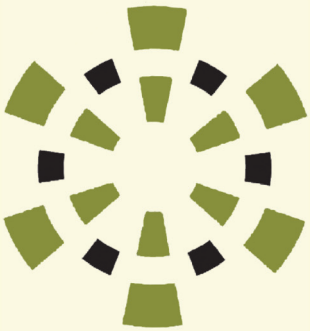
RHYTHMICA

REVISTA ESPAÑOLA DE MÉTRICA COMPARADA



Año XVII Número 17

WHAT IS POETRY? CONTENT AND FORM IN ENGLISH VERSE

¿QUÉ ES POESÍA? FORMA Y CONTENIDO EN EL VERSO INGLÉS

MARTIN J. DUFFELL
Queen Mary, University of London

Abstract: This article argues that good poetry results from the fusion of meaningful content and significant form and that modern free verse differs little from traditional regular verse in this respect. It shows how language and rhythm can give special intensity to the expression of thoughts and feeling and provides a dozen outstanding examples of this process drawn from both regular and free verse in English. This article also argues that the present is an opportune time for poets to produce new and exciting poems, providing they do not neglect form and waste the rich resources of rhythm and language.

Keywords: poetry, content, form, free verse, language, rhythm, intensity, English verse.

Resumen: Este artículo plantea que la buena poesía es resultado de la fusión entre contenido significativo y forma significativa, y que, en la misma línea, el verso libre moderno difiere poco del tradicional verso regular. Se pone

de manifiesto la manera en que el lenguaje y el ritmo dan una especial intensidad a la expresión de pensamientos y sentimientos. Para ello, se muestran doce ejemplos significativos de la poesía inglesa, escritos tanto en verso regular como en verso libre. Este artículo también sostiene que la época actual puede favorecer la creación de poemas nuevos e interesantes siempre que no se descuide la forma ni se desaproveche la riqueza del ritmo y del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: poesía, contenido, forma, verso libre, lenguaje, ritmo, intensidad, verso inglés.

Introduction

Many people enjoy poetry and quite a few try to earn a living by teaching others how to enjoy it. Poetry merits this attention because it is an important feature of what we term *The Humanities.* As Gerald Smith first pointed out, "Poetry is the most remarkable thing that humans do with their most distinctive property — language"[1]. The definition of poetry given in the Oxford English Dictionary is: "Texts in which special intensity is given to the expression of thoughts and feelings by the use of language and rhythm"[2].

The definition given by many French, Spanish, and Italian dictionaries is an almost word-for-word translation of this[3].

Thoughts and Feelings

Unfortunately, many modern literary scholars limit their attention to the external features of this definition: the thoughts and feelings expressed. This is a serious distraction from the study of poetry, because thoughts can be more fully and deeply explored in prose, and human feelings can be expressed in many ways other than verbally. The unique property of poetry is the way that language and rhythm give special intensity to those thoughts and feelings, and to examine the content in isolation is to ignore what makes poetry poetry: the process whereby language and rhythm give the special intensity that is the hallmark of all the arts.

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[1] Smith, Gerald S.: "Russian Poetry: The Lives or the Lines". *Modern Language Review*, 2000, 95.4, p. 29.

[2] *The New Oxford Dictionary of English.* Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, p. 1430.

[3] See, for example, *Dictionnaire de Français vivant.* London: Harrap, 1972, p. 940.

Nevertheless, cultural studies has come to dominate the work of literature departments in the twenty-first century. This is because cultural studies is an easy option: it reduces the most complex and subtle products of human ingenuity to a few cultural constants currently fashionable to dissect in public (sex, race, class, and power). Such a reduction loses the essence of great literature, and turns it into grist for the mill of identity politics, so that growls and graffiti are indistinguishable from the classics.

Pursuing the essence of poetry means studying form as well as content and, in particular, the way that the two are interwoven in the best-crafted lines. Many teachers of literature today are wary of such study, and may even warn their students off it by saying that metrical and linguistic analysis is "too difficult for undergraduates". Two factors have influenced literature teachers in this direction: the first is that departments of linguistics have built a wall of new jargon around their analysis in an effort to appear more scientific[4]. This problem could surely be solved if literature teachers and linguistic researchers cooperated in hammering out a precise set of terms intelligible to students of both disciplines[5].

