

John Hollander

Rhyme's Reason

A GUIDE TO ENGLISH VERSE



NB

THIRD EDITION

JOHN HOLLANDER

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION



In the second edition of this handbook, I added a considerable bit of new material; this included some non-Western verse forms influential to poets writing in English; a discussion of what the late W. K. Wimsatt called "verbal mimesis"; and some examples, self-descriptive in various ways—such as sonnets on the sonnet—of verse forms by other poets from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. This considerably augmented third edition allows the schemes and patterns illustrated self-descriptively additional room to speak for themselves, as it were, through instances of their actual use in poetry. These are collected in the section Patterns in Practice at the end of this volume and will additionally exemplify the ways in which different historical styles of diction and syntax, and changing conceptions of genre, have subtly recast older formal patterns and devices.

I should like to head off any possible misleading characterization of this book as a guide to "formal poetry." The very term itself seems a misnomer: it implies that accentual-syllabic verse is the only

"form," and that the many different kinds of free-verse, of twentieth-century syllabics, of pure accentualism, etc., are formless. This is nonsense. There is a great difference between coherent writing and incoherent or dysfunctional writing in verse of any sort. And surely poetic "form" is a very deep matter that covers much more than phonological or typographic pattern. I have discussed such matters in some detail elsewhere; but a reader who considers closely the array of examples now included will probably be able to see into some of these depths.

Since the original edition of this manual twenty years ago, I have noticed that a considerable number of good younger poets are now writing accentual-syllabic (rhymed or blank) or syllabic verse with deep skill, or various modes of free verse that generate their own conventions and rules with the same kind of power that measured verse deploys. This is perhaps because a century-long tradition of great poetry written in free verse can supply models, not for imitation, but—and this is true of all poetic verbal patterns—for creative revision. And yet the preponderance of very bad verse is still the same weak *vers libre* that has all of the inanity of the rhymed greeting-card jingle that was the analogous default-mode of badly written verse in the first half of the twentieth century. Good verse of any sort is nevertheless only half the story of good poetry, whose essential character is what Wallace Stevens called "fictive," and Robert Frost "ulterior," or "saying one thing and meaning another," or what we could simply call not being literal. Having in the past year spent time re-

covering from an injury, I came to realize that "When you see someone with a cane / That person's probably in pain."

These lines are clearly verse, and the proposition they assert is true. But they are not in the least *poetry*, for they are totally literal: there is nothing of fiction in them. Even the one possible trace of the nonliteral that might lurk therein—that *pain* and *cane* appropriately rhyme because feeling the first might lead one to use the second—is totally glossed into triviality by the simple literal truth of the statement. *Rhyme's Reason* is thus subtitled *A Guide to English Verse* and not "—to Poetry." I trust that its readers will understand that verse (or in certain modern instances, prose treated and used as verse) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for poetry. All the rest is metaphor.

I hope that immediate reminders of the actual poetic use of the patterns and schemes will inform readers' subsequent experience of the whole of poetry in our language.

I have corrected a few minor errors and added to the main body of the text some material on conventions of typographical indentation in verse. In addition I should like to add the following to the "Suggestions for Further Reading" section on page 137–138: Paul Fry's *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven, 1980); Jennifer Wagner's *Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Madison, N.J., 1996); John Fuller's *The Sonnet* (London, 1972); Stephen Cushman's *Fictions of Form in Modern Poetry* (Princeton, 1993); Richard Brad-

ford's *The Look of It: A Theory of Visual Form in English Poetry* (Cork, Ireland, 1993); Annie Finch's *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (Ann Arbor, 1993); H. T. Kirby-Smith's *The Origins of Free Verse* (Ann Arbor, 1996); and Steven Monte's *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2000).

I wish to thank Donald Hall and Alan Ansen for permission to include their splendidly self-regarding sestinas.

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his is a guide to verse, to the formal structures which are a necessary condition of poetry, but not a sufficient one. The building blocks of poetry itself are elements of fiction—fable, "image," metaphor—all the material of the nonliteral. The components of verse are like parts of plans by which the materials are built into a structure. The study of rhetoric distinguishes between tropes, or figures of meaning such as metaphor and metonymy, and schemes, or surface patterns of words. Poetry is a matter of trope; and verse, of scheme or design. But the blueprints of verse can be used to build things made of literal, or nonpoetic material—a shopping list or roadside sign can be rhymed—which is why most verse is not poetry.

