

# THE RHYTHMS OF ENGLISH POETRY

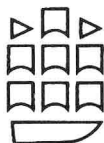
Derek Attridge



# The Rhythms of English Poetry

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LONGMAN  
London and New York

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED

Longman House

Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex, UK

*Published in the United States of America  
by Longman Inc., New York*

© Longman Group Limited 1982

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*First published 1982*

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Attridge, Derek

The rhythms of English poetry. – (English language series; 14)

1. English language – Versification

I. Title II. Series

921'.009 PE1509 80-42114

ISBN 0-582-55106-4

ISBN 0-582-55105-6 Pbk

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Printed in Singapore by  
Kyodo-Shing Loong Printing Industries Pte Ltd

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERIES

TITLE NO. 14

The Rhythms of English Poetry

## Foreword

In one of the first books in this series, Ian Gordon was concerned with the claim that the style and rhythm, *The Movement of English Prose*, displayed a throb of continuity over a millennium and more. Dr Attridge in the present volume is concerned with no less a claim, no less grand a theme: the unity of tradition, extending over six hundred years, manifested by the main stream of English ‘accentual-syllabic’ verse. His exposition of this theme demands an initial examination of the partly distinct, partly intertwined theories that have informed critical approaches to poetics: and then – the bulk of this volume – a detailed analysis in turn of ‘rhythm’ and ‘metre’, themselves also partly distinct and partly intertwined, and demanding from the reader both a sensitive ear and an appreciation of technical, logical argument.

Dr Attridge brings to this daunting enterprise a well-practised expertise in the field. He won high acclaim – to give one outstanding example – for his book on Elizabethan classical verse, *Well-weighed Syllables*, which was published in 1974. But in that work, as in this, one is struck not only by the keen historical knowledge of poetic form but by the deep personal involvement in (and love of) poetry itself. Even these, though essential, are not sufficient. Derek Attridge has made himself expert in linguistics – historical, traditional, structural, and transformational. And all these aspects of his scholarship he is able to communicate with enthusiasm and conviction. As with some other successful books in this series, we have here an author who is a true ‘philologist’, effortlessly straddling literary values and linguistic technicalities, convincingly showing the relevance of each to the other, excitingly indicating analogies with music at one moment and basic relationships with ordinary speech at another.

Indeed, for all its artfulness and (sometimes strenuous) complexity, poetry is not disjunct from but intimately bedded in the most commonplace fundamentals of our everyday speech rhythm and grammar: even in the most everyday strategies of conversational

discourse. For this reason alone, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* deserves a proudly central place in this series. As English has increasingly come into worldwide use, there has arisen a correspondingly increasing need for more information on the language and the ways in which it is used. The English Language Series seeks to meet this need and to play a part in further stimulating the study and teaching of English by providing up to date and scholarly treatments of topics most relevant to present-day English – including its history and traditions, its sound patterns, its grammar, its lexicology, its rich variety and complexity in speech and writing, and its standards in Britain, the USA, and the other principal areas where the language is used.

RANDOLPH QUIRK

University College London  
January, 1982

## Preface

If every book were prefaced by a description of its ideal reader, much of the public's time and effort might be saved; but this volume permits of no such convenient premonitory paradigm. The only requirements I can think of are an interest in the subject, sufficient patience to follow an extended argument, and some acquaintance with, and pleasure in, English poetry. Readers with an exclusively literary or exclusively linguistic background may find that occasionally they are asked to think in ways more characteristic of the other discipline, but advances in the study of poetic language depend on just such broadmindedness.

A single book on rhythm and metre can deal only with the most important features of the subject, especially if in its examination of those features it aims to take as little as possible for granted and to leave as little as possible unexplained. By and large, therefore, I have had to limit my scope to a single remarkably homogeneous body of poetry: the main tradition of regular accentual-syllabic verse in Middle and Modern English. This has meant keeping off some of the most picturesque byways of English versification, such as syllabic verse, classical imitations, concrete poetry, and the metrical experiments and theories of a host of individual writers, as well as avoiding the currently busy freeway of nonmetrical poetry; progress along these routes must wait upon an understanding of the central network from which they take their departure. It has also meant giving scant attention to other varieties of sound patterning like alliteration or rhyme, and leaving out of consideration altogether the wider manifestations of rhythm in the sequences of expectancy and satisfaction created by syntax, large-scale formal and generic conventions, and structures of meaning. And since my interest is primarily in the singleness of this metrical tradition – in the capacity, that is, of the modern reader to engage directly with rhythmic forms produced over the past six hundred years – I have deliberately ignored its historical dimension. Instead, I have drawn extensively and promiscuously on the poetry of writers with

established reputations from Shakespeare to Yeats for most of my examples, because it is largely on familiarity with this body of poetry that the modern reader's metrical knowledge is based.