Verse, Regular and Free

The second factor driving teachers and students away from the study of form in poetry is free verse, which has become so varied and individualistic that it is difficult for either poets or critics to generalise about it[6]. An unfortunate casualty of this development is quality: many people cannot tell the difference between

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[4] *Generative Metrics* was first introduced by HALLE, Morris, and Samuel J., KEYSER: "Chaucer and the Study of Prosody". *College English*, 1966-1967, 28, pp. 187-219. *Optimality Theory* was first proposed by PRINCE, Alan, and Paul SMOLENSKY, at the 3rd Arizona Conference on Phonology, Univ. Of Arizona, Tucson, 1991. For comparison with these modern scholars' precision, see the Edwardian theory that English lines are composed of Ancient Greek feet in FRY, Stephen: *The Ode Less Travelled*. London: Hutchinson, 2005.

[5] For a summary of modern developments in the study of English poetic metre, see DUFFELL, Martin J.: "English Historical Metrics, 1990-2015". *Rhythmica*, 2016, XIV, 14, pp. 161-180.

[6] See HARTMAN, Charles O.: *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody.* Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980.

well-crafted free verse and prose which has been chopped up by the random striking of a return key. But the difference between free verse and the regular verse that preceded it is relatively small, while the difference between good verse and bad is as great as that between a landslide and a pyramid. Good free verse is designed, not accidental, and it gives the special intensity to the expression of thoughts and feelings that defines all poetry[7]. That regularity is not essential to this task is proved by the many successful attempts to compose poems in prose, poems in which language alone bears the weight of producing the required special intensity, and where the more varied and unpredictable rhythms of prose better fit the subject matter[8].

Modern free verse appeared in Europe around the year 1880 and it brought a new balance between regularity and variety, the staples of all good verse[9]. It was not, however, the first time that some English poets sought greater variety and less regularity in their versifying[10]. Among those seekers of more variety were some of the finest poets of their times, and this has continued to be the case: Eliot pointed out that the lines of good free verse are as carefully crafted as those of good regular verse[11].

The most concise definition of verse is "numerically regulated language"[12]. And the most basic form of regulation in a verse text is its division into lines: units which offer an alternative structure to those of the syntax and the semantic structure of the text. The second way in which verse is regulated is within lines: there are two simple ways for a poet to regulate any line: one is to make it

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[7] Some modern scholars have argued that the term *metre* does not include free verse; see Fabb, Nigel, and Morris Halle: *Meter in Poetry.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002. This solves the problem of chopped-up prose, but ignores irregular lines that have been carefully measured, as in the examples in Section 6 below.

[8] An early example was the poem sequence "Le Spleen de Paris"; see Baudelaire, Charles: *Les Fleurs du mal et Oeuvres choisies*. New York: Bantam Books, 1964, pp. 116-53.

[9] See Utrera Torremocha, M. Victoria: *Estructura y teoría del verso libre*. Madrid: CSIC, 2010.

[10] For the evolution of free verse in English, see Steele, Timothy: *Missing Measures*. Fayetteville and London: Univ. Of Arkansas Press, 1990.

[11] Eliot, T. S.: *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 37.

[12] See Lotz, John: "Metric Typology", in Sebeok, Thomas A.: *Style in Language*. Boston: MIT Press, 1960, pp. 135-148, p. 135.

match other lines and the other is to make it contrast with them[13]. Traditionally, poets have sought to match major features of their lines, such as the number of syllables, and to allow subtle variation in minor ones, such as whether the line ends in a post-tonic syllable. With the advent of free verse, however, poets began to contrast a number of major features.

Thus in regular verse either (a) all the lines match or (b) lines are grouped so that matching lines occur at predictable intervals. In free verse either the lines do not match, or matching lines occur at unpredictable intervals. In regular verse the matches are major and the contrasts minor; in free verse contrasts may play as big a part as matches. But if either type of verse is to be classed as poetry its author must use language and rhythm to give special intensity to the text's expression of thoughts and feelings.

Language

Coleridge once described poetry as "the best words in the best order", but what are the best words to endow the expression of thoughts and feelings with special intensity? There are a number of ways in which language can serve this function. The simplest is by the poet's choice of words: unusual, rare, strange, and ambiguous words have more impact and make a text more memorable. Well-chosen imagery can serve the same function: Most poetry is replete with metaphor and simile and, indeed, all of what medieval treatises called "the colours of rhetoric". Thus in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* Coleridge conveys to his audience the scale and horror of the disaster when he employs a figure of speech, known in the classical world as *hendiadys*, but in modern times reduced to the catchphrase of a comedian[14].

