

Attridge, Derek. 1982. *The Rhythms of English Poetry*.

Chapter 4

The four-beat rhythm

When we apply the word 'rhythm' to speech we are referring to its characteristic movement in time, as perceived by the speaker and hearer; and we saw in the previous chapter that although spoken English has an underlying tendency towards regularity, this is seldom fully achieved in normal usage. The 'rhythm' of a song or a dance, on the other hand, or 'rhythm' as a psychological phenomenon, both of which we are concerned with in this chapter, carry much stronger connotations of regular patterning. The two notions are close – if the language had no principle of regularity at all we would refer merely to its 'movement', not its 'rhythm' – but the gap between them must not be ignored, since it is the function of metre to bridge that gap, and in so doing to shape the linguistic material into the lively and subtle forms of verse. The general principles of rhythm, as manifested in music as well as in poetry, operate in metrical verse at several levels, and in our discussion of them in this chapter we shall move from the deeper levels to those nearer the surface; that is, from the simple rhythmic forms which underlie the variety that exists in metrical practice to the rhythmic features which make that variety possible. The one exception to this order will be the final section on dipodic rhythm, which takes us back once more to elementary rhythmic processes. This chapter deals exclusively with the four-beat rhythm in its various guises, as the most fundamental rhythmic form in verse, but the framework developed in the course of the discussion is relevant to all regular forms, and will be the basis of the account of the five-beat rhythm in the chapter that follows.

4.1 THE PERCEPTION OF RHYTHM

To perceive a regular rhythm is to comprehend a sequence of events as a pattern in time, with two mutually reinforcing features, *repetition* and

periodicity.¹ That is to say, a series of stimuli is understood as the *same* stimulus occurring again and again; and these repetitions are felt to be occurring at equal, or at least equivalent, temporal intervals. It is not an objective, measurable phenomenon, but a perceptual one: if the stimuli are of the right kind, they need not be identical, nor need they fall at equal intervals, in order to establish a regular rhythm in the mind of the perceiver. But what constitutes the 'right kind' of stimulus? The most powerfully rhythm-inducing events, some kinds of sound, for instance, appear to be those which involve discharges of energy that can be directly interpreted in terms of muscular activity. The natural response to rhythmic sound is muscular participation, whether in the tapping of a finger or the movement of the whole body in a dance. One of the reasons for the supremacy of the drum as a rhythm-marking instrument is that we are able to relate the sound very immediately to the muscular movement of the arm that produces it; by contrast, electronically synthesised music, unless it mimics the imprint of human energy, is likely to be rhythmically inert. Visual stimuli alone are less often felt as strongly rhythmic: the satisfaction in watching classical ballet comes from the manifestation in movement of the rhythms we *hear*. Perhaps the only rhythms as commanding as those of sound are those directly induced by kinetic or muscular stimuli, such as we feel (or used to feel) when the train-wheels beneath us pass over the line-joints, or when we become hyperconscious of our own heartbeats.

Rhythm in its most elementary form, then, is the apprehension of a series of events as a regularly repeated pulse of energy, an experience which has a muscular as well as a mental dimension. The strongest perception of rhythm, however, comes not from a simple succession of stimuli, but from the repeated alternation of a stronger pulse and a fixed number of weaker pulses, usually one or two. The mind prefers to organise its perceptions in such alternating patterns, as is clear from the way in which we hear a clock's succession of identical ticks as a rhythm of stronger and weaker sounds. The strong impulses in such a rhythmic sequence are usually called *beats*, and I shall retain this term, and its opposite, *offbeats*, in referring to the fundamental alternations of verse rhythm.