It is nonetheless common and convenient for most people who don't read carefully to use "poetry" to mean "writing in some kind of verse," and to regard thereby the design without considering the materials. The most popular verse form in America today—the ubiquitous jingle readers identify with "poetry" even as, fifty or sixty years ago, they did anything that rhymed—is

a kind of free verse
without any special
constraints on it except
those imposed by
the notion—also
generally accepted—that
the strip the lines
make as they run
down the page (the
familiar strip with the
jagged
right-hand edge) not
be too wide

This is as automatic and unpoetic in its arbitrary formality as jingling rhymes on "June" and "moon" ever were; schemes and structures of free verse are as conventional and, for most writers, as "academic" as certain other "official" forms have been in other eras. Major poetry has been built in this form, even as Tennyson could employ the same rhyming schemes as writers of occasional verses for family parties.

Both verse and prose, then, are schematic domains. Literacy used to entail some ability to write in both modes, without any presumption of poetry in the execution of skill in the former. But today sportswriters on the few newspapers we have left know no Latin nor can write good witty verses. We no longer memorize poems at school. Young persons are protected from the prose cadences—so influential on writing in both modes—of the King James Bible by aggressive separatism and the churches themselves; all of us are shielded from Shakespearean rhythm by the ways in which both prose and verse are publicly intoned in America. The territory covered in this guide—this road map through the region of poetry in English—has itself tended to run back into second-growth timber, if not into wilderness.

Some day we will all be reading Blue Guides and Baedekers to what once were our own, familiar public places. In former times, the region of verse was like an inviting, safe municipal park, in which one could play and wander at will. Today, only a narrow border of that park is frequently used (and vandalized), out of fear that there is safety only in that crowded strip—even as the users' grandparents would cling to walks

that went by statues—and out of ignorance of landscape. The beauties of the rest of that park are there, unexplored save by some scholars and often abandoned even by them.

I am old enough to have grown up in the park, and to map a region one loves is a way of caressing it. (Goethe wrote of counting out hexameters on his Roman lady's back as she lay in his arms: he was mapping her body's curve even as he felt for the ancient rhythm.) I too set out now as a loving rather than merely dutiful tour guide. Even today, when touch seems casual and only discourse intimate, one can't presume on Whitmanic relations with readers. I shall content myself (Inquiry's too severe in prose; / Verse puts its questions in repose) with tapping out my self-explaining diagrams and illustrations of the walks and alleys and bosks and ponds and parterres and follies and hahas and so forth that comprise my territory, as it were, on the reader's hand. After all, this is a manual.

The schemes and designs to be explored here include: the structures of lines of verse; patterns of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance; schemes of syntax and word order; groups of lines called strophes or stanzas; overall patterns of repetition and variation (refrains, etc.); and larger arrangements of these. Over the centuries, these forms have come at various times to be associated with one or another kind of poetic use—or with what some critics would call a "theme," a "subject" or an occasion. Sonnets, for example, start out by being about a particular philosophic conception of love, and end up in the twen-

tieth century as descriptions of pictures, explanations of myths, or analytic meditations. And yet the later poems in the history of the form's life—when written by the finest poets—are always in some way aware of, and always engage, that history and the burden it puts on originality.

This little book contains examples of formal schemes of various sorts, and at various levels of organization. Since we are concerned only with verse in English, no historical sketch or comparative analysis of metrics and forms is given, save for a glance at what the meters of classical poetry have entailed for English. But it should be remembered that all poetry was originally oral. It was sung or chanted; poetic scheme and musical pattern coincided, or were sometimes identical. Poetic form as we know it is an abstraction from, or residue of, musical form, from which it came to be divorced when writing replaced memory as a way of preserving poetic utterance in narrative, prayer, spell, and the like. The ghost of oral poetry never vanishes, even though the conventions and patterns of writing reach out across time and silence all actual voices. This is why, to go back to the earlier analogy of architecture, a poet is always like both the builder of houses, with plans "at hand," and the designer or executor of a complicated edifice, drawing and working from complex blueprints.

Verse can be organized according to very many metrical *systems*, depending upon the structure of the language in which the verse is written. The systems relevant to verse in English are:

1. *Pure accentual*—the meter of the earliest Ger-

manic poetry; it is preserved in nursery rhymes and in much lyric verse.

2. *Accentual-syllabic*—the verse system which involves such patterns as "iambic," "dactylic," etc., all somewhat confusingly named for Greek meters in a totally different system.