(1) Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down[15].

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[13] See DUFFELL, Martin J.: *A New History of English Metre*. London: Maney, 2008, pp. 187-188.

[14] The catchphrase of the comedian Bruce Forsyth was: "Nice to see you; to see you, nice".

[15] COLERIDGE, Samuel Taylor: *Poems*. London: J. M. Dent, 1974, p. 176, l. 107.

As well as striking diction and imagery, poets can use the register of their language to give special intensity to the expression of their ideas and feelings. Thus in his poem *The Unknown Citizen* Auden uses the impersonal register of officialese until the closing lines, when the simple words "sad" and "happy" emphasize how little official records know of us[16]. Dialect can also be used for special poetic effects: in Chaucer's Reeve's Tale, the enmity of miller and students is given an extra measure of realism by the latter plotting their poetic revenge in a broad Northern dialect[17]. Slang can serve a similar poetic purpose; thus when Larkin wishes to bring the theories of Freud closer to his audience he says:

(2) They fuck you up, your mum and dad[18].

Another way that poets can enrich the language of a poem is by allusion to, or quotation from, a well-known text. Thus when Tennyson wishes to add stature to his poem *Ulysses* he uses a line that is a literal translation from Homer's *Odyssey*;

(3) Much have I seen and known: cities of men[19].

To embellish it further he gives the line a similar (accentual) rhythm to the original (quantitative) metre. And, when Eliot wants to express his depression at the sight of a throng of London commuters, he quotes Dante's description of dead souls trying to cross the River Styx:

(4) I had not thought death had undone so many[20].

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[16] Auden, W. H.: *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969, p. 146.

[17] Chaucer, Geoffrey: *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988, pp. 82-86.

[18] Larkin, Philip: "This Be the Verse", in *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 180, l. 1.

[19] Tennyson, Alfred: *Poems and Plays*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965, p. 90, l. 13 (*Odyssey*, l. 3).

[20] Eliot, T. S.: *Selected Poems, 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1974, p. 65, l. 63; see also note, p. 81.

Eliot is also fond of including quotations in other languages in his verse; *The Waste Land* boasts lines in German, French, Italian and Sanskrit, as well as echoes of lines by many famous English poets.

It would not be unfair to say that the early free verse poets writing in English drew more heavily on the resources of language than their predecessors to produce the required special intensity because they had decided to make the rhythms in their poetry less obtrusive.

Rhythm

Acoustic physics defines *rhythm* as "the repetition of an event in time"[21]. The most obvious event repeated in regular verse is the line. Free verse balances this rhythmic deficit by offering the alternative of contrast in each line the poet composes. This is a relatively minor sacrifice because there is a far more important rhythmic event in language, and that is *prominence*. Some constituents of language are more salient than others, and in English this is the result of some syllables being delivered with greater volume and duration, combined with a change in fundamental frequency. The combination of these qualities is termed *dynamic accent* or *stress,* and peaks and troughs of stress are the chief source of rhythm in the English language[22].

The rhythms of prose are much less regular than those of verse, and in English this is because the *intervals* between prominence peaks are more variable. Utterances, or lines of verse, with intervals of one syllable between peaks are said to be in *duple time* and those with intervals of two are said to be in *triple time*; and when three syllables occur between peaks the middle one tends to become just a little more prominent than its neighbours. This gives English utterances an accentual rhythm that can be captured in musical terms: natural peaks of prominence are *beats*; peaks that depend upon their position within

[21] CHATMAN, Seymour: *A Theory of Meter*. The Hague: Mouton, 1965, p. 29.

[22] CRYSTAL, David: *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, pp. 288-289. For a detailed comparative study of linguistic rhythm, see HAYES, Bruce: *Metrical Stress Theory: Principles and Case Studies*. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1995.

a trisyllabic interval are *weak beats*; and the intervals between peaks are *offbeats*[23]. This terminology facilitates comparisons between normal speech, prose, free verse, and regular verse.

