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METER

Spiderwebs and Rabbits in Hats

Solid form includes, along with whole-poem forms (like sonnets), conventional meter, the basic underlying rhythmic pattern of the *line* of verse in English. Although free verse is more formal than its name indicates, meter is happily less formal than it may seem—and less complicated than its thicket of terminology suggests.

Meter means “measure.” Some recurring element of the language is used as the unit of line measurement. Languages vary and thus each has its own distinctive basis for meter. Latin verse, for example, used the duration of vowels, long or short, as the measuring element. Chinese, in which all words are monosyllabic, uses syllables. English has always used **accent** as one measuring element. Accent is the emphasis—in loudness, pitch, or duration—with which a syllable is spoken, relative to adjacent syllables. For metrical purposes only two levels of accent (or **stress**) are counted: relatively *heavily* accented syllables (called “accented”) and relatively *lightly* accented syllables (called “unaccented”).

It may be suggestive to think of meter as underlying the sentence rhythms in the way that the beat in music underlies and makes possible the melody. The bass, thumping along, provides the necessary background to the lilt of the tune. Man took a little wind into his mouth, Frost says, “And then by measure blew it forth.”

By measure. It was word and note,
The wind the wind had meant to be—
A little through the lips and throat.
The aim was song—the wind could see.

ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC METER

Accentual-syllabic meter has been standard in English since the sixteenth century. It has a rich tradition, as varied as the poets using it: Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, Yeats, Frost, Stevens, Auden, and in recent

decades Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, Philip Larkin, and Mona Van Duyn.

In accentual-syllabic meter, both the number of accents and the number of syllables are counted; the *pattern* of unaccented and accented syllables forms the meter. The elementary pattern or unit is called a **foot**. The basic foot is the *iambic foot*, or **iamb**, which is an unaccented followed by an accented syllable: $\text{t}\acute{\text{e}}\ \text{T}\acute{\text{U}}\text{M}$, as in “avóid” or “to bréak” or “bý méas|ure bléw.” Note that, as in the third example, a word may be part of two separate feet. A line of four feet, say, would go like this:

Hě wálked | bēnéath | thě tíme | lěss trées.

Lines may be composed of any number of feet, though lines of four or five feet (eight or ten syllables) have been the norm. Each line-length has a handy name. **Monometer**, for instance, is a line consisting of one foot: $\check{\text{~}} \acute{\text{~}}$. In “Upon His Departure Hence” Robert Herrick (1591–1674) provides a rare example of a poem written in monometer:

Thus Í	
Passe by,	
And die:	
As One,	
Unknown,	5
And gon:	
I'm made	
A shade,	
And laid	
I'th grave . . .	10

Dimeter, also rare, is a line of two feet: $\check{\text{~}} \acute{\text{~}} | \check{\text{~}} \acute{\text{~}}$. Although it deviates a little from strict iambic dimeter, here is a twentieth century example. (Note: a final unaccented syllable at the end of the line—an extra-syllable or “feminine” ending—is not counted and does not change the meter.)

Hów tíme | révé|sēs

Thě próud | ín héart!

Í nów | máke vé|sēs

Whó aímed | át árt.

Here is the poem:

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed 10
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,
 Then waltzed me off to bed 15
 Still clinging to your shirt.

Tetrameter, very common and serviceable, is a line of four feet: $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$. (Note: in line 1, "Loveliest" is a dactylic foot substituted for the iamb; and in line 4, the unaccented syllable of the first foot is omitted—its place marked by the superscript x.)

Lóveliĕst | ǒf trĕes, | thĕ chĕr|ry nów
 Īs húng | wĭth blóom | ǎlong | thĕ bóugh,
 Ānd stánds | ǎbout | thĕ wóod|land rĭde
^xWĕar|ĭng whĭte | fǒr Ēas|tĕrtide.

The poem:

Loveliest of Trees

A. E. HOUSMAN

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
 Is hung with bloom along the bough,
 And stands about the woodland ride
 Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
 Twenty will not come again, 5
 And take from seventy springs a score,
 It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
 Fifty springs are little room, 10
 About the woodlands I will go
 To see the cherry hung with snow.

Pentameter is a line of five feet: $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$ | $\overset{\sim}{\sim}$. Iambic pentameter has been the standard line of verse in English from Shakespeare to the present. When it is unrhymed, it is also called **blank verse**, as in:

Āll ǒut|ǒf-dóors | lóokĕd dǎrk|ly 'in | ǎt hĭm
 Througĥ thĕ | thĭn fróst | ǎlmóst | in sĕp|ǎrǎte stǎrs,

That gath|ers (´) | the páne | in émp|ty r´ooms.

What képt | his éyes | from gí|ving báck | the gáze . . .