The book is designed to be read as a whole, but the interdependence of parts and chapters is balanced by a measure of independence which should enable readers to follow up particular topics without going through the entire work. Part One is a critical account of the major approaches to be found in discussions of English metre: its aim is not merely to summarise these approaches but also to ascertain the requirements of an adequate metrical theory, and it therefore adumbrates some of the main arguments that follow. The next two parts deal with the three main sources and determinants of rhythmic patterning in poetry: Part Two with the rhythmic characteristics of the English language and the nature of rhythmic form, and Part Three with the metrical conventions of the verse tradition. A proper understanding of the first two influences requires some forays into the domains of linguistics, psychology, and music, while the third demands close attention to the practice of poets, taking account not only of what they have written, but also of what they have chosen not to write. Finally, Part Four focuses on the critical implications of rhythmic form, considered generally in terms of its poetic functions, and specifically in a selection of verse examples. The more technical points of the book's argument are summarised in the Appendix.

Although (or perhaps because) the words 'rhythm' and 'metre' occur on virtually every page, and as the titles of two parts, I have no wish to differentiate between them by means of simple definitions. The connotations which they carry are basically those of common usage, not the more specialised meanings they are sometimes given in prosodic theory; and it is the business of the following pages to provide a justification and elaboration of those connotations. But if I were obliged to be more explicit, I would hazard the assertion that rhythm, although it can encompass all types of movement which display a tendency towards patterning, has special reference to patterns apprehended through ordinary habits of perception, whereas metre is dependent on habits acquired through familiarity with a particular tradition of verse.

Since the purpose of almost every example I quote is to illustrate a general point about English poetic rhythm, questions of provenance and textual detail are usually irrelevant; I have therefore been eclectic in my choice of texts, modernised spelling and punctuation freely, and



in most cases left identification to the end of the book. Examples are numbered throughout each chapter, using the following conventions: (8), quotation identified in the list of sources; (8), repeated quotation; [8], invented construct; [8a], rewritten quotation or construct, relating directly to (8) or [8]. I have had to make frequent reference to a hypothetical (though never ideal) poet or reader; if these individuals are consistently masculine, it is only because I have found no practicable way of evading the established convention.

My work on this subject owes a great deal, both directly and indirectly, to my teachers and fellow-teachers, students and fellow-students (to use four categories that overlap considerably) during the course of many years. I can single out for individual thanks only a few of those who have responded willingly and helpfully to questions and drafts: Sidney Allen, John Birtwhistle, John Hollander, Samuel Jay Keyser, Frank Prince, Frank Stack, John Swannell, and Edward Weismiller. Nor can I list all the qualities Randolph Quirk has shown as an editor; despatch, meticulousness, and humour will have to suffice. I was fortunate to have in Heather King a typist who did not always assume that the author must be right. Various stages of this work were made possible by grants from the Fulbright-Hays Programme, the British Academy, and the Southampton University Advanced Studies Fund, and by the hospitality of Clare College, Cambridge, and the English Department of the University of Illinois at Urbana. I am grateful to the editors of *Essays in Criticism* for allowing me to use, in Chapter 9, material from an article published in that journal. Thanks, too, to Robert, Richard, Randy, and Penny for seeing me down the final straight.

Southampton University  
November, 1980

DA

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**In Memory of  
Henry Lester Attridge  
1903–1971**

# Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	v
<i>Preface</i>	vii
 <i>Part One: Approaches</i>	
1 TRADITIONAL APPROACHES	3
1.1 The classical approach	4
1.2 The temporal approach	18
2 LINGUISTIC APPROACHES	28
2.1 The phonemic approach	29
2.2 The generative approach	34
 <i>Part Two: Rhythm</i>	
3 THE RHYTHMS OF ENGLISH SPEECH	59
3.1 The syllable	60
3.2 Stress	62
3.3 Stress hierarchies	67
3.4 Alternation and stress-timing	70
4 THE FOUR-BEAT RHYTHM	76
4.1 The perception of rhythm	76
4.2 Underlying rhythm	80
4.3 Metrical patterns and unrealised beats	84
4.4 Offbeats; duple and triple rhythms	96
4.5 Line-openings, line-ends, and line-junctures	102
4.6 Rising and falling rhythms	108
4.7 Dipodic rhythms	114
5 THE FIVE-BEAT RHYTHM	123
5.1 Underlying rhythm and metrical pattern	125

5.2	Duple and triple, rising and falling rhythms	129
5.3	Line-junctures and blank verse	132
5.4	Syllabic rhythm	138
5.5	Five-beat and four-beat rhythms	142

### *Part Three: Metre*

6	WHAT IS A METRICAL RULE?	147
6.1	Rules of metre and rules of language	148
6.2	Metrical set	152
7	THE RULES OF ENGLISH METRE	158
7.1	Underlying rhythms and metrical patterns	158
7.2	Base rules and double offbeats	160
7.3	Promotion	164
7.4	Demotion	168
7.5	Implied offbeats	172
7.6	Pairing conditions and syllabic rhythm	175
7.7	Iambic verse	186
7.8	Trochaic verse	193
7.9	Triple verse	197
7.10	Complexity and tension	205
8	METRICAL RULES AND THE STRUCTURES OF LANGUAGE	214
8.1	Indefinite stress	215
8.2	Sense and the stress pattern	222
8.3	Metrical subordination	230
8.4	Double offbeats and elision	239
8.5	Promotion and demotion	248
8.6	Pairing and syntax	256
8.7	Pairing and word-boundaries	265
8.8	Compounds	275

### *Part Four: Practice*

9	THE FUNCTIONS OF POETIC RHYTHM	285
9.1	Iconic functions	287
9.2	Affective functions	295
9.3	Associative functions	300
9.4	Emphasis and connection	303
9.5	Pattern and cohesion	306
9.6	Foregrounding and textuality	310

xii CONTENTS

10 RHYTHM AT WORK: SOME EXAMPLES	316
10.1 Nonmetrical verse	316
10.2 Four-beat verse	324
10.3 Five-beat verse	344
APPENDIX: RULES AND SCANSION	357
<i>Bibliography</i>	363
<i>Sources of examples</i>	376
<i>Index</i>	388

## *Part One: Approaches*





## *Chapter 1*

### Traditional approaches

One kind of insight into the history of metrical study in English can be gained simply from a glance at the collections on the subject held by most large, long-established libraries. The shelves are dominated by fading volumes from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: unwieldy surveys thick with scanned quotations; elegant essays dabbling in this or that prosodic sidestream; scientific investigations of syllabic duration or vocalic quality; handbooks for the schoolroom parading lists of Greek terms and *recherché* metres culled from Swinburne and Bridges. Most of these works evince a deep passion for the subject: absolute truths are proclaimed in heavy capitals, opponents despatched in savagely civil footnotes, snippets of verse triumphantly displayed like newly-discovered zoological specimens. Very few fail to offer some illumination of a corner or two, or to provide some problematic example which demands an explanation; but by and large their undisturbed repose on the library shelves is not unmerited.

Within this vast demonstration of scholarly and critical ardour ranging from the comically idiosyncratic to the laboriously obvious it is possible to trace two main approaches to English metre, and these form the subject of this chapter. To categorise in this way is, of course, to over-simplify and misrepresent a complex web of arguments; but the survey that follows is intended not as a history of prosodic study, but as an examination of those ways of dealing with metre which have proved most tenacious in their hold on the English literary consciousness, and which are most likely to affect – whether we realise it or not – our present reading, teaching, and criticism of verse. This examination will have the double aim of providing an outline of the metrical assumptions which underlie most critical discussions of English poetry, and of assessing what is valuable and what misleading about these traditional accounts. While prosodic approaches of more recent origin, to be discussed in the next chapter, have begun to make