The rhythm of the earliest English verse is based primarily upon beats, with four as the favourite number, but with certain expansions of this number allowed by convention[24]. Nineteenth-century scholars classified such lines as being in *native metres* and contrasted them with *foreign metres*[25]. In the period from 1380-1880 French and Italian models led English poets to count the syllables in their lines as well as the beats, but English poets found their own way of counting: they placed a regular number of syllables between beats and thus created a new rhythmic event: the contrast between a beat and offbeat[26]. These contrasts were soon termed *accentual feet* because of their (rather faint) resemblance to the weight contrasts between Ancient Greek syllables[27]. For much of its history English poetry has, therefore, been composed in *foot-based* verse, that is verse in which accentual contrasts provide most of the rhythm within lines.

There is, however, another important source of rhythm within and between both Old English and Modern English lines, and that event is the *phoneme*, the smallest segment of the speech chain[28]. There are just over forty phonemes in English, and so some are bound to get repeated in a text of any length. While this phoneme repetition occurs mostly by accident and is comparatively rare in prose, it is cultivated and may be systematized in verse. English syllables have a three-part structure: *onset* + *nucleus* + *coda*, of which only the nucleus is mandatory, and any or all of the three parts may contain the same phoneme as another syllable in the same utterance[29]. This phonemic matching may

[23] Attridge, Derek: *The Rhythms of English Poetry*. London: Longman, 1982, pp. 76-84.

[24] McCully, Christopher, and Sharon Hilles: *The Earliest English: An Introduction to Old English Language*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005, pp. 143-185.

[25] Schipper, Jakob: *A History of English Versification*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910, pp. 126-134.

[26] Attridge, Derek: *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, *cit.,* pp. 85-96.

[27] Crystal, David: *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, *cit.*, pp 123-124.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 298.

[29] *Ibid*., pp. 296-297.

be either exact or approximate, but it normally affects the same part of each of the syllables concerned.

The oldest English verse contained systematic repetition of onsets (termed *alliteration*) within the line, while French influence led later English poets to repeat the phonemes of nucleus and coda (termed *rhyme*), mostly between lines[30]. Employing line-end rhyme as a systematic rhythmic event allowed English poets to use alliteration for purposes of emphasis and artistic effect, and rhyme within the line could be used to the same end. In earlier centuries rhyming skill was often judged by the exactness of the phoneme repetition, but in the twentieth century there was a vogue for imprecise and approximate repetition[31]. And fashion led many poets to cultivate other types of repetition, such as repeating nuclei but not codas (*assonance*), or codas but not nuclei (*consonance*), or both onsets and codas (the Old Welsh device of *cynghanedd*)[32].

In addition to lines, beats, feet, and phonemes, *words* can serve as rhythmic events, either individually or in a series. A medieval Italian form known as the *sestina* requires the corresponding lines in each strophe to end in the same word, and another, the *ballade*, has a *refrain*, an almost identical line, to close each strophe[33]. Probably because he had relegated feet and rhyme to minor roles in his verse Eliot tended to rely heavily on verbal repetition to produce his poetic effects. Thus, for example, the "Fire Sermon" section of *The Waste Land* has the line:

(5) Burning burning burning burning[34].

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[30] MCCULLY, Christopher, and Sharon HILLES: *The Earliest English, cit.*, p.164.

[31] See, for example, OWEN, Wilfred: "Strange Meeting", in *The Collected Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1963, pp. 35-36.

[32] *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 4th ed., 2012, p. 1535.

[33] For a modern example of a sestina, see POUND, Ezra: "Altaforte", in his *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1959, pp. 53-55. For an English example of a medieval European ballade, see CHAUCER, Geoffrey: "Lak of Stedfastnesse", in *The Riverside Chaucer*, *cit.*, p. 654.

[34] ELIOT, *Selected Poems...*, *cit.*, p. 654.

Similarly, *Ash Wednesday* begins with three lines commencing "Because I do not hope", a translation of Guido Cavalcanti's "*Perch'io no spero*"[35].

There are also more subtle rhythms in many poems: repetitions not of phonological material, but of syntactic or semantic events. Consider these lines from the King James Bible:

(6) The conies are but a feeble folk
yet make they their houses in the rock.

