric feet of it. Nuance and inflection provide the only variety.

In this line the regular pattern of iambic feet is scanned "correctly." And yet a reader of the line would surely make heavier stresses on the words "forlorn" and "bell" than on the words "very," "word," or "like," though each of these words too has a heavy accent. Clearly there are differing degrees of heavy and light stresses, under the rules of simple sense.

But there are lines in which clarity simply isn't brought forth sufficiently by this method of charging the light and heavy stresses differently. There are occasions when something more definite is called for. Consider these three lines from *Mr. Edwards and the Spider*:

On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:

.....
But who | can plumb | the sink | ing of | that
soul?

(Robert Lowell)

In the third line, the iambic pattern calls for a light stress on the word "that" in the final foot. But this makes no sense; the word itself, its meaning in the poem, calls for a heavy stress. Moreover, it seems entirely unacceptable to do anything in terms of pattern or sense with "soul" than to give it, too, a heavy stress.

There is accommodation to this kind of necessity; it is called the *spondee*. Two stresses, of equal weight, can replace the iambic foot in order to take care of compound words, such as "heartbreak," "breadboard," etc.—and at any time that logic or design calls for it. Thus the third line from the Lowell quotation can be

scanned as follows, and the phrase "that soul" be made more readable:

On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:

.....
But who | can plumb | the sink | ing of | that
soul?*

And consider one more line, that restrained outburst from Keats:

Bright star! | would Í | were stéad | fǎst ás | thǔu
art—

The opening line of Keats's sonnet might also call for some spondee replacement of the iambic pattern. I say "might," for here is a case where it is difficult to say that anything is right, or wrong. One could scan the line as it appears in the beginning of this chapter, indicating regular iambs. Or one might indicate a spondee at the beginning of the line, so as to put equal weight upon "bright" and "star":

Bright star! | would Í | were stéad | fǎst ás | thǔu
art—

*The first line of this three-line passage is easy: straight iambs five times over. Line 2 I offer to the reader for his or her own entanglement and pleasure; "fierce fire" of course calls for the spondee, but what is one to do with "bowels," and anyway is "bowels" one syllable or two syllables here? I have *my* idea of it; readers will learn a lot by determining what they think about it.

Additionally, one might prefer to read the word "stead-fast" without lightening the second syllable, and so that foot also could be scanned with a spondee:

Bright star! | would Í | were stéad | fǎst ás | thǔu
art—

Or, one might actually feel that, in this extraordinary line, any light stress causes a loss of the personal and immeasurable longing of the whole,* and so scan it as follows:

Bright star! | would Í | were stéad | fǎst ás | thǔu
art—

I have explained previously why the pentameter part of the iambic pentameter line is the most widely used line in the English language—because its length matches the breath capacity of our lungs. The iambic foot has wide currency for a similar "natural" reason. It is the paramount sound in any string of English words, thus it is the most fluid, the most uncontrived sounding meter. Phrases falling naturally into the iambic pattern are noticeable in every kind of writing. Compared to it, any other meter, in fact, sounds "composed"—not unlike one of those snapping flourishes of the drums.

*Also, it is easy to see that any change from the regular pattern causes a disturbance along the rest of the line—now it is clear that the light stress on "thou" has become awkward, and that foot by itself at least would require a spondee, had I not elected at this point to scan the entire line with spondees.

This is the opening line of *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost:

Sómetĥing | there ís | thát dóes|n't love|ă
wăll, . . .

The first foot of the line is the opposite of the iambic foot—the heavy stress comes first and is followed by a light stress. This is called a *trochee*. It is a wonderful and forceful way to begin a line.* It can be used anywhere within a line also, replacing an iambic foot. Or, it may be the prevailing line, as in this familiar passage from Shakespeare's *MacBeth*:

Dóuble, dóuble tóil and tróuble;
Fire, burn; and, cáuldron, búbble.

Another meter, which can replace the iamb or the trochee, or may be used as the prevailing pattern, is the *dactyl*. The word *happiness* is a dactyl—one heavy stress followed by two light stresses. *Dactyl* comes from a

*You may have noticed and wondered about the initial trochee foot in passages quoted on the previous pages. One appears in the passage quoted from Blake, another in one of the passages quoted from Keats.

It is fascinating to see when Frost uses the iamb to begin a poem and when he chooses the trochee or dactyl. More often than not he uses an iamb when the poem begins with narration, and a trochee or dactyl (the more formal, "composed" sound) when the poem starts with dialogue. Often in these poems the first word is a person's name or a place name. See *The Witch of Coös*, *Death of a Hired Man*, *A Hundred Collars*, etc.

Greek stem meaning finger—one long finger bone followed by two short finger bones.

Here is a well-known example of the dactylic pattern, from the poem *Evangeline*:

This ís the |fórest prĭ|méval. The |mŭrmŭring
|pĭnes and the |hémlocks,
Beárded wĭth |moss, and ín |gármĕnts |grĕen,
índis|tinct ín the |twĭlight,
Stand líke |Drŭíds of |eld, wĭth |vóices |sád
and prŏ|phĕtic, . . .
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

And here is an example of dactylic meter used within a poem whose pattern is not at all constant, but changes from one kind of metric foot to another, elevating and intensifying the poem's tone and meaning:

Lĕt lŏv|ers gŏ frĕsh | and swĕet | tŏ bĕ |
úndŏne,
And thĕ |hĕavĭest |nŭns wălk | ín ă pŭre |
flŏating |
Ōf dark |hábĭts, |
kĕĕping thĕir |dĭffĭcŭlt |
balănce.

(Richard Wilbur, *Love Calls Us
to the Things of This World*)

The *anapest* is the opposite of the dactyl, two light stresses followed by a heavy stress. It is fairly uncommon.

extra light syllable in the final foot of line 2, and again in line 4, deriving from the second syllables of the rhyming words “dizzy” and “easy.” Such an extra light stress within a final foot is commonly called a *tag* and is not counted as part of the metrical pattern.

But the matter of rhyme is properly a subject of the following section.

The Beginning of the Line and the End of the Line

The most important point in the line is the *end* of the line. The second most important point is the *beginning* of it.

More poems begin with iambic meter than any other construction. The mood is relaxed, invitational—natural. Robert Frost would begin to read a poem so directly after making a personal remark, and the iambic line was so natural, that it was sometimes difficult to tell just where his “talk” ended and the poem began.

When a poem does begin with a heavy stress (spondee, trochee, or dactyl in metrical verse), it immediately signals to the reader that something dramatic is at hand. Something different from ordinary speech.

We all know what rhyme is.

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thee?

(William Blake, *The Tyger*)

The similarity of sound at the end of two or more lines creates cohesion, order, and gives pleasure. Obvious rhyme is *meant* to be noticed and to please. In fact, the mood of rhyming poems is often lighthearted.*

The rhyme occurring on the words “spears” and “tears” is called *true rhyme*. It is also a *masculine rhyme*: the words rhyme on a single stressed syllable.

When the words are not true rhyming words (like *pot* and *hot*) but almost rhyme (like *down* and *noon* in the Emily Dickinson quotation on p. 41) it is called *off-rhyme*, or *slant rhyme*. And *feminine rhyme* uses words of more than one syllable that end with a light stress, as in “buckle” and “knuckle.” The rhyme on lines 2 and 4 of the Roethke stanza (p. 39) is an example of both slant rhyme and feminine rhyme.

Feminine endings tend to blur the end rhyme. So does slant rhyme. Masculine and true rhyme endings are forthright. And masculine true rhymes with words ending in mute sounds are the most emphatic rhymes of all—they slam the gate shut. Consider the last stanza of Frost’s poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (p. 25).

The repetition of lines, or the use of a refrain line, is a source of enjoyment. Both evoke the old pleasure of things occurring and reoccurring—rhythm, in fact.

After a repetition or a refrain, the reader, given the pattern clue that the next lines are obviously going to be different, is prone to listen to them with more than ordinary attention.

*But not always. You can’t get more serious than Blake.

Turning the Line

Always, at the end of each line there exists—inevitably—a brief pause. This pause is part of the motion of the poem, as hesitation is part of the dance. With it, the poet working with metrical verse can do several things, as indicated above. In addition, apart from the length of line and the requirements of the meter, the poet must decide where within the phrase itself to turn the line over.

The writer of nonmetrical verse also has this end-of-the-line pause to work with and can choose among various ways of handling it. Say the writer chooses to make the line self-enclosed. A *self-enclosed* line may be an entire sentence, or it may be a phrase that is complete in terms of grammar and logic, though it is only a part of a sentence. In such a case—in Ezra Pound's poem *Salutation*, for example—the pause works as an instant of inactivity, in which the reader is "invited" to weigh the information and pleasure of the line.

When, on the other hand, the poet *enjambes* the line—turns the line so that a logical phrase is interrupted—it speeds the line for two reasons: curiosity about the missing part of the phrase impels the reader to hurry on, and the reader will hurry twice as fast over the obstacle of a pause because it is there. We leap with more energy over a ditch than over no ditch.

Turning the line, in free verse, is associated not only with the necessary decision at each turn (since the poem is not following any imposed order), but it also has much to do with the visual presentation on the page. Free

Salutation

EZRA POUND

O generation of the thoroughly smug
 and thoroughly uncomfortable,
 I have seen fishermen picnicking in the sun,
 I have seen them with untidy families,
 I have seen their smiles full of teeth
 and heard ungainly laughter.
 And I am happier than you are,
 And they were happier than I am;
 And the fish swim in the lake
 and do not even own clothing.

verse came into fashion just as the availability of books was becoming widespread, and the practice of reading poems with one's eyes, and listening to them silently, was taking precedence over the oral tradition. The pattern on the page, then, became the indicator of pace, and the balance and poise of the poem was inseparable from the way the line breaks kept or failed a necessary feeling of integrity, a holding together of the poem from beginning to end. The regular, metrical line gave assistance to a listener who sought to remember the poem; the more various line breaks of the "visual" poem gave assistance to the mind seeking to "hear" the poem.

Conclusion

No two poems will sound exactly alike, even though both are written in, say, iambic tetrameter rhyming couplets. Every poem has a basic measure, and a continual counterpoint of differences playing against that measure. Poems that do not offer such variations quickly become boring. The gift of words—their acute and utter wakefulness—is drowned in a rhythm that is too regular, and the poem becomes, instead of musical, a dull and forgettable muttering.

On the other hand, the poem needs to be reliable. I cannot say too many times how powerful the techniques of line length and line breaks are. You cannot swing the lines around, or fling strong-sounding words, or scatter soft ones, to no purpose. A reader beginning a poem is like someone stepping into a rowboat with a stranger at the oars; the first few draws on the long oars

through the deep water tell a lot—is one safe, or is one apt to be soon drowned? A poem is that real a journey. Its felt, reliable rhythms can invite, or can dissuade. A meaningful rhythm will invite. A meaningless rhythm will dissuade.