


# Meter and Meaning

An introduction to rhythm in poetry

Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge

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IN POETRY

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T. C., D. A.

Cornish, Maine, U.S.A  
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# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to increase your enjoyment and understanding of English poetry written in regular meters. You may be a writer of poetry who would like to improve your grasp of metrical forms in English so that you may use them effectively in your poems. Perhaps you are studying literature in a high school or secondary school, or in a college or university, and would like to deepen your appreciation of the poetry you are reading. You may be a teacher who would like to provide your students with useful tools to help them discuss the rhythms of poems, and how they relate to other aspects of poetry. Or you may be one of the many people who are not specialists in literature or poetry but who love the sounds and rhythms of metrical poems and want to become even more aware of their pleasures and powers. This book is addressed to you.

Increased understanding, we believe, leads to increased enjoyment, but in the case of poetry, understanding is not only an intellectual matter. To experience a poem fully is to hear and feel it at the same time as responding to the meanings of its words and sentences, and to do this one has to be able to appreciate its rhythms. An invaluable tool in doing so, and in communicating one's experience to others, is a way of marking the lines of verse to indicate how the rhythm is working – in the case of metrical poetry, both how it uses familiar rhythms and how it creates particular effects by departing from these rhythms. We have attempted to make this process – scansion – as simple as possible by linking it directly to the way poems are experienced, and by using a straightforward set of symbols to mark the lines. We want to demystify meter, which for too long has been the preserve of the specialist, and we hope to add further

dimensions to your appreciation of the art of the poets who, now as in the past, find heightened powers of communication and fresh possibilities for the expression of emotion through the use of regular, yet varied, rhythms.

The very words “scansion” and “prosody” – the metrical analysis of verse – cause anxiety for many lovers of poetry, and particularly for students young and old, from the early years of study to graduate schools. Examining the technical features of an attractive line seems to many like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel, to borrow a phrase from Alexander Pope, or, in the words of William Wordsworth, like murdering to dissect. Many feel that little is gained by dividing up lines of beautiful and moving language and then giving the little units, called “feet,” names like iamb, trochee, anapest, dactyl, spondee, pyrrhic, amphibrach, ionic; the list of Greek-based labels goes on. If you are emotionally touched by the thoughts and rhythms of metrical poetry, this activity may seem no more than an intellectual game – and, often, a guessing game at that.

But if the perception of rhythms and meters is a physical as well as an intellectual act, why have such emphasis on *naming feet* when we sense the presence of meter by *feeling* it when we perform poems, either aloud or silently?

Before trying to answer these questions in the chapters that follow, we think it’s important to say a little about who we are and why we believe this subject to be one that repays the expenditure of time and effort – both yours and ours. The “we” in this book usually means Tom Carper and Derek Attridge, not the “we” encountered in statements like “we know that, on this round planet, somewhere the sun is shining” or “here we sense the poet’s melancholy.” You, as reader and performer, will discover that we invite your own opinions and responses – agreeing or disagreeing – when we ask you to try out and evaluate our ways of performing certain metrical lines and identifying their rhythmic features, along with the meanings these rhythmic features help create.

We have both lived with poetry all our lives, teaching many hundreds of poems to large numbers of students, in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. One of us has published several collections of metrical poetry, the other has published three books on the subject of rhythm and meter. We have also read a mountain of books and articles trying to introduce students to the way rhythm and meter

work in poetry, and have always been disappointed – too many lists of terms, too much attention to norms and exceptions, too little examination of the basic assumptions about the experience of poetry underlying the discussion. We have always found this way of talking about meter left at least half of the students puzzled about what was going on, and this seemed a shame. The students were all thoughtful and dedicated, but the system of feet and their stress markings seemed to bear no relation to the expertise they demonstrated when reading poetry aloud. They could *perform* lines and entire poems beautifully, bringing out the beat of complex rhythms in just the way we would or, even better, with different emphases that exposed new meanings – often deeper meanings than we had noticed, or felt.

So we have for a long time been using a different approach in teaching metrical poetry, one for which there has been no classroom text. It is based on a simple principle: **Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats.** We continued to use some of the traditional labels like “iambic pentameter” in talking about the way we performed poetry by reading it aloud, and our experience of its rhythms as we did so. The difference was that we did this not in a world of intellectual manipulations but in a world of felt perceptions. We helped our students *feel* metrical verse as poets would wish, in whole lines, not fragments of lines.

By developing a simple method of scansion based on beats and offbeats we enabled our students to discuss clearly with us and with each other the experience of rhythm that is integral to the perception of meanings and emotions in the metered poems that make up the largest part of British, American, and other poetries written in the English language. Some students went on to study the rhythms of poetry more extensively, and to gain familiarity with the traditional foot-based approach to meter; but the ability to feel the beats remained crucial to their use of older types of scansion. The best way to grasp the working of the various feet with Greek names that you will encounter in many studies of poetry is by first getting a clear sense of the rhythmic patterns of beats and offbeats that are fundamental to the way regular verse is heard. Our way of talking about metrical verse has also proved useful in understanding and discussing much poetry that is not in regular meters (generally known as “free verse”) since the familiar rhythms upon which meter is built often play a significant part in these more freely organized poems.



The way of talking about poems that we developed in our classrooms – beat prosody – is being used more and more widely in education and in literary criticism; this short introduction to the rhythms of English metrical poetry presents it in an easy-to-grasp form. Although there is no rhythm without at least some suggestion of meaning, and in a successful poem the two always work inseparably together, we will simplify matters by concentrating at the beginning on the most basic rhythms, and using made-up verse that has no pretensions at being richly meaningful poetry. (You will see, however, that questions of meaning enter very quickly into the discussion.) Later, when we have introduced the most important elements of meter, we shall broaden our discussion to real poems – some famous, some little known – and invite you to use what you have learned about rhythm to perform them, to perceive and enjoy rhythm and meaning working together, and to articulate your experience in the simple terms of beat prosody. Our focus is not on methods of analysis but on poems: on the many ways they stir, move, delight, soothe, or excite us, and on the part that regular but always varied rhythms play in creating their powerful appeal.

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We all live with rhythms. In fact, we live in and through rhythms – rhythms of walking, talking, breathing, swimming, writing. When our muscles are engaged in any continuous activity, they prefer to tense and relax rhythmically, in time to a regular beat. The songs we sing and the music we listen or dance to can move our bodies and linger in our minds because they use rhythms that arise from these elementary pulses. Rhythms in poetry work similarly, from the nursery rhymes we chanted as young children to the subtle language we hear in performances of Shakespeare. In this opening chapter, you will see (and more importantly hear and feel) how these basic rhythms, at the heart of all metrical poetry, do their work.

We'll start with four lines written in simple rhythms.

## *First poem*

We won't talk of stress,  
We won't talk of feet.  
We'll talk about rhythm –  
We'll talk about beat.

There are more profound poems. But this one reveals in an uncomplicated way a principal point of our Introduction, that **Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats**, so it will be useful as we begin looking into (and listening to) the way metrical poetry creates its rhythm, and the ways we hear those rhythms. Sometimes a person will say, "There is only one way to hear the rhythm in such-and-such a line." But another person may disagree. How can this happen?

Pretty easily, *in some circumstances* – but not in all circumstances. Our first example will demonstrate this. In “First Poem” you will discover that there are two lines which have alternative meters. To perform the lines in the alternative ways is to take a big step toward understanding how to *hear* and *feel* meters, and then recognize metrical norms.

We can tell you that when the lines were written, it didn’t occur to the writer that there could be differing metrical ways of reading them; he wrote with a single rhythm in mind, or, more precisely, with a single rhythm playing on his pulses. But applying the principles we will be studying, you will see how he was wrong.

First, though, an important point: with every example in this book, you must speak the lines aloud. If we are to understand rhythm in poetry, we have to get physical with it, and the only way to do this is to mouth it and hear it.

So, say the following lines aloud:

We won’t talk of stress,  
We won’t talk of feet.

Notice that you’ve emphasized certain words more than others. Which were they?

While writing the lines, our not-particularly-inspired poet was emphasizing “won’t” in both lines, the word “stress” in the first line, and the word “feet” in the second line. For him, the lines went like this (we show emphasis by means of bold type):

We **won’t** talk of **stress**,  
We **won’t** talk of **feet**.

This means the lines had two beats. Maybe your performance of the lines was just the same as his. But maybe it wasn’t – in which case you had one of the following pairs of *three*-beat lines:

We **won’t** talk of **stress**,  
We **won’t** talk of **feet**.

or

**We won't talk of stress,  
We won't talk of feet.**

This is a significant moment: we see (or hear) plainly that certain lines can have three valid, natural-sounding, *different* performances. And we also notice that the differing performances influence meanings: the first performance emphasizes the things that we *won't* be doing; the second emphasizes that *we* won't be doing certain things – but maybe others will; the third is very emphatic, with the lines almost shouting to express opposition even to bringing up the matter of “stress” and “feet.” (One hears such energetic expression at football games: “Block that kick!”)

Let's now perform aloud the second pair of lines:

**We'll talk about rhythm –  
We'll talk about beat.**

Are there three possibilities for this pair, as there were for the first pair of lines? Try them out, continuing with the patterns we've just established, one with two beats in each line, two with three beats. Do they all work?

**We'll talk about rhythm –  
We'll talk about beat.**

and

**We'll talk about rhythm –  
We'll talk about beat.**

and

**We'll talk about rhythm –  
We'll talk about beat.**

What about the first of the three-beat versions of these lines? Why doesn't “We'll talk about **rhythm**” work?

The answer is obvious. Nobody who speaks the English language with average fluency pronounces the word “about” as about. It's

always **about**. So for this pair of lines, the only possibilities are the first and third versions.

But just how likely is it that our poet, while writing his brief verse, had the third version in mind? Try the four lines yourself with this rhythm:

**We won't talk of stress,  
We won't talk of feet.  
We'll talk about rhythm –  
We'll talk about beat.**

Does it seem to you that it's necessary, when presenting this fairly tame message to a reader, to use this degree of energy? Or do you feel, as we do, that these words, when emphasized so much, become more rhythmical than meaningful? That they turn, in effect, toward jazz rhythms and music?

A question still remains, though. If the first two lines of our small example may be performed in three different ways, and if lines three and four may be performed in only two different ways – because the “about” way won't work – and if the over-emphatic, jazzy way of performing all four lines together seems unnatural, what can we suppose the writer wanted us to experience? Will we say that our poet has written a poem using two rhythms, or meters – that is, two three-beat lines followed by two two-beat lines? Or will we say that the poem is one which the writer expects to be performed with two beats in every line?

As we begin our study of rhythm, you may be inclined to insist, “It's a free country. I hear threes and twos, so my answer is number one.” But we trust, with good reason, that after going through this brief book and performing the examples and listening to the differences you yourself are making, you will choose answer two.

Why? As will be demonstrated in the course of our discussion, poets who bother to write in regular rhythms – in meters – prefer to stick to the patterns they've established. It's part of the art. They work to avoid ambiguities of rhythm. They depend on regularity. And they do this so that when, from time to time, they do change the rhythm a little, or even a lot, the change will be noticed by the reader, or listener. And in this way a meaningful emotional effect can be created.

Here is an illustration of how a variation from the expected meter can cause an emotional reaction; it's a slight rewriting of the opening lines of what is probably the most famous American poem, "A Visit from Saint Nicholas," published anonymously in 1823. Try reading this aloud:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through  
the house  
Not a creature was stirring – not even a mouse;  
The stockings were hung with care  
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.

Because the third line is too short, it's jarring, and for no important reason relating to meaning or feeling. Why then would the poet abruptly interrupt the metrical flow of the line to shock the reader into paying particular attention to the ordinary act of hanging up Christmas stockings? In all likelihood, if we were to see this in a book of poems, we would think, "This is a misprint. Something has been left out." But the author, reputedly Clement Clark Moore, has in fact respected both the pattern of four beats per line and the rhyming pattern that the first two lines set up; so in the real poem he gives us what we're expecting: "The stockings were hung *by the chimney* with care." And with our expectations fulfilled, we feel satisfied.

Let's move on now and perform the following lines aloud:

### *Second poem*

Hickory dickory dock,  
The verse ticks like a clock.  
But when the clock unwinds,  
Its mechanism grinds,  
And it stops.

How did the first line go? How many beats? Most of us will get "hick-or-y dick-or-y dock." And so a three-beat rhythm is set up. But what if some people hear the word "hickory" as a two-syllable word – "hick-ry"? There are two common pronunciations for the word, so of course the two-syllable pronunciation is all right. But does it change the number of beats we hear? No, we still have three. And

even if there is any doubt, the following lines (except for the last) will assure us that we have heard three beats, and that the poet intended them: “But **when the clock unwinds**,” and so on.

What does the first line mean? Hickory is a kind of tree, or its wood, or a switch made of this wood. But what is “dickory”? The question may seem odd, and the answer obvious: dickory is a nice-sounding word made up by somebody to add rhyme and rhythm to a children’s poem. But notice, there is a point to be made here that can be applied to many devices of sound and rhythm we may encounter in the most sophisticated, even the most difficult, poems: often the pleasures to be gained from the *sounds* and *rhythms* of words are more important to the poet than the literal meanings of the words – in fact, the sounds and rhythms *create* meaning. Notice that the literal meaning of “hickory” really has no connection with the nursery rhyme, in which a mouse runs up a clock and then, when the clock strikes, runs back down again. Of course we can suppose, or even insist, that the clock must have been made of hickory; but in this case we must ask, which is greater, the pleasure of coming up with an impossible-to-prove “meaning,” or the pleasure of hearing pleasant, childlike sounds and rhythms working harmoniously together?

The second line can have two readings. Speak the line again, several times, and try to say what the two performances might be; then read on.

The verse ticks like a clock.

Here are the possibilities:

The **verse** ticks like a clock.

The verse **ticks** like a clock.

What’s your preferred performance? The first is very regular, and so may be said to reflect the regular ticking of a clock. But perhaps you feel that as a line of verse it is a bit mechanical (like clocks, rather than poems). The second performance, with an emphasis on “ticks,” seems more natural and “spoken” (at least to us), and also has more energy. Now if we were further along – if we were at the point of discussing scansion – we would agree that slightly different markings would be



needed for the different ways of performing the line, whichever one you prefer. But for now, we can agree that there are three beats, and to get into the swing of the simple verse, that's all we need.

The third line is quite regular (an alternate performance that emphasizes "but" rather than "when" is possible though not likely):

**But when the clock unwinds,**

The regularity is no surprise, for a large proportion of lines in metrical poems will be very regular. Why? The poet knows that if there are too many irregularities, the meter will be lost.

The fourth line is quite regular, too; try saying it aloud:

**Its mechanism grinds,**

You will feel two strong beats:

**Its mechanism grinds,**

But wait. We've been saying all along that three beats is the norm, the regular pattern, for this poem. Where is that third beat which can be felt, but that isn't so strong?

**Its mechanism grinds,**

This is another significant moment. The reader has been rolling rhythmically through the poem, and so feels the beat continuing even when the "-is-" in "mechanism" gets nowhere near the emphasis that "mech-" and "grinds" get. Thus the line fits perfectly into the expected three-beat pattern, even though the "-is-" is a gentle pat rather than a thump.

And our last line?

**And it stops.**

Two beats, maybe? Or one? Take your pick.

So far we have touched on several important points: that in certain circumstances a single line can have different metrical performances; that poets writing metrically tend to stick to their established patterns;