(7) The locusts have no king
yet go they forth all of them by bands.
(Proverbs, 30: 26-27)

(8) My bowels are troubled... my liver is poured upon the earth.
(Lamentations, 2:11)

Modern literary critics term these subtle rhythms *internal rhythms*, and they are of great importance to free verse poets for the same reason that they were to the Bible's authors and translators: because the phonological rhythms in their texts are fewer[36].

Special Intensity

A. E. Housman once wrote that if a line of poetry passed through his mind when he was shaving the hairs of his beard would stand on end[37]. I have no such instant test of special intensity and so, in order to demonstrate how language and rhythm can produce it, I shall take a dozen examples of English texts in which I recognize this property (and vast numbers of other readers also seem to have done so). In each case I shall tease out the role of language and rhythm in the process. My dozen examples are heavily weighted towards the period when fashion allowed poets the choice between regular and free verse. These examples support the thesis that good free verse has more in common with good regular verse than with chopped-up prose.

[35] Cavalcanti, Guido: *The Complete Poems*. New York: Ithaca Press, 1992, pp. 90-92.
[36] See Utrera Torremocha, M. Victoria: *Estructura y teoría...*, *cit.*, pp. 145-171.
[37] Housman, A. E.: *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933, p. 47.

Example I From *Essay on Criticism* by Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

> A needless Alexandrine ends the song,
> That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along[38].

These lines express the poet's contempt for mediocre poets who follow stale fashions and for inelegant rhythms, a feeling that is made more intense by the language and rhythm of the couplet. The lines are an iambic pentameter and an iambic hexameter, as found at the close of Spenserian stanzas. Derek Attridge argues that lines with an odd number of beats contain *unrealised beats*[39]. He describes them as "strongly rhythmical" and Pope seems to have sensed that this is why English poetry has favoured the five-beat line over the six-beat.

Note how Pope weaves a complex phonemic rhythm into the first line by repeating the phonemes [*l*], [*n*], [*d*], and [*s*] in "needless", "Alexandrine" and "ends", and by maintaining two of these repetitions in the last word "song". In the second line Pope maintains the rhythm of these four phonemes in "like", "snake", "wounded", "drags", "slow", "length" and "along". He also mimics the movement of a wounded snake by making eight of the line's twelve syllables *heavy* (they have long vowels or codas that can't be combined with following initial vowels)[40]. Attridge also points out that the clumsy demotion of the word "slow" to an offbeat contributes to the second line's lameness[41]. In these two lines the form thus matches the content perfectly.

Example II *Jenny Kissed Me* by Leigh Hunt (1784-1859)

> Jenny kissed me when we met,
> Jumping from the chair she sat in;
> Time, you thief who love to get
> Sweets into your list, put that in!
> Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,

[38] POPE, Alexander: *Essay on Criticism*, in *Collected Poems*. London: J. M. Dent, 1983, p. 67, ll. 356-357.
[39] ATTRIDGE, Derek: *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, *cit.*, pp. 84-96.
[40] For syllable weight, see HAYES, Bruce: *Metrical Stress Theory*, *cit.*, pp. 50-54.
[41] ATTRIDGE, Derek: *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, *cit*., pp. 233-234.

Say that health and wealth have missed me,
Say I'm growing old, but add
Jenny kissed me[42].

These lines express the pleasure of recalling a past affection that makes an old man, for a moment, feel young again.The form is four-beat verse with a falling rhythm (in traditional terms trochaic tetrameter in which odd-numbered lines are *catalectic*, that is, their final trochee is *resolved* into a stressed monosyllable). Such a rhythm often sounds more energetic than a rising one, and is made livelier still by alternating masculine and feminine lines[43]. Note the alliteration of "jumping" / "Jenny" and the repetition of the first half line in the last short line. There is also a jauntiness in the two-word feminine rhymes "sat in / that in" and "missed me/kissed me".

Example III From *On Seeing the Elgin Marbles* by John Keats (1795-1821)

Like a sick eagle looking at the sky[44].

This line expresses sadness, helplessness and frustration, and Keats has found a felicitous simile to add intensity to the expression of those feelings. Note that the line is an iambic pentameter that subdivides into two alliterating five-syllable units; not only do the first syllables of these half-lines repeat the onset [*l*], but they also repeat the coda [*k*]. The other phonemic rhythms in the line are the cynghanedd between "sick" and "sky" and the vocalic alliteration of "eagles" and "at".