3. *Pure syllabic*—the basic system of modern French and Japanese, to cite two kinds of poetry that have used it for centuries; it has been used in English only in the last fifty years or so.

4. So-called *free verse*, of which there are many varieties, developed mostly in the twentieth century.

5. *Quantitative verse* which, save for some grotesque and failed examples, cannot occur in English, but which was the basis of Greek prosody and, later on, of Latin.

Since accentual-syllabism has been so dominant, and so important, during the course of the poetic history of the English language, we will start with it.

Accentual-syllabic verse is built up of pairs or triads of syllables, alternating or otherwise grouping stressed and unstressed ones. Syllables usually keep their word accent, or the accent they would have in phrases in normal speech. *Iambic pentameter*, a line pattern made up of five syllable pairs with the first syllable unstressed, can be illustrated by a line which most perfectly conforms to the pattern itself:

About about about about about

or this:

A boát, a boát, a boát, a boát, a boát

(for a monosyllable, with its preceding article, is accented like a word of two syllables). But actual lines of iambic pentameter, because they can't simply repeat identical pairs of syllables, have individual and particular rhythms which depart from the metrical pattern slightly. It is in this variation that the sound of poetry lives. For example, a simple variation of our first example—one that has become a standard pattern in itself—is actually a reversal of stressed and unstressed syllables in the first pair:

Almost "about about about about"

or in the second as well:

Nearly almost "about about about"

But there are ways of departing that seem to obscure the pattern so that they can no longer be considered variations from it:

Almost the sound of the line of "about"s

What we hear is a rhythm of four beats, not five, and the unstressed syllables are grouped into triads of *dum de de*, *dum de de* (called dactyls), even though there are, in fact, ten syllables in the lines.

Most interesting with regard to poetry are the variations—and almost every line of poetry exhibits them—that lie between these extremes. Any poem will be cast in one metrical form or another, and after we read three or more lines it will be obvious which of two patterns even the most ambiguous line is a variation of. Frequently, richness and significance of sound depend upon our ear hesitating for a while between patterns; but there is real ambiguity only

at the start of a poem. An extreme case is the opening of one of Keats's sonnets:

How many bards gild the lapses of time

We might think that a matching line would be:

Read this as dactyls and then it will rhyme

like the one we made up before. But in fact, the sonnet continues in iambic pentameter, and we realize that we had a wildly variant first line instead of a more patterned one. But a better example, also by Keats, can be seen in the second line of his "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time

Here, although only the fourth pair has its order reversed, the line nevertheless resounds with other possibilities. Thus,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time

Accéntually póunding to só míme

An ántiquated rhýthm which had nó rhýme.

But the phrase "slow time" resolves itself in the poem because "time" rhymes there only with the monosyllable "rhyme" two lines below (there's no "slow"/"so" chiming, as in our example). When we *scan* a line of poetry, or mark the prominent syllables, we are really showing what its actual rhythm is, and then, by putting this rhythm in alignment with adjacent ones in the poem or stanza of the poem, deciding what their common pattern is. Thus, every line is at once unique and has family resemblances, usually very strong, to its companions in any one poem.

Accentual-syllabic verse is traditionally discussed as sequences of *feet*; and although the terminology is misleading, you can remember that:

A foot | is just | a group | of syl- | lablés:
Trochees | (like these), | iámbs, | spondees, | paired, while
Dactyls and | anapests | always are | triads of | syllables.

An iamb is a pair with a stress on the second syllable (as in "about"):

Iámbic méter runs along like this:
Pentameters will have five syllables
More strongly stressed than other ones nearby—
Ten syllables all told, perhaps eleven.

But

Trochees simply tumble on and
Start with downbeats just like this one
(Sorry, "iamb" is trochaic).

★

"Dactyl" means | "finger" in | Gréek, and a | foot that was
| made up of | one long
Syllable followed by two, like the joints in a finger was used
for
Lines made of six, just like these, in the epics of Homer and
Virgil,
Save that in English we substitute downbeats and upbeats
for long-short.*

★

In an *án* | *apest* up | beats start out | in reverse
Of the dactyl's persuasion but end up no worse.
(Yes, the anapest's name is dactylic—a curse?)

★

Slow *spondees* are two heavy stressed downbeats
They stand shoulder to strong shoulder this way.

*For more on this, see pages 34–36.