The poem:

An Old Man's Winter Night

ROBERT FROST

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
 Through the thin frost almost in separate stars,
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand. 5
 What kept him from remembering what it was
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.
 He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
 And having scared the cellar under him
 In clomping here, he scared it once again 10
 In clomping off;—and scared the outer night,
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
 But nothing so like beating on a box.
 A light he was to no one but himself 15
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
 A quiet light, and then not even that.
 He consigned to the moon, such as she was,
 So late-arising, to the broken moon
 As better than the sun in any case 20
 For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
 His icicles along the wall to keep;
 And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
 Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept. 25
 One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

Hexameter (or **Alexandrine**) is a line of six feet: ´´ | ´´ | ´´ | ´´ | ´´ | ´´. Because it tends to be long and sluggish in practice, it is rare. Howard Nemerov (1920–1991) uses it deftly, however, in this epigram:

Power to the People

Why´ are | the stámps | ad´orned | with kíngs | and prés|idén|ts?

That wé | máy líck | their hínd|er párts | and thúmp | their héads.

Heptameter, a line of seven feet, is very rare. An example is from “The Book of Thel” by William Blake (1757–1827):

The Lí|lǎ́ (˘) | the vá|lǎ́, bréath|ǎ́ng (˘) | the húm|blǎ́ gráss,
 Ánswǎ́red | the lóve|lǎ́ máid | and sáid: | “Í am | á wat|rǎ́ wéed,
 Ánd Í | ám vé|rǎ́ smáll | and lóve | tǎ́ dwéll | ǎ́n lów|lǎ́ váles;
 Sǎ́ weak, | the gíld|ǎ́d bú|tǎ́rflǎ́ | scárce pǎ́rch|ǎ́s (˘) | mǎ́ hǎ́d.”

Over the centuries, tetrameter and pentameter lines have become the norm; they are neither too short and clipped nor too long and clumsy. Monometer or dimeter lines tend to occur only in stanzaic poems of varying line lengths, such as John Donne’s “Song” (p. 85), where the two monometer lines give each stanza a concluding whirl:

Yet she
 Will be
 False, ere I come, to two, or three.

If you are inexperienced at meter, this might be a good point to try out the basics. Take a sheet of paper and mark on it, with breve (˘) and ictus (´), blanks for four lines of iambic tetrameter, thus:

˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´
 ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´
 ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´
 ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´

Then fit short sentences to the pattern, not worrying much about what they say. Be sure the unaccented and accented syllables are quite obvious. (Your dictionary marks accents if you are in doubt.) Perhaps rhyme lines 2 and 4 for the fun of it. You will get something like:

The rǎ́od ǎ́s gǎ́oing úp the híll.
 The rǎ́od ǎ́s álsǎ́ cǎ́omíng dǎ́wn.
 The wá́y óne thínks ǎ́t gǎ́es dǎ́pǎ́nds.
 The bǎ́y ǎ́s wá́lking hǎ́me frǎ́m tǎ́wn.

A variation, when you are that far, is then to make each line *one foot longer*, as “The road is going up the *wóoded* hill, / The road, *of cǒurse*, is also coming down,” et cetera. Harder, but worth a try, is making each line shorter by one foot, as:

The road goes up the hill.
It's also coming down.
The way it goes depends.
The boy is leaving town.

A further variation might be to make one line run-on, as:

Going up the hill, the road
Is also coming down.

Don't be afraid to tinker with your draft. Save it, as we will return to it later.

SUBSTITUTION AND VARIATIONS

The iamb (te TUM) is the basic foot. But, as suggested by anomalies in the scansions already marked, five other feet may be substituted for iambs without changing the metrical pattern. They are:

Trochee (trochaic): accented followed by unaccented syllable: TÚM tĕ.
only total cow and the | fǎrm be|low

Anapest (anapestic): two unaccented followed by an accented: tĕ tĕ TÚM.
intervene for a while lover of mine

Dactyl (dactylic): accented followed by two unaccented: TÚM tĕ tĕ.
merrily time for a lover of | mine

Spondee (spondaic): two accented syllables together: TÚM TÚM.
bread box in the | sweet land strong foot

Double-iamb: two unaccented followed by two accented: tĕ tĕ TÚM TÚM.
of the sweet land in a green shade

Instead of the double-iamb, many accounts include the **pyrrhic** foot, two unaccented syllables: te tĕ. But since it contains no accent, the pyrrhic is impossible to hear as a unit, and it is almost invariably followed by a spondee. This pattern is so frequent that it seems simpler and more natural to think of it as a double-iamb. A double-iamb, of course, counts as two feet.

Any of these other feet—trochees, anapests, dactyls, spondees, or double-iambs—may be *substituted* for iambs in the norm line. “Slid from” is a trochee substituted as the first foot in the second line of “My Papa’s Waltz”: