c. Dickinson, "It sifts from Leaden Sieves" (page 788) and Emerson, "The Snowstorm" (page 909).
d. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan" (page 859) and Machan, "Leda's Sister and the Geese" (page 860).
e. Frost, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (page 913) and Frost, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" (page 1049).
f. Randall, "Ballad of Birmingham" (page 728) and Hayden, "The Whipping" (page 727).

Chapter Eleven

Musical Devices

Poetry obviously makes a greater use of the "music" of language than does language that is not poetry. The poet, unlike the person who uses language to convey only information, chooses words for sound as well as for meaning, and uses the sound as a means of reinforcing meaning. So prominent is this musical quality of poetry that some writers have made it the distinguishing term in their definitions of poetry. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, describes poetry as "music . . . combined with a pleasurable idea." Whether or not it deserves this much importance, verbal music, like connotation, imagery, and figurative language, is one of the important resources that enable the poet to do more than communicate mere information. The poet may indeed sometimes pursue verbal music for its own sake; more often, at least in first-rate poetry, it is an adjunct to the total meaning or communication of the poem.

The poet achieves musical quality in two broad ways: by the choice and arrangement of sounds and by the arrangement of accents. In this chapter we will consider the first of these.

An essential element in all music is repetition. In fact, we might say that all art consists of giving structure to two elements: repetition and variation. All things we enjoy greatly and lastingly have these two elements. We enjoy the sea endlessly because it is always the same yet always different. We enjoy a baseball game because it contains the same complex combination of pattern and variation. Our love of art, then, is rooted in human psychology. We like the familiar, we like variety, but we like them combined. If we get too much sameness, the result is monotony and tedium; if we get too much variety, the result is bewilderment and confusion. The composer of music, therefore, repeats certain musical tones; repeats them in certain combinations, or chords; and repeats them in certain patterns, or melodies. The poet likewise repeats certain sounds in certain combinations and arrangements, and thus adds musical meaning to verse. Consider the following short example.
The Turtle

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.

Ogden Nash (1902–1971)

Here is a little joke, a paradox of animal life to which the author has cleverly drawn our attention. An experiment will show us, however, that much of its appeal lies not so much in what it says as in the manner in which it says it. If, for instance, we recast the verse as prose: “The turtle lives in a shell that almost conceals its sex. It is ingenious of the turtle, in such a situation, to be so prolific,” the joke falls flat. Some of its appeal must lie in its metrical form. So now we cast it in unrhymed verse:

Because he lives between two decks,
It's hard to tell a turtle's gender.
The turtle is a clever beast
In such a plight to be so fertile.

Here, perhaps, is some improvement over the prose version, but still the piquancy of the original is missing. Much of that appeal must have consisted in the use of rhyme—the repetition of sound in “decks” and “sex,” “turtle” and “fertile.” So we try once more.

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a plight to be so fertile.

But for perceptive readers there is still something missing—they may not at first see what—but some little touch that makes the difference between a good piece of verse and a little masterpiece of its kind. And then they see it: “plight” has been substituted for “fix.”

But why should “fix” make such a difference? Its meaning is little different from that of “plight”; its only important difference is in sound. But there we are. The final x in “fix” catches up the concluding consonant sound in “sex,” and its initial f is repeated in the initial consonant sound of “fertile.” Not only do these sound recurrences provide a subtle gratification to the ear, but they also give the verse structure; they emphasize and draw together the key words of the piece: “sex,” “fix,” and “fertile.”

Poets may repeat any unit of sound from the smallest to the largest. They may repeat individual vowel and consonant sounds, whole syllables, words, phrases, lines, or groups of lines. In each instance, in a good poem, the repetition will serve several purposes: it will please the ear, it will emphasize the words in which the repetition occurs, and it will give structure to the poem. The popularity and initial impressiveness of such repetitions are evidenced by their becoming in many instances embedded in the language as clichés like “wild and woolly,” “first and foremost,” “footloose and fancy-free,” “penny-wise, pound-foolish,” “dead as a door-nail,” “mighty and main,” “sink or swim,” “do or die,” “pell-mell,” “helter-skelter,” “harum-scarum,” “hocus-pocus.” Some of these kinds of repetition have names, as we will see.

A syllable consists of a vowel sound that may be preceded or followed by consonant sounds. Any of these sounds may be repeated. The repetition of initial consonant sounds, as in “tried and true,” “safe and sound,” “fish or fowl,” “rhyme or reason,” is alliteration. The repetition of vowel sounds, as in “mad as a hatter,” “time out of mind,” “free and easy,” “slap-dash,” is assonance. The repetition of final consonant sounds, as in “first and last,” “oaths and ends,” “short and sweet,” “a stroke of luck,” or Shakespeare’s “struts and frets” (page 855) is consonance.

Repetitions may be used alone or in combination. Alliteration and assonance are combined in such phrases as “time and tide,” “thick and thin,” “kith and kin,” “alas and alack,” “fit as a fiddle,” and Edgar Allan Poe’s famous line, “The viol, the violet, and the vine.” Alliteration and consonance are combined in such phrases as “crisscross,” “last but not least,” “lone and lorn,” “good as gold,” Housman’s “malt does more than Milton can” (page 732), and Kay’s “meanings lost in manners” (page 761).

*Different writers have defined these repetitions in various ways. Alliteration is used by some writers to mean any repetition of consonant sounds. Assonance has been used to mean the similarity as well as the identity of vowel sounds, or even the similarity of any sounds whatsoever. Consonance has often been reserved for words in which both the initial and final consonant sounds correspond, as in green and grow. moon and mine. Rhyme has been used to mean any sound repetition, including alliteration, assonance, and consonance. In the absence of clear agreement on the meanings of these terms, the terminology chosen here has appeared most useful, with support in usage. Labels are useful in analysis. However, the student should learn to recognize the devices and, more important, should learn to see their function, without worrying too much over nomenclature.
Rhyme is the repetition of the accented vowel sound and any succeeding consonant sounds. It is called masculine when the rhyme sounds involve only one syllable, as in decks and sex or support and retort. It is feminine when the rhyme sounds involve two or more syllables, as in turtle and fertile or spitefully and delightfully. It is referred to as internal rhyme when one or more rhyming words are within the line and as end rhyme when the rhyming words are at the ends of lines. End rhyme is probably the most frequently used and most consciously sought sound repetition in English poetry. Because it comes at the end of the line, it receives emphasis as a musical effect and perhaps contributes more than any other musical resource except rhythm to give poetry its musical effect as well as its structure. There exists, however, a large body of poetry that does not employ rhyme and for which rhyme would not be appropriate. Also, there has always been a tendency, especially noticeable in modern poetry, to substitute approximate rhymes for perfect rhymes at the ends of lines. Approximate rhymes (also called slant rhymes) include words with any kind of sound similarity, from close to fairly remote. Under approximate rhyme we include alliteration, assonance, and consonance or their combinations when used at the end of the line; half-rhyme (feminine rhymes in which only half of the word rhymes—the accented half, as in lightly and frightful, or the unaccented half, as in yellow and willow; and other similarities too elusive to name. "Twas warm—at first—like Us" (page 888), "Toads" (page 800), and "Mr. Z" (page 848), to different degrees, all employ various kinds of approximate end rhyme.

That night when joy began
That night when joy began
Our narrowest veins to flush,
We waited for the flash
Of morning's leveled gun.

But morning let us pass,
And day by day relief
Outgrows his nervous laugh,
Grown credulous of peace,

As mile by mile is seen
No trespasser's reproach,
And love's best glasses reach
No fields but are his own.

W. H. Auden (1907–1973)

QUESTIONS
1. What has been the past experience with love of the two people in the poem? What is their present experience? What precisely is the tone of the poem?
2. What basic metaphor underlies the poem? Work it out stanza by stanza. What is "the flash / Of morning's leveled gun" (3–4)? Does line 10 mean that no trespasser reproaches the lovers or that no one reproaches the lovers for being trespassers? Does "glasses" (11) refer to spectacles, tumblers, mirrors, or field glasses? Point out three personifications.
3. The rhyme pattern in the poem is intricate and exact. Work it out, considering alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

In addition to the repetition of individual sounds and syllables, the poet may repeat whole words, phrases, lines, or groups of lines. When such repetition is done according to some fixed pattern, it is called a refrain. The refrain is especially common in songlike poetry. Shakespeare's "Winter" (page 720) and "Spring" (page 725) furnish examples of refrains.

The Waking

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.
Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)

QUESTIONS

1. The refrains in lines 1 and 3 occur at patterned intervals in this example of the form called "villanelle" (see page 967 for a definition of the form). Even without the definition, you can work out the repetitive pattern—but the key question is, what do these two lines mean, both as statements within the first stanza, and in each subsequent repetition? Starting with line 1, for what is "sleep" a common metaphor? What would be the meaning if the first phrase were "I was born to die"?

2. Paraphrase the third line, in light of the idea that the first line presents an attitude toward the fact that all living things must die. Where does the speaker "have to go" ultimately? What is the process of his present "going"?

3. Explain the clear-cut attitude toward emotive experience versus intellectual knowledge expressed in line 4. How is that attitude a basis for the ideas in the refrain lines? How does it support line 10?

4. What is it that "Great Nature has... to do" (13) to people? How should they live their lives, according to the speaker?

5. Explain the paradox that "shaking keeps [the speaker] steady" (16). Consider the possibility that the speaker is personifying "the Tree" (10) as himself—what then is "fall[ing] away," and how near is it (17)?


We have not nearly exhausted the possibilities of sound repetition by giving names to a few of the more prominent kinds. The complete study of possible kinds of sound repetition in poetry would be so complex, however, that it would exceed the scope of this introductory text.

Some of the subtlest and loveliest effects escape our net of names. In as short a phrase as this from the prose of John Ruskin—"ivy as light and lovely as the vine"—we notice alliteration in light and lovely, consonance in ivy, light, and vine, and consonance in ivy and lovely, but we have no name to connect the v in vine with the vs in ivy and lovely, or the second l in lovely with the first l, or the final syllables of ivy and lovely with each other; yet these are all an effective part of the music of the line. Also contributing to the music of poetry is the linking of related rather than identical sounds, such as m and n, or p and b, or the vowel sounds in boat, boot, and book.

These various musical repetitions, for trained readers, will ordinarily make an almost subconscious contribution to their reading of the poem: readers will feel their effect without necessarily being aware of what has caused it. There is value, however, in occasionally analyzing a poem for these devices in order to increase awareness of them. A few words of caution are necessary. First, the repetitions are entirely a matter of sound; spelling is irrelevant. Bear and pair are rhymes, but through and rough are not. Cell and sin, folly and philosophy alliterate, but sin and sugar, gun and gem do not. Second, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and masculine rhyme are matters that ordinarily involve only stressed or accented syllables; for only such syllables ordinarily make enough impression on the ear to be significant in the sound pattern of the poem. For instance, we should hardly consider which and its in the second line of "The Turtle" an example of assonance, for neither word is stressed enough in the reading to make it significant as a sound. Third, the words involved in these repetitions must be close enough together that the ear retains the sound, consciously or subconsciously, from its first occurrence to its second. This distance varies according to circumstances, but for alliteration, assonance, and consonance the words ordinarily have to be in the same line or adjacent lines. End rhyme bridges a longer gap.

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)

QUESTIONS
1. What is the theme of this sonnet?
2. The image in lines 3–4 possibly refers to olive oil being collected in great vats from crushed olives, but the image is much disputed. Explain the simile in line 2 and the symbols in lines 7–8 and 11–12.
4. Using different-colored pencils, encircle and connect examples of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme. Do these help to carry the meaning?

We should not leave the impression that the use of these musical devices is necessarily or always valuable. Like the other resources of poetry, they can be judged only in the light of the poem’s total intention. Many of the greatest works of English poetry—for instance, Hamlet and King Lear and Paradise Lost—do not employ end rhyme. Both alliteration and rhyme, especially feminine rhyme, become humorous or silly if used excessively or unskillfully. If the intention is humorous, the result is delightful; if not, fatal. Shakespeare, who knew how to use all these devices to the utmost advantage, parodied their unskillful use in lines like “The preyful princess pierced and pricked a pretty pleasing prickett” in Love’s Labor’s Lost and

Whereat with blade, with bloody, blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast

in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Swinburne parodied his own highly alliterative style in “Nephelidia” with lines like “Life is the lust of a lamp for the light that is dark till the dawn of the day when we die.” Used skillfully and judiciously, however, musical devices provide a palpable and delicate pleasure to the ear and, even more important, add dimension to meaning.

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.
Seven At The Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000)

QUESTIONS
1. In addition to end rhyme, what other musical devices does this poem employ?
2. Try reading this poem with the pronouns at the beginning of the lines instead of at the end. What is lost?
3. English teachers in a certain urban school were once criticized for having their students read this poem: it was said to be immoral. What essential poetic device did the critics misunderstand?

Blackberry Sweet

Black girl black girl
lips as curved as cherries
full as grape bunches
sweet as blackberries

Black girl black girl
when you walk you are
magic as a rising bird
or a falling star
2. Discuss the rhymes in one of the following. Does the poem employ exact rhymes or approximate rhymes? How do the kind and pattern of rhyme contribute to the poem's effect?
   b. Browning, “My Last Duchess” (page 849).
   e. Dickinson, “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (page 1037).

Chapter Twelve

Rhythm and Meter

Our love of rhythm is rooted even deeper in us than our love for musical repetition. It is related to the beat of our hearts, the pulse of our blood, the intake and outflow of air from our lungs. Everything that we do naturally and gracefully we do rhythmically. There is rhythm in the way we walk, the way we swim, the way we ride a horse, the way we swing a golf club or a baseball bat. So native is rhythm to us that we read it, when we can, into the mechanical world around us. Our clocks go tick-tick-tick, but we hear tick-tock, tick-tock. The click of railway wheels beneath us patterns itself into a tune in our heads. There is a strong appeal for us in language that is rhythmical.

The term rhythm refers to any wavelike recurrence of motion or sound. In speech it is the natural rise and fall of language. All language is to some degree rhythmical, for all language involves alternations between accented and unaccented syllables. Language varies considerably, however, in the degree to which it exhibits rhythm. Sometimes in speech the rhythm is so unobtrusive or so unpatterned that we are scarcely aware of it. Sometimes, as in rap or in oratory, the rhythm is so pronounced that we may be tempted to tap our feet to it.

In every word of more than one syllable, one or more syllables are accented or stressed; that is, given more prominence in pronunciation than the rest.* We say today, tomorrow, yesterday, intervene. These accents within individual words are indicated by stress marks in dictionaries, and with many words of more than two syllables primary and secondary stresses are shown (in 'ter-vene'). When words are arranged into a sentence, we give certain words or syllables more prominence in

*Though the words accent and stress generally are used interchangeably, as here, a distinction is sometimes made between them in technical discussions. Accent, the relative prominence given a syllable in relation to its neighbors, is then said to result from one or more of four causes: stress, or force of utterance, producing loudness; duration; pitch; and juncture, the manner of transition between successive sounds. Of these, stress, in English verse, is the most important.
pronunciation than the rest. We say: "He WENT to the STORE" or "ANN is DRIVING her CAR." There is nothing mysterious about this; it is the normal process of language. The major difference between prose and verse is that in prose these accents occur more or less haphazardly; in verse the poet may arrange them to occur at regular intervals.

In poetry as in prose, the rhythmic effects depend almost entirely on what a statement means, and different intended meanings will produce different rhythms even in identical statements. If I say "I don't believe YOU," I mean something different from "I don't believe you" or from "I don't believe you." In speech, these are rhetorical stresses, which we use to make our intentions clear. Stressing "I" separates me from others who do believe you; stressing "you" separates you from others whom I do believe; stressing "believe" intensifies my statement of disbelief. Such rhetorical stressing comes as naturally to us as language itself, and is at least as important in poetry as it is in expressive speaking. It is also basic to understanding the rhythm of poetry, for poetic rhythm depends on the plain, rhetorical stresses to communicate its meaning. We must be able to recognize the meaning of a line of poetry before we can determine its rhythm.

In addition to accent or stress, rhythm is based on pauses. In poetry as in prose or speech, pauses are the result of natural speech rhythms and the structure of sentences. Periods and commas create pauses, but so does the normal flow of phrases and clauses. Poetry, however, adds another kind of pause arising from the fact that poetry is written in lines. The poetic line is a unit that creates pauses in the flow of speech, sometimes slight and sometimes large. Poets have at their disposal a variety of possibilities when ending a line. An end-stopped line is one in which the end of the line corresponds with a natural speech pause; a run-on line is one in which the sense of the line moves without pause on into the next line. (There are of course all degrees of end-stop and run-on. A line ending with a period or semicolon is heavily end-stopped. A line without punctuation at the end is normally considered a run-on line, but it is less forcibly run-on if it ends at a natural speech pause—as between subject and predicate—as between article and its noun, between an auxiliary and its verb, or between a preposition and its object.) In addition there are pauses that occur within lines, either grammatical or rhetorical. These are called caesuras, and they are another resource for varying the rhythm of lines.

The poetic line is the basic rhythmic unit in free verse, the predominating type of poetry now being written. Except for its line arrangement there are no necessary differences between the rhythms of free verse and the rhythms of prose, so our awareness of the line as a rhythmic unit is essential. Consider the rhythmic contrast between end-stopped lines and run-on lines in these two excerpts from poems presented earlier, and notice how the caesuras (marked ||) help to vary the rhythms:

A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, || filament, || filament, || out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, || ever tirelessly speeding them.

(page 809)

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames || as it has flamed
often before || but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.

(page 775)

There is another sort of poetry that depends entirely on ordinary prose rhythms—the prose poem exemplified by Carolyn Forché's "The Colonel" (page 1046). Having dispensed even with the line as a unit of rhythm, the prose poem lays its claim to being poetry by its attention to many of the poetic elements presented earlier in this book: connotation, imagery, figurative language, and the concentration of meaning in evocative language.

But most often, when people think of poetry they think of the two broad branches, free verse and metrical verse, which are distinguished mainly by the absence or presence of meter. Meter is the identifying characteristic of rhythmic language that we can tap our feet to. When verse is metrical, the accents of language are so arranged as to occur at apparently equal intervals of time, and it is this interval we mark off with the tap of a foot.
because of the varying stresses on syllables in a spoken sentence, it is very unusual for all of the stressed syllables in a line to be equally stressed.

For diagramming the metrical form of verse, various systems of visual symbols have been devised. In this book we shall use a breve (\(\text{˘}\)) to indicate an unstressed syllable, an ictus (\(\text{˘}\)) to indicate a stressed syllable, and a vertical bar to indicate the division between feet. The basic kinds of feet are as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\text{Examples} & \text{Name of foot} & \text{Adjectival form}\* \\
\hline
to-day, the sun & lamb & lambic \\
tro-ly, went to & Trochee & Trochaic \\
in-ter-vene, in the dark & Anapest & Anapestic \\
mul-ci-ple, col-or of & Dactyl & Dactylic \\
true-blue & Spondee & Spondaic \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Two kinds of examples are given here, whole words and phrases, to indicate the fact that one must not assume that every individual word will be a foot, nor that divisions between feet necessarily fall between words. In actual lines, one might for example find the word intervene constituting parts of two different feet:

I want to inter-vene.

As this example demonstrates, in diagramming meters we must sometimes acknowledge the primary and secondary stresses provided by dictionaries: the word intervene provides the stresses for two consecutive feet.

The other basic unit of measure in metrical verse is the line, which has the same properties as in free verse—it may be end-stopped or run-on, and its phrasing and punctuation will create caesuras. The difference between metrical and free verse lines is that metrical lines are

*In the spondee the accent is thought of as being distributed equally or almost equally over the two syllables and is sometimes referred to as a hovering accent. No whole poems are written in spondees. Hence there are only four basic meters: iambic, trochaic, anapestic, and dactylic. Iambic and trochaic are called duple because they employ two-syllable feet, anapestic and dactylic triple because they employ three-syllable feet. Of the four standard meters, iambic is by far the most common, followed by anapestic. Trochaic occurs relatively infrequently as the meter of poems, and dactylic is so rare as to be almost a museum specimen.
measured by naming the number of feet in them. The following names indicate number:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monometer</th>
<th>one foot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimeter</td>
<td>two feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimeter</td>
<td>three feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetrameter</td>
<td>four feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentameter</td>
<td>five feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hexameter</td>
<td>six feet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third unit of measurement, the stanza, consists of a group of lines whose metrical pattern is repeated throughout the poem. Since much verse is not written in stanzas, we shall save our discussion of this unit till a later chapter.

Although metrical form is potentially uniform in its regularity, the poet may introduce metrical variations, which call attention to some of the sounds because they depart from what is regular. Three means for varying meter are substitution (replacing the regular foot with another one), extra-metrical syllables added at the beginnings or endings of lines, and truncation (the omission of an unaccented syllable at either end of a line). Because these represent clear changes in the pattern, they are usually obvious and striking. But even metrical regularity rarely creates a monotonous rhythm because rhythm is the actuality in sound, not the pattern or blueprint of meter. The rhythm of a line of poetry, like the actuality of a building, depends on the components of sound mentioned above—stress, duration, pitch, and juncture—as these are presented in rhetorically stressed sentences. We may diagram the metrical form of a line, but because no two sentences in English are identical in sound, there can be no formulas or mechanical systems for indicating rhythm. Rhythm must be described rather than formulated.

The process of defining the metrical form of a poem is called scanning. To scan any specimen of verse, we do three things: (1) we identify the prevailing foot; (2) we name the number of feet in a line—if this length follows any regular pattern; and (3) we describe the stanzaic pattern—if there is one. We may try out our skill on the following poem:

Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky;
The dew shall weep thy fall to night,
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

George Herbert (1593–1633)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: bridal (2), brave (5), closes (11), coal (15).

2. How are the four stanzas interconnected? How do they build to a climax? How does the fourth contrast with the first three?

The first step in scanning a poem is to read it normally, according to its prose meaning, listening to where the accents fall naturally, and perhaps beating time with the hand. If we have any doubt about how a line should be marked, we should skip it temporarily and go on to lines where we feel greater confidence; that is, to those lines which seem most regular, with accents that fall unmistakably at regular intervals—for we are seeking the poem's pattern, which will be revealed by what is regular in it. In “Virtue” lines 3, 10, and 14 clearly fall into this category, as do the short lines 4, 8, and 12. Lines 3, 10, and 14 may be marked as follows.

The dew shall weep thy fall to night; 3
A box where sweets compacted lie; 10
Like seasoned timber, never gives 14

Lines 4, 8, and 12 are so nearly identical that we may use line 4 to represent all three.

For thou must die. 4
Surveying what we have done so far, we may with some confidence say that the prevailing metrical foot of the poem is iambic; and we may reasonably hypothesize that the second and third lines of each stanza are tetrameter (four-foot) lines and the fourth line dimeter. What about the first lines? Line 1 contains eight syllables, and since the poem is iambic, we may mark them into four feet. The last six syllables clearly constitute three iambic feet (as a general rule, the last few feet in a line tend to reflect the prevailing meter of a poem).

_Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright_ 1

This too, then, is a tetrameter line, and the only question is whether to mark the first foot as another iamb or as a spondee—that is, whether it conforms to the norm established by the iambic meter, or is a substituted foot. The adjective "Sweet" is certainly more important in the line than the repeated adverb "so," and ought to receive more stress than the adverbs on the principle of rhetorical stress, by which the plain prose sense governs the pronunciation. But we must remember that in marking metrical stresses, we are only comparing the syllables within a foot, so the comparison with the repeated "so" is irrelevant. The real question is whether "Sweet" receives as much emphasis as "day."

As another general rule (but by no means an absolute one), a noun usually receives more stress than an adjective that modifies it, a verb more than its adverbs, an adjective more than an adverb that modifies it—except when the modifying word points to an unusual or unexpected condition. If the phrase were "fat day" or "red day," we would probably feel that those adjectives were odd enough to warrant stressing them. "Sweet day" does not strike us as particularly unusual, so the noun ought to receive stress. Further, as we notice that each of the first three stanzas begins with "Sweet" modifying different nouns, we recognize that the statement of the poem is drawing attention to the similarities (and differences) of three things that can be called sweet—"day," "rose," and "spring." By its repetition before those three nouns, the word sweet may come to seem formulaic, and the nouns the object of attention. On the other hand, the repetition of "Sweet" may seem emphatic, and lead us to give approximately equal stress to both the noun and its adjective. As our purpose is to detect the pattern of sounds in the poem, the most likely result of this study will be to mark it iambic. However, judging it to be spondaic would not be incorrect, for ultimately we are reporting what we hear, and there is room for subjective differences.

The first feet of lines 5 and 9 raise the same problem as line 1 and should be marked in the same way. Choices of a similar sort occur in other lines (15 and 16). Many readers will quite legitimately perceive line 16 as parallel to lines 4, 8, and 12. Others, however, may argue that the word "then"—emphasizing what happens to the virtuous soul when everything else has perished—has an importance that should be reflected in both the reading and the scansion, and will therefore mark the first foot of this line as a spondee:

_Then chief-ly lives._ 16

These readers also will hear the third foot in line 15 as a spondee:

_But though the whole world turn to coal._ 15

Lines 2 and 7 introduce a different problem. Most readers, if they encountered these lines in a paragraph of prose, would read them thus:

_The BRIdal of the EARTH and SKY_ 2

_Thy ROOT is EVER in its GRAVE_ 7

But this reading leaves us with an anomalous situation. First, we have only three stresses where Our pattern calls for four. Second, we have three unaccented syllables occurring together, a situation almost never found in verse of duple meter. From this situation we may learn an important principle. Though normal reading of the sentences in a poem establishes its metrical pattern, the metrical pattern so established in turn influences the reading. An interactive process is at work. In this poem the pressure of the pattern will cause most practiced readers to stress the second of the three unaccented syllables in both lines slightly more than those on either side of it. In scansion, comparing the syllables within the individual foot, we acknowledge that slight increase of stress by marking those syllables as stressed (remember, the marking of the accent does not indicate a degree of stress in comparison with other accents in the line). We mark them thus:

_The BRIdal of the earth and sky._ 2

_Thy root is ev-er in its grave._ 7

Line 5 presents a situation about which there can be no dispute. The word "angry," though it occurs in a position where we would expect an
iamb, by virtue of its normal pronunciation must be accented on the first syllable, and thus must be marked a trochee:

Sweet rose, whose hue, an-gry and brave

There is little question also that the following line begins with a trochee, whether the adjective rash presents an unexpected modification for the noun gazer. Since the possibilities seem about equal, we prefer to let the pattern again take precedence, although a spondee would be acceptable:

Bids the rash gaz-er wipe his eye

Similarly, the word “Only,” beginning line 13, must be accented on the first syllable, thus introducing a trochaic substitution in the first foot of the line. Line 13 also presents another problem. A modern reader perceives the word “virtuous” as a three-syllable word, but the poet writing in the seventeenth century when metrical requirements were stricter than they are today would probably have meant the word to be pronounced as two syllables: ver- tuous. Following the tastes of this century, we mark it as three syllables, so introducing an anapest instead of the expected iamb in the last foot:

On-ly a sweet and vir- tu-ous soul

In doing this, however, we are consciously modernizing—altering the probable practice of the poet for the sake of a contemporary audience. One problem of scansion remains: in the third stanza, lines 9 and 11 differ from the other lines of the poem in two respects—(a) they contain an uneven number of syllables (nine rather than the expected eight); (b) they end on unaccented syllables:

My mu-sic shows ye have your clos- es

Such leftover unaccented syllables at line ends are examples of extra-metrical syllables and are not counted in identifying and naming the meter. These lines are both tetrameter, and if we tap our feet when reading them, we shall tap four times. Metrical verse will often have one and sometimes two leftover unaccented syllables. In iambic and anapestic verse they will come at the end of the lines; in trochaic and dactylic at the beginning. They never occur in the middle of a line.

Our metrical analysis of “Virtue” is completed. Though (mainly for ease of discussion) we have skipped about, we have indicated a scansion for all its lines. “Virtue” is written in iambic meter (meaning that most of its feet are iambic), and is composed of four-line stanzas, the first three lines tetrameter, the final line dimeter. We are now ready to make a few generalizations about scansion.

1. Good readers will not ordinarily stop to scan a poem they are reading, and they certainly will not read a poem aloud with the exaggerated emphasis on accented syllables that we sometimes give them in order to make the metrical pattern more apparent. However, occasional scansion of a poem does have value, as will be indicated in the next chapter, which discusses the relation of sound and meter to sense. Just one example here. The structure of meaning of “Virtue” is unmistakable; three parallel stanzas concerning things that die are followed by a contrasting fourth stanza concerning the one thing that does not die. The first three stanzas all begin with the word “Sweet” preceding a noun, and the first metrical foot in these stanzas is either an iamb or a spondee. The contrasting fourth stanza, however, begins with a trochee, thus departing both from the previous pattern and from the basic meter of the poem. This departure is significant, for the word only is the hinge upon which the structure of the poem turns, and the metrical reversal gives it emphasis. Thus meter serves meaning.

2. Scansion only begins to reveal the rhythmical quality of a poem. It simply involves classifying all syllables as either accented or unaccented and ignores the sometimes considerable differences between degrees of accent. Whether we call a syllable accented or unaccented depends only on its degree of accent relative to the other syllable(s) in its foot. In lines 2 and 7 of “Virtue,” the accents on “of” and “in” are obviously much lighter than on the other accented syllables in the line. Further, unaccented syllables also vary in weight. In line 5 “whose” is clearly heavier than “-gry” or “and,” and is arguably even heavier than the accented “of” and “in” of lines 2 and 7. It is not unusual, either, to find the unaccented syllable of a foot receiving more stress than the accented syllable immediately preceding it in another foot, as in this line by Ben Jonson (page 1064):

Drink to me on-ly with thine eyes

The last four syllables of the line, two perfectly regular iambics, are actually spoken as a sequence of four increasingly stressed accents. A similar sequence of increasing accents occurs in lines 4, 8, and 12 of “Virtue,”

For thou must die
since the necessity expressed in the word “must” makes it more heavily stressed than the pronoun “thou.” The point is thatmetrical scansion is incapable of describing subtle rhythmic effects in poetry. It is nevertheless a useful and serviceable tool, for by showing us the metrical pattern, it draws attention to the way in which the actuality of sound follows the pattern even while departing from it; that is, recognizing the meter, we can more clearly hear rhythms. The idea of regularity helps us be aware of the actuality of sounds.

3. Notice that the divisions between feet have no meaning except to help us identify the meter. They do not correspond to the speech rhythms in the line. In the third foot of line 14 of “Virtue,” a syntactical pause occurs within the foot; and, indeed, feet divisions often fall in the middle of a word. It is sometimes a mistake of beginners to expect the word and the foot to be identical units. We mark the feet divisions only to reveal regularity or pattern, not to indicate rhythm. But in “Virtue,” if we examine all of the two-syllable words, we find that all eleven of them as isolated words removed from their lines would be called trochaic. Yet only two of them—“angry” (5) and “only” (13)—actually occur as trochaic feet. All the rest are divided in the middle between two iambic feet. This calls for two observations: (a) the rhythm of the poem, the heard sound, often runs counter to the meter—iambic feet have what is called a “rising” pattern, yet these words individually and as they are spoken have a “falling” rhythm; and (b) the trochaic hinge word “only” thus has rhythmic echoes throughout the poem, those preceding it yielding a kind of predictive power, and those following it reinforcing the fact that the sense of the poem turns at that word. This rhythmic effect is especially pronounced in the simile of line 14:

Like seasoned timber, ne'er gives

Echoing the key word “only,” this line contains three disyllabic words, each of them having a falling rhythm running counter to the iambic meter.

4. Finally—and this is the most important generalization of all—perfect regularity of meter is no criterion of merit. Inexperienced readers sometimes get the notion that it is. If the meter is regular, and the rhythm mirrors that regularity in sound, they may feel that the poet has handled the meter successfully and deserves all credit for it. Actually there is nothing easier for any moderately talented versifier than to make language go ta-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM. But there are two reasons why this is not generally desirable. The first is that, as we have said, all art consists essentially of repetition and variation. If a rhythm alternates too regularly between light and heavy beats, the result is to banish variation; the rhythm mechanically follows the meter and becomes monotonous. But used occasionally or emphatically, a monotonous rhythm can be very effective, as in the triumphant last line of Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (page 818):

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

The second reason is that, once a basic meter has been established, deviations from it become highly significant and are a means by which the poet can reinforce meaning. If a meter is too regular, and the rhythm shows little deviation from it, the probability is that the poet, instead of adopting rhythm to meaning, has simply forced the meaning into a metrical straitjacket.

Actually what gives the skillful use of meter its greatest effectiveness is to be found in the distinction between meter and rhythm. Once we have determined the basic meter of a poem, say iambic tetrameter, we have an expectation that the rhythm will coincide with it—that the pattern will be identical to the actual sound. Thus a silent drumbeat is set up in our minds, and this drumbeat constitutes an expected rhythm. But the actual rhythm of the words—the heard rhythm—will sometimes confirm this expected rhythm and sometimes not. Thus the two, meter and rhythm, are counterpointed, and the appeal of the verse is magnified just as when two melodies are counterpointed in music, or as when we see two swallows flying together and round each other, following the same general course but with individual variations and so making a more eye-catching pattern than one swallow flying alone. If the heard rhythm conforms too closely to the expected rhythm (meter), the poem becomes dull and uninteresting rhythmically. If it departs too far from the meter, there ceases to be an expected rhythm and the result is likely to be a muddle.

There are several ways by which variation can be introduced into a poem’s rhythm. The most obvious way, as we have said, is by the substitution of other kinds of feet for the basic foot. Such metrical variation will always be reflected as a rhythmic variation. In our scansion of line 13 of “Virtue,” for instance, we found a trochee and an anapest substituted for the expected iambics in the first and last feet. A less obvious but equally important means of variation is through varying degrees of accent arising from the prose meaning of phrases—from the rhetorical stressing. Though we began our scansion of “Virtue” by marking lines 3, 10, and 14 as perfectly regular metrically, there is actually a considerable
rhythmic difference between them. Line 3 is quite regular because the rhythmic phrasing corresponds to the metrical pattern, and the line can be read: ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM (The DEW shall WEEP thy FALL to NIGHT). Line 10 is less regular, for the three-syllable word "compacted" cuts across the division between two feet. This should be read: ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM (a BOX where SWEETS compacted LIE). Line 14 is the least regular of these three because here there is no correspondence between rhythmic phrasing and metrical division. This should be read: ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM (Like SEASONed TIMber, NEVER GIVES). Finally, variation can be introduced by grammatical and rhetorical pauses, whether or not signaled by punctuation (punctuated pauses are usually of longer duration than those occasioned only by syntax and rhetoric, and pauses for periods are longer than those for commas). The comma in line 14, by introducing a grammatical pause (in the middle of a foot), provides an additional variation from its perfect regularity. Probably the most violently irregular line in the poem is line 5,

Sweet rose, whose hue, an-gry and brave,

for here the unusual trochaic substitution in the second from last foot of an iambic line (a rare occurrence) is set off and emphasized by the grammatical pause, and also as we have noted the unaccented "whose" is considerably heavier than the other unaccented syllables in the line. This trochee "angry" is the first unquestionable metrical substitution in the poem. It occurs in a line which, because it opens a stanza, is subconsciously compared to the first line of the first stanza—an example of regularity with its grammatical pauses separating all four of its feet. Once we have noticed that the first line of the second stanza contains a metrical variation, our attention is called to the fact that after the first, each stanza opens with a line containing a trochee—and that these trochees are moved forward one foot in each of the successive stanzas, from the third position in stanza two, to the second in four, and finally to the first in the concluding stanza. This pattern itself tends to add even more emphasis to the climactic change signaled by the final trochee, "only." Again, meter and rhythm serve meaning.