Example IV From "When I set out for Lyonesse" by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

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[42] Hunt, Leigh, in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 559.

[43] See Hanson, Kristin: "Resolution: Evidence from Modern English Metrics". *North East Linguistic Society*, 1993, 23, pp. 159-173.

[44] Keats, John: "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles", in *Poems*. London: Heinemann, 1981, p. 93, l. 5.

When I set out for Lyonesse,
A hundred miles away,
The rime was on the spray,
And starlight lit my lonesomeness
When I set out for Lyonesse
A hundred miles away[45].

These lines express the feelings of a husband who recalls the thrill of first love, but who knows that in his marriage love has been buried like a lost kingdom beneath the sea. Lyonesse is a fabled land lying to the West of Cornwall that flourished in the time of the first Anglo-Saxon invasions. It is recalled in the legend of Tristran and Iseult and her husband King Mark[46]. The strophe is in lines with 4 / 3 beats, like the oldest English folk verse. Note Hardy's use of rare words derived from Old West Germanic: "rime" and "spray", superseded in modern English by "frost" and "branches". Note also the phonemic rhythm in "Lyonesse" and "lonesomeness", where the penultimate, unstressed syllables rhyme and the final secondary-stressed syllables are identical. The phoneme [*l*] dominates the internal music of this poem, the phoneme that is halfway between a vowel and a French kiss. The alliteration of "starlight" and "lit" is an unusual one of a weak syllable with a strong. The phoneme [*s*] is also repeated, here suggesting not the hiss of a snake but the silence of anticipation.

Example V From "Tell me not here" by A. E. Housman (1859-1936)

Or beeches strip in storms for winter
And stain the wind with leaves[47].

These lines express regret at the passing of time and the impermanence of beauty in a poem that mourns the short time each human has to enjoy the beauties of nature. The verse design is

[45] HARDY, Thomas: *Poems: A New Selection*. London: Macmillan Press, 1977, p. 38, ll. 1-6.
[46] See TENNYSON, Alfred: *Idylls of the King*, in *Poems and Plays*, *cit*., pp. 287-442.
[47] HOUSMAN, A. E.: *Collected Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1956, p. 152, ll. 17-18.

a traditional one known as *common measure*, which alternates four-beat with three-beat lines. Here Housman alternates unrhymed feminine lines with rhymed masculine lines. Note the assonance between "beeches" and "leaves" and the alliteration of the consonant cluster *-st-* in "stains", which combines with *[r]* in "strip" to become cynghanned in some pronunciations of "storms". The most important feature of these lines from the point of view of intensity, however, is the metaphor of the wind (alliterating with "winter"). Here Housman borrows an image found in Catullus and gives it a colourful autumnal slant:

> Dicit; sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti
> In vento aut rapidā scribere oportet aquā[48].

This reference underlines Housman's semantic strategy in this poem: to depict his passion for nature (his "enchantress") as an unrequited love affair.

Example VI From *Snake* by D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930)

> And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
> Of life;
> And I have something to expiate:
> A pettiness[49].

These are the last lines of a poem in free verse, and they can be regarded as a challenge to Pope (see Example I): they express the feelings of shame and guilt the poet feels at having tried to kill a beautiful reptile. The poet chose to employ two six-beat lines to close the poem but made them not-quite Alexandrines by dividing them irregularly and placing each subdivision on a separate line. The beat formula of the resulting quatrain is therefore 4-2-5-1. The other way that Lawrence makes his six beats more athletic than Pope's is by placing two weak syllables in one of the intervals in each of the longer lines (between beats 4 and 5 of the first line and beats 2 and 3 of the third).

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[48] Catullus, Gaius Valerius: *Carmina*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961, No. 70, ll. 3-4. Trans. "So she says, but what a woman says to her eager lover should be written on the wind or in fast-flowing water".

[49] Lawrence, D. H.: *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Books, 2008, pp. 125-128.

Note how Lawrence uses phoneme repetition sparingly but effectively: there is alliteration in "lords" / "life" and "expiate / pettiness", in the latter case alliterating a weak syllable with a strong one; and the two syllables of the final word have assonance of their short vowels. He also makes the last beat of the final two lines weak: it is provided by a secondary stress. All of these phonological features serve to add intensity to the note of regret on which the poem ends. Lawrence's snake withdraws defiantly into the bowels of the burning earth, while the poet whimpers. The roles of man and snake in the Pope couplet have been reversed.

Example VII From "My father moved" by E. E. Cummings (1894-1962)

> Joy was his song and joy so pure
> A heart of star by him could steer[50]

These four-beat lines express the poet's love of his father and celebrate the older man's cheerfulness and reliability. The word "joy" becomes a rhythmic event in the first line, which also has alliteration between "song / so". In the second line there is an unusual chiming between "star" / "steer" where in addition to alliteration there is an "eye-consonance" in the final *[r]* (which many English speakers do not pronounce), and a sharp contrast between the long back vowel *[a]* and the long front vowel *[i]*. There is also another alliteration in "heart" / "him". Linking the lines there is consonance rather than rhyme: the coda repetition of "pure" / "steer". These lines are made memorable by the metaphor whereby a man becomes something a star steers by, rather than vice versa. A magnificent hyperbole thus gives intensity to Cumming's expression of filial love.

Example VIII *In My Craft Or Sullen Art* by Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

[50] CUMMINGS, E. E.: *Selected Poems, 1925-1958*. London: Faber and Faber, 1960, pp. 505-508, ll. 21-22.

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages,
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms,
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art[51].

This poem explores the reasons why a poet may write poetry; Thomas rejects a number of possible motivations before presenting his own answer.The lines of this poem have three beats, but occasionally one of those beats is weak and occasionally a line has an extra weak beat, and the accentual rhythm varies from line to line between duple and triple time. The poem is divided into two strophes with an intricate rhyme scheme invented for the occasion: it comprises five full rhymes, and each strophe begins with the rhymes abcde- and closes with the rhymes -cca. The first strophe has eleven lines (its mid-section rhymes -bde-) while the second strophe has nine lines (because its mid-section is a single line rhymed -e-).

This poem contains a number of brilliant images and choices of diction that give special intensity to the way Thomas presents his case. The word "sullen" in line 1 is particularly appropriate to an art that is silent and solitary and frequently masks suffering. The word "raging" applied to the moon twice (lines 3 and 13) hints at mystery and madness. The lover's "griefs" in

[51] Thomas, Dylan: *Collected Poems, 1934-1952*. London: J. M. Dent, 1952, p. 120.

line 5 are surely that morning must come and that love doesn't last. The music of "I labour by singing light" (line 6) fits the meaning closely, with its triple-time rhythm and alliteration on the first and last beats. "The strut and trade of charms on the ivory stages" (lines 8 and 9) is a striking monosyllabic metaphor for audience feedback and mutual admiration. In line 14 writing to impress the critics is denounced as being "For the proud man apart from the raging moon", and in line 15 seeking the immortality of posthumous fame is morphed into "the towering dead"; and here Thomas compares his motivations with those of Keats and Milton by his reference to "nightingales and psalms". At the close of each strophe Thomas declares that he writes to seek communion with the lovers whose arms hold "the griefs of the ages" and who are too engrossed in one another to heed the contents of the poet's "spindrift" message (line 14), using a rare epithet that underlines the poem's uncertain fate.

I quote this poem in its entirety to demonstrate that it is possible to sustain special intensity of expression for many lines, and to illustrate how the freedom of free verse includes being able to preserve some features of regular verse (such as rhyme) and reject others (such as a dominant accentual rhythm and line length).

Example IX From "What could she say" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919-)

What could she say to the fantastic foolybear
and what could she say to brother
and what could she say to the cat with future feet
and what could she say to mother

after the time that she lay lush
among the lolly flowers
on that hot river bank[52].

[52] FERLINGHETTI, Lawrence: *A Coney Island of the Mind*. New York: New Direction, 1956, ll. 1-7.

These lines express the mixture of excitement, fear, and guilt felt by an adolescent who has just succeeded in losing her virginity. The accentual rhythm has the gaiety of triple time at the beginning of most lines, but it usually gives way to the more sober duple time at the line end. Ferlinghetti employs alliteration ("fantastic foolybear") to close line 1 and also line 3 ("future feet"). Conventional rhyme, however, closes lines 2 and 4 and hints that this is a conventional family despite the father being a play animal and the younger sister having a feline future. The alliteration of "lush" / "lolly flowers" captures the self-indulgence of the girl's adventure, and the repetition of the word "that" reminds us of the significance of the event. The poet succeeds in adding intensity to the description of a not uncommon situation, and the reader hopes that, if the family find out, they will keep their sense of humour.

Example X From *Mirror* by Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

> In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
> Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish[53].

These lines express a woman's horror at growing old (*l'enfer de dames*). The lines have 3 + 2, and 4 + 2 beats (the target of Pope's scorn in Example I). But there is no question of them dragging slowly: they are in triple time and hasten in a way that mimics the aging process. Besides this accentual rhythm, there is a semantic rhythm in the contrasts "old" / "young" and "drowned" / "rises", and a verbal rhythm as well as alliteration in "day after day". In these lines the mirror becomes a metaphorical lake, and a final contributor to the effectiveness of the poem is the terrible word "terrible", which leaps, like a giant shark, from a sea of monosyllables. Plath's lines convey with great intensity the emotions of a wife who is losing her husband to a more attractive woman.

Example XI From *Mossbawn,* 1*, Sunlight* by Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

[53] Plath, Sylvia: *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981, p. 174.

And here is love
Like a tinsmith's scoop
Sunk past its gleam
In the meal-bin[54].

These lines express the emotional warmth of the simple country home in which the poet grew up. There are no verbal fireworks here, because they would be inappropriate to the content. This is the language of everyday speech, in the traditional pattern of four beats plus three, but laid out as half lines. These monosyllables and compounds have an accentual rhythm that is mostly duple time. Finally, the image of the scoop in the meal-bin brings the reader in close to the scene, and the metaphor "sunk past its gleam" captures perfectly something in a humble home that is buried deep but is as precious as a jewel. Heaney was a master of the short line and this was one of his favourite poems.

Example XII From *About His Person* by Simon Armitage (1963-)

No gold or silver,
But crowning one finger

A ring of white unweathered skin.
That was everything[55].

In this poem Auden's *Unknown Citizen* has gone one stage further: he is now a corpse, and the language is that of a police report. The poem finds very little to give the dead man any individuality, but here at the end of the list is the fact that he wears no ring, only the "unweathered skin" where a ring must have been.That he was recently divorced, seems certain, that he may have committed suicide is hinted, and so a great unhappiness is made vivid by suggestion. Finally, the closing statement, which may mean no more than that there was nothing else to list, is ambiguous in context: the loss signified by "unweathered skin" may have been everything — to him.

[54] HEANEY, Seamus: *New Selected Poems*, *1966-1987*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 49-50, ll. 25-28.
[55] ARMITAGE, Simon: *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001, p. 50.

Note the assonance and weak rhyme of "silver and finger", the assonance of "finger" and "ring", which becomes rhyme in the next line's "everything". The form of the poem is a Medieval Latin Sequence in which pairs of lines are matched either in rhythm or rhyme. The accentual rhythm of these four line begins with duple time in describing what was absent and closes with triple time revealing what was present. The rhythm of these lines is as subtle and unobtrusive as the poem's content, and the poet skilfully uses impersonal data to add intensity to his message: that we leave so little in the world to tell who we were, and that our greatest tragedies are as nothing in the cosmic scheme of things.

Conclusion

These dozen examples demonstrate that free verse is no barrier to achieving the special intensity that marks poetry, nor does it prevent zealous critics recognizing it. The loss of familiar linear, accentual, and phonemic rhythms hinders poets to some extent in their labours, but language has plenty of other resources for achieving the same ends. The indiscriminate use of the return key may be a new threat, but it is no worse than the menace of banal rhyme (of the "I'm a poet and didn't know it" type); and good poets have always been able to resist such temptations.

The biggest challenge to poetry today, however, comes from social change: minorities that for millennia have had to suffer in silence have now found their voice, and their words have a resonance that comes from novelty. Moreover, all this is happening to a background of rapid progress in artificial intelligence, so there are exciting new issues to debate as well as powerful emotions to express[56]. The twenty-first century should, therefore, be a boom time for poetry; that is, providing poets don't lose the art of adding special intensity to what they have to say, and providing teachers and critics don't neglect the form of poems and focus solely on their content.

Fecha de recepción: 6 de febrero de 2019.
Fecha de aceptación: 2 de abril de 2019.

[56] See Bostrom, Peter: *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014.


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