The effects of rhythm and meter are several. Like the musical repetitions of sound, the musical repetitions of accent can be pleasing for their own sake. In addition, rhythm works as an emotional stimulus and heightens our awareness of what is going on in a poem. Finally, a poet can adapt the sound of the verse to its content and thus make meter a powerful reinforcement of meaning. We should avoid, however, the notion that there is any mystical correspondence between certain meters or rhythms and certain emotions. There are no "happy" meters and no "melancholy" meters. The "falling" rhythm of line 14 of "Virtue," counterpointed against its "rising" meter, does not indicate a depression of mood or feeling—the line has quite the opposite emotional tone. Poets' choice of meter is probably less important than how they handle it after they have chosen it. In most great poetry, meter and rhythm work intimately with the other elements of the poem to produce the total effect.

And because of the importance of free verse today, we must not forget that poetry need not be metrical at all. Like alliteration and rhyme, like metaphor and irony, like even imagery, meter is simply one resource poets may or may not use. Their job is to employ their resources to the best advantage for the object they have in mind—the kind of experience they wish to express. And on no other basis should they be judged.

**EXERCISES**

1. A term that every student of poetry should know (and should be careful not to confuse with free verse) is blank verse. Blank verse has a very specific meter: it is iambic pentameter, unrhymed. It has a special name because it is the principal English meter; that is, the meter that has been used for a large proportion of the greatest English poetry, including the plays of Shakespeare and the epics of Milton. Iambic pentameter in English seems especially suitable for the serious treatment of serious themes. The natural movement of the English language tends to be iambic. Lines shorter than pentameter tend to be songlike, or at least less suited to sustained treatment of serious material. Lines longer than pentameter tend to break up into shorter units, the hexameter line being read as two three-foot units. Rhyme, while highly appropriate to many short poems, often proves a handicap for a long and lofty work. (The word blank indicates that the end of the line is "blank," that is, bare of rhyme.) Of the following poems, four are in blank verse, two are in other meters, and four are in free verse. Determine in which category each belongs.

   a. Frost, "Birches" (page 1046)
   b. Donne, "Break of Day" (page 747)
   c. Disch, "The Lipstick on the Mirror" (page 1039)
   d. Platt, "Mirror" (page 749)
   e. Tennyson, "Ulysses" (page 818)
   f. Arnold, "Dover Beach" (page 892)
   g. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen" (page 843)
   h. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (page 1109)
   i. Frost, "Out, Out—" (page 853)
   j. Mathias, "Getting Out" (page 896)
QUESTIONS
1. In lines 3–4 the speaker wishes he could put his thoughts into words. Does he make those thoughts explicit in the course of the poem?
2. What aspects of life are symbolized by the two images in stanza 2? By the image in lines 9–10? How do lines 11–12 contrast with those images?
3. The basic meter of this poem is anapestic, and all but two lines are trimeter. Which two? What other variations from a strict anapestic trimeter do you find? How many lines (and which ones) display a strict anapestic pattern? With this much variation, would you be justified in calling the poem free verse? Do the departures from a strict metrical norm contribute to the meaning?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING
The following suggestions are for brief writing exercises, not for full critical essays. The suggestions here could constitute a part of a full essay that includes some discussion of the contribution of rhythm and meter to the total meaning of a poem.
1. Scan one of the following metrical poems, and indicate how the rhythmical effects (including substitutions and variations from the metrical norm) contribute to meaning:
   a. Blake, "Introduction" to Songs of Innocence (page 930; see question 5).
   b. Housman, "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" (page 933; see questions 2–3).
   c. Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for Death" (page 938; see question 6).
   d. Tennyson, "Break, break, break" (page 939; see question 3).
   e. Frost, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (page 913; consider how the first and last lines depart from metrical regularity).
   f. Shelley, "Ozymandias" (page 838; consider regular and irregular meters in lines 10–14).
2. In the following free verse poems, discuss how the line forms a rhythmic unit, paying particular attention to run-on and end-stopped lines:
   a. Pastan, "To a Daughter Leaving Home" (page 934; see question 2, and particularly examine lines 12–14, 15–16, 19–20, 21–24).
   b. Ferlinghetti, "Constantly risking absurdity" (page 935; see question 4).
   c. Williams, "The Widow's Lament in Springtime" (page 775; particularly examine lines 20–24).
   e. Hughes, "Theme for English B" (page 1062).

Chapter Thirteen

SOUND AND MEANING

Rhythm and sound cooperate to produce what we call the music of poetry. This music, as we have pointed out, may serve two general functions: it may be enjoyable in itself, or it may reinforce meaning and intensify the communication.

Pure pleasure in sound and rhythm exists from a very early age in the human being—probably from the age the baby first starts cooing in its cradle, certainly from the age that children begin chanting nursery rhymes and skipping rope. The appeal of the following verse, for instance, depends almost entirely on its "music":

Pease porridge hot,
Pease porridge cold,
Pease porridge in the pot
Nine days old.

There is very little sense here; the attraction comes from the emphatic rhythm, the emphatic rhymes (with a strong contrast between the short vowel and short final consonant of hot-pot and the long vowel and long final consonant combination of cold-old), and the heavy alliteration (exactly half the words begin with p). From nonsense rhymes such as this, many of us graduate to a love of more meaningful poems whose appeal resides largely in the sounds they make. Much of the pleasure that we find in poems like Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" derives from their musical qualities.

The peculiar function of poetry as distinguished from music, however, is to convey not sounds but meaning or experience through sounds. In first-rate poetry sound exists not for its own sake nor for mere decoration, but to enhance the meaning. Its function is to support the leading player, not to steal the scene.

The poet may reinforce meaning through sound in numerous ways. Without claiming to exhaust them, we can include most of the chief means under four general headings.
First, the poet can choose words whose sound in some degree suggests their meaning. In its narrowest sense this is called onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia, strictly defined, means the use of words which, at least supposedly, sound like what they mean, such as hiss, snap, and bang.

Song: Come unto these yellow sands

Come unto these yellow sands,  
And then take hands.  
Curtsied when you have and kissed,  
The wild waves whist,  
Foot it fealty here and there,  
And, sweet sprites, the burden bear.  
Hark, hark!  
Bow-wow.  
The watch-dogs bark!  
Bow-wow.  
Hark, hark! I hear  
The strain of strutting chanticleer  
Cry, “Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

In these lines from The Tempest, “bark,” “bow-wow,” and “Cock-a-doodle-doo” are onomatopoeic words. In addition, Shakespeare has reinforced the onomatopoeic effect with the repeated use of “hark,” which sounds like bark. The usefulness of onomatopoeia, of course, is strictly limited, because it occurs only where the poet is describing sound, and most poems do not describe sound. And the use of pure onomatopoeia, as in the preceding example, is likely to be fairly trivial except as it forms an incidental part of a more complex poem. But by combining onomatopoeia with other devices that help convey meaning, the poet can achieve subtle and beautiful effects that are among the keenest pleasures in reading poetry.

In addition to onomatopoeic words there is another group of words, sometimes called phonetic intensives, whose sound, by a process as yet obscure, to some degree connects with their meaning. An initial fl-sound, for instance, is often associated with the idea of moving light, as in flame, flare, flash, flicker, flimmer. An initial gl- also frequently accompanies the idea of light, usually unmoving, as in glare, gleam, glint, glow, glisten. An initial sl- often introduces words meaning “smoothly wet,” as in slippery, slick, slide, slime, slop, slosh, slobber, slushy. An initial st- often suggests strength, as in staunch, stalwart, stout, sturdy, stable, stocky, stern, strong, stubborn, steel. Short -i- often goes with the idea of smallness, as in inch, imp, thin, slim, little, bit, chip, sliver, slit, sip, wilt, little, slip, wisp, flicker, winkle, nudge, click, kid, kitten, miniskin, miniature. Long -oo- or -oo- may suggest melancholy or sorrow, as in moan, groan, moan, mourn, forlorn, toll, doom, gloom, moody. Final -are sometimes goes with the idea of a big light or noise, as flare, glare, stare, blare. Medial -at- suggests some kind of particled movement as in spatter, scatter, chatter, chatter, rattle, prattle, clutter, batter. Final -er and -le indicate repetition, as in glitter, flutter, shimmer, whisper, jabber, chatter, chatter, sputter, flicker, twitter, chatter, and ripple, bubble, twinkle, sparkle, SCatter, rumble, jingle.

None of these various sounds is invariably associated with the idea that it seems to suggest and, in fact, a short -i- is found in thick as well as thin, in big as well as little. Language is a complex phenomenon. But there is enough association between these sounds and ideas to suggest some sort of intrinsic if obscure relationship. A word like flicker, though not onomatopoeic (because it does not refer to sound) would seem somehow to suggest its sense, with the fl- suggesting moving light, the -i- suggesting smallness, the -ck- suggesting sudden cessation of movement (as in crack, peck, pick, hack, and flick), and the -er suggesting repetition. The above list of sound-idea correspondences is only a very partial one. A complete list, though it would involve only a small proportion of words in the language, would probably be a longer list than that of the more strictly onomatopoeic words, to which they are related.

Eight O’Clock

He stood, and heard the steeple  
Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.  
One, two, three, four, to market-place and people  
It tossed them down.

Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,  
He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;  
And then the clock collected in the tower  
Its strength, and struck.

A. E. Housman (1859–1936)
CHAPTER THIRTEEN / SOUND AND MEANING

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: quarters (2).
2. Eight A.M. was the traditional hour in England for putting condemned criminals to death. Discuss the force of “morning” (2) and “struck” (8). Discuss the appropriateness of the image of the clock collecting its strength. Can you suggest any reason for the use of “nighing” (5) rather than nearing?
3. Consider the contribution to meaning of the following phonetic intensives: “steeple” and “Sprinkle” (1, 2), “stood” (1, 6), “Strapped” (5), “strength” and “struck” (8). Comment on the frequent k-sounds leading up to “struck” in the second stanza.

A second and far more important way that the poet can reinforce meaning through sound is to choose sounds and group them so that the effect is smooth and pleasant sounding (euphonious) or rough and harsh sounding (cacophonous). Vowels are in general more pleasing than consonants, for vowels are musical tones, whereas consonants are merely noises. A line with a high percentage of vowel sounds in proportion to consonant sounds will therefore tend to be more melodious than one in which the proportion is low. The vowels and consonants themselves differ considerably in quality. The “long” vowels, such as those in fate, red, rhyme, coat, food, and dune are fuller and more resonant than the “short” vowels, as in fat, red, rim, cot, foot, and dun. Of the consonants, some are fairly mellifluous, such as the “liquids,” l, m, n, and r; the soft v and j sounds; the semivowels w and y; and such combinations as th and wh. Others, such as the “plosives,” b, d, g, k, p, and t, are harsher and sharper in their effect. These differences in sound are the poet’s materials. Good poets, however, will not necessarily seek out the sounds that are pleasing and attempt to combine them in melodious combinations. Rather, they will use euphony and cacophony as they are appropriate to content. Consider, for instance, the following lines.

Sound and Sense

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
’Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;

But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;
When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o’er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.

Hear how Timotheus’ varied lays surprise,
And bid alternate passions fall and rise!

Alexander Pope (1688–1744)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: numbers (6), lays (13).
2. This excerpt is from a long poem (called An Essay on Criticism) on the arts of writing and judging poetry. Which line states the thesis of the passage?
3. There are four classical allusions: Zephyr (5) was god of the west wind; Ajax (9), a Greek warrior noted for his strength; Camilla (11), a legendary queen reputedly so fleet of foot that she could run over a field of grain without bending the blades or over the sea without wetting her feet; Timotheus (13), a famous Greek rhapsodic poet. How do these allusions enable Pope to achieve greater economy?
4. Copy the passage and scan it. Then, considering both meter and sounds, show how Pope practices what he preaches. (Incidentally, on which syllable should “alternate” in line 14 be accented? Does the meter help you to know the pronunciation of “Timotheus” in line 13?)

There are no strictly onomatopoetic words in this passage, and yet the sound seems marvelously adapted to the sense. When the poem is about soft, smooth effects (lines 5–6), there is an abundance of alliteration (s in soft, strain, smooth stream, smoother) and consonance (the voiced s or z sound in Zephyr, blows, numbers flows; the voiced th of smooth and smoother). When harshness and loudness are the subject, the lines become cacophonous and even the pleasant smoothness of s-aliteration when coupled with sh evokes angry hissling: “surges lash the sounding shore, / The hoarse, rough verse should . . . ” Heavy labor is expressed in cacophony (“Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw”), while lightness and speed are expressed with euphonious short i sounds (“swift Camilla . . . skims”). Throughout the passage there is a remarkable correspondence between the pleasant-sounding and the pleasant in idea, the unpleasant-sounding and the unpleasant in idea.
As the excerpt from Alexander Pope also demonstrates, a third way in which a poet can reinforce meaning through sound is by controlling the speed and movement of the lines by the choice and use of meter, by the choice and arrangement of vowel and consonant sounds, and by the disposition of pauses. In meter the unaccented syllables usually go faster than the accented syllables; hence the triple meters are swifter than the duple. But the poet can vary the tempo of any meter by the use of substitute feet. Generally, whenever two or more unaccented syllables come together, the effect will be to speed up the pace of the line; when two or more accented syllables come together, the effect will be to slow it down. This pace will also be affected by the vowel lengths and by whether the sounds are easily run together. The long vowels take longer to pronounce than the short ones. Some words are easily run together, while others demand the position of the mouth be re-formed before the next word is uttered. It takes much longer, for instance, to say, “Watch dogs catch much meat” than to say, “My aunt is away,” though the number of syllables is the same. And finally the poet can slow down the speed of a line through the introduction of grammatical and rhetorical pauses. Consider lines 54–56 from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (page 818):

>> The lights in gin to twin-kle from the rocks; 
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep 
Moans round with man- y voi-ces. . . .

In these lines Tennyson wished the movement to be slow, in accordance with the slow waning of the long day and the slow climbing of the moon. His meter is iambic pentameter. This is not a swift meter, but in lines 55–56 he slows it down further, (a) by introducing three spondaic feet, thus bringing three accented syllables together in two separate places; (b) by choosing for his accented syllables words that have long vowel sounds or diphthongs that the voice hangs on to: “long,” “day,” “wanes,” “slow,” “moon,” “climbs,” “deep,” “Moans,” “round”; (c) by choosing words that are not easily run together (except for “day” and “slow,” each of these words begins and ends with consonant sounds that require varying degrees of readjustment of the mouth before pronunciation can continue); and (d) by introducing two grammatical pauses, after “wanes” and “climbs,” and a rhetorical pause after “deep.” The result is an extremely effective use of the movement of the verse to accord with the movement suggested by the words.

A fourth way for a poet to fit sound to sense is to control both sound and meter in such a way as to emphasize words that are important in meaning. This can be done by highlighting such words through alliteration, assonance, consonance, or rhyme; by placing them before a pause; or by skillfully placing or displacing them in the metrical scheme. We have already seen how Ogden Nash uses alliteration and consonance to emphasize and link the three major words (“sex,” “fix,” and “fertile”) in his little verse “The Turtle” (page 900), and how George Herbert pivots the structure of meaning in “Virtue” (page 920) on a trochaic substitution in the initial foot of his final stanza. For an additional example, let us look again at Drayton’s “Since there’s no help” (page 884). This poem is a sonnet—fourteen lines of iambic pentameter—in which a lover threatens to abandon his courtship if the woman he desires will not go to bed with him. In the first eight lines he pretends to be glad that they are parting so cleanly. In the last six lines, however, he paints a vivid picture of the death of his personified Love/Passion for her but intimates that even at this last moment (“Now”) she could restore it to life again—by satisfying his sexual desires.

Now, at the last gasp of Love’s last test breath, 
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies, 
From death to life thou mightst him yet re-cover.

Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,*

The emphasis is on Now. In a matter of seconds, the speaker indicates, it will be too late: his Love/Passion will be dead, and he himself will be gone. The word “Now” begins line 9. It also begins a new sentence and a new direction in the poem. It is separated from what has gone before by a period at the end of the preceding line. Metrically it initiates a trochee, thus breaking away from the poem’s basic iambic meter (line 8 is perfectly regular). In all these ways—it’s initial position in line, sentence, and thought, and its metrical irregularity—the word “Now” is given

*Drayton probably intended “given” to be pronounced as one syllable (giv’n), and most sixteenth-century readers would have pronounced it thus in this poem.
extraordinary emphasis appropriate to its importance in the context. Its repetition in line 13 reaffirms this importance, and there again it is given emphasis by its positional and metrical situation. It begins both a line and the final rhyming couplet, is separated by punctuation from the line before, and participates in a metrical inversion. (The lines before and after are metrically regular.)

While Herbert and Drayton use metrical deviation to give emphasis to important words, Tennyson, in the concluding line of "Ulysses," uses marked regularity, plus skillful use of grammatical pauses, to achieve the same effect.

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

QUESTIONS

1. It is important to understand the sequence of events in this deathbed scene. Arrange the following events in correct chronological order: (a) the willing of keepsakes, (b) the weeping of mourners, (c) the appearance of the fly, (d) the preternatural stillness in the room.

2. What or who are the "Eyes" and the "Breaths" in lines 5–6? What figures of speech are involved in these lines? Is the speaker making out her will?

3. What sort of expectation is set up by phrases like "last Onset" (7), "the King" (7), and "Be witnessed" (8)?

4. Explain "the Windows failed" (15) and "I could not see to see" (16).

We may well conclude our discussion of the adaptation of sound to sense by analyzing this poem. It consists of four four-line stanzas of alternating iambic tetrameter (first and third lines) and iambic trimeter (second and fourth); the first and third lines are unrhymed, the second and fourth display approximate rhymes in the first three stanzas. The fourth stanza uses an exact rhyme that echoes the rhyme of the third stanza. The poem depicts a speaker's recollection of her own deathbed scene, focusing on the suspenseful interval during which she and her loved ones await the arrival of death—ironically symbolized in the closing lines as a common housefly. But the poem does not move chronologically. Surprisingly,
it begins with its conclusion, the apparently trivial fact that the last conscious perception was hearing the buzzing fly; then it proceeds to summarize the events leading up to that moment.

How is the poem's sound fitted to its sense? In the opening stanzas, the pace is slow and even solemn, the rhythm perfectly matching the meter, as befits this apparently momentous occasion with its "Stillness," its quiet, breathless awaiting of "the King"—death itself. The approximate rhymes provide a formal unity even as they convey an atmosphere of unease, an uncertainty and fear in the face of imminent death, and the dashes contribute to the poem's measured, stately rhythm. And then the poem returns to the insignificant topic of its opening line, and invests it with enormous meaning.

The one onomatopoetic word in the poem is Buzz, introduced abruptly in line 1 without capitalization and then reintroduced with intensity in line 13. In line 11, the final word was, though unrhymed in its own stanza, and unrhymed in the formal rhyme scheme, nevertheless is an exact rhyme for Buzz in the first line of the final stanza. In line 12, the word interrupted continues the buzzing into the final stanza. In line 13 the vowel sound of Buzz is preceded by the identical vowel sounds in "uncertain" and "stumbling, " making three u sounds in close succession. Finally, the b sound in Buzz is preceded in line 13 by the bs in "Blue" and "stumbling." Thus all the sounds in Buzz—its initial and final consonants and its vowel—are heard at least three times in lines 11–13. This outburst of onomatopoetic effect consummates the aural imagery promised in the opening line, "I heard a Fly buzz."

But line 13 combines images of color and motion as well as sound. Though the sound imagery is the most important, the poem concludes with a reference to the speaker's dimming eyesight, and we may infer that she saw a blur of the bluebottle's deep metallic blue as well as hearing its buzz. This image is an example of synesthesia, the stimulation of two or more senses simultaneously, especially as here when one sense perception is described in terms of another (as in a "Blue ... Buzz"). The images of motion between "Blue" and "Buzz" also belong to both the visual and aural modes of sensing. The speaker hears and imperfectly sees the "uncertain" flight of the fly as it bumbles from one pane of glass to another, its buzzing now louder, now softer. Furthermore, the exact rhymes in the last stanza that pick up on "was" in the preceding underscore the abrupt finality of the speaker's confrontation with death, and thus the sudden end of her human perception.

In analyzing verse for correspondence between sound and sense, we need to be very cautious not to make exaggerated claims. A great deal of nonsense has been written about the moods of certain meters and the effects of certain sounds, and it is easy to suggest correspondences that exist only in our imaginations. Nevertheless, the first-rate poet has nearly always an instinctive tact about handling sound so that it in some degree supports meaning. One of the few absolute rules that applies to the judgment of poetry is that the form should be adequate to the content. This rule does not mean that there must always be a close and easily demonstrable correspondence. It does mean that there will be no glaring discrepancies.

The two selections that introduce this chapter illustrate, first, the use of sound in verse almost purely for its own sake ("Pease porridge hot") and, second, the use of sound in verse almost purely to imitate meaning ("Hark, hark! Bow-wow"), and they are, as significant poetry, among the most trivial passages in the whole book. But in between these extremes there is an abundant range of poetic possibilities where sound is pleasurable for itself without violating meaning and where sound to varying degrees corresponds with and corroborates meaning; and in this rich middle range lie many of the greatest pleasures of reading poetry.

EXERCISE

In each of the following paired quotations, the named poet wrote the version that more successfully adapts sound to sense. As specifically as possible, account for the superiority of the better version.

1. a. Go forth—and Virtue, ever in your sight,
   Shall be your guide by day, your guard by night.  
   b. Go forth—and Virtue, ever in your sight,
   Shall point your way by day, and keep you safe at night.  
   Charles Churchill

2. a. How charming is divine philosophy!
   Not harsh and rough as foolish men suppose
   But musical as is the lute of Phoebus.
   b. How charming is divine philosophy!
   Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose
   But musical as is Apollo's lute.  
   John Milton

3. a. All day the fleeing crows croak hoarsely over the snow.
   b. All day the out-cast crows croak hoarsely across the whiteness.  
   Elizabeth Coatsworth

4. a. Your talk attests how bells of singing gold
   Would sound at evening over silent water.
   b. Your low voice tells how bells of singing gold
   Would sound at twilight over silent water.  
   Edwin Arlington Robinson