Given this description, the reasons why patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in English speech constitute such a powerful source of rhythm are not far to seek. We saw in Chapter 3 that syllables can be understood as rhythmically-controlled releases of energy, and that the most satisfactory account of stress sees it as a burst of increased

energy on particular syllables, manifested by such features as change in pitch and increase in duration or volume, and interpreted by the hearer in terms of the muscular activity needed to produce them. We noted also that it is the muscular basis of speech production which creates the tendency towards rhythmic alternation and periodicity in the sequence of syllables. And we emphasised that a native speaker of English will, because of his knowledge of the patterns of stress placement in the language, perceive the stress contour even if the cues are only partially present, or sometimes in their absence altogether. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find that stressed and unstressed syllables are very readily perceived as rhythmic beats and offbeats, and that they can function as such even when they do not form an objective, measurable pattern of equal intervals and peaks of energy.² The strongest rhythms that can occur in English, therefore, are created by the simple alternation of stress and nonstress, or stress and double nonstress, in sequences like these:

/ x / x / x /

(1) Go, and catch a falling star

/ x x / x x / x x /

(2) Sweet be thy matin o'er moorland and lea

In these arrangements of syllables, the stress-timed character of the language is most fully brought out, and whatever the objective durations may be, we experience the stresses as falling at equivalent time-intervals. When we read regular verse aloud, we participate directly in the muscular rhythmic activity that underlies metrical form, and when we listen to it we participate empathetically.

Once established, a regular rhythm has a tendency to self-perpetuation, a momentum like that of motion in a straight line: the producer of a rhythm will be inclined to impose it on further material, and the perceiver will be inclined to go on hearing it if it is possible for him to do so, if, that is, the physical reality does not depart too far from the established norm. Rhythm thus projects itself strongly into the future, and the occurrence of one rhythmic event, while it satisfies a previous expectation, simultaneously generates a fresh one. This creation of rhythmic expectancy, affecting the interpretation of following stimuli, is a form of what is known in the psychology of perception as *set*, a concept aptly introduced into metrical theory by several writers (for instance, Chatman, 1965, p. 121; R. Fowler, 1968,

pp. 150–51; Harding, 1976, Ch. 3 and 4), and one which we shall find very useful in discussing the rules of metre in Part Three. In general terms, it makes possible a clearer account of the notion of metrical *tension*, which we touched upon in 1.1. In the perception of rhythm, tension may be regarded as the psychological experience produced by a local failure to satisfy completely an established regular rhythmic set. It is felt only if the stimuli come close enough to their expected form to be interpreted as at least a partial fulfilment of the set, and it has the effect of heightening the perceiver's attention to the rhythmic substance (whereas an absolutely regular rhythm often works to exactly the opposite effect), and, by creating a demand for a return to the momentarily thwarted regularity, of increasing the sense of forward propulsion. There are therefore two principles of onward movement involved in rhythm: underlying patterns of expectation and satisfaction, and sequences of tension and relaxation produced by variations in the degree to which that satisfaction occurs. In many cases the two cannot be separated, of course: the relaxation attendant on a return to strict rhythmic regularity, for instance, acts to heighten the sense of fulfilled expectation. Tension can also inhere in the relations *between* rhythmic and other levels of the verse, and complete relaxation occurs only if the patterns of expectation and satisfaction at every level coincide. We shall return to the question of tension frequently in the pages that follow; see in particular 7.10 and 9.5.

It should be clear from this discussion that in whatever medium a rhythm occurs, it always takes place in the dimension of time, albeit psychological rather than objective time. 'Rhythm' is, of course, often used metaphorically – the rhythms of a painting, or chimney pots against the sky – but one must not lose sight of the fact that such uses *are* metaphorical; and that we use the word unmetaphorically when discussing speech and poetry, which occur in time, and in which sequential and dynamic relations are of the utmost importance. It is difficult to escape from the tyranny of the sense of sight, and many of the terms one falls back on in describing rhythm – 'groups', 'structures', 'positions', even 'lines' – have spatial origins. I can only hope that in what follows they will not be construed as having spatial implications, but simply as a reflection of the poverty of the lexical store on which one draws to refer to the richly various qualities of movement through time.

4.2 UNDERLYING RHYTHM

One might say that the tendency of a rhythm to continue once established is a consequence of its escape from the normal limitations of time, since it converts a succession of different events into a repetition of the same event, and part of its fascination may lie in this illusory triumph over mutability. But an art-form requires a shape, not a series extending into infinity; middles should feel like middles, and ends like ends (and surprises are only possible if these norms have been established). Hence in verse, as in music, rhythm is always organised, and it is with the elementary forms which provide this organisation that we are now concerned. As we are investigating the basic elements from which sophisticated literary works are built, we shall give much of our attention to anonymous, popular verse in which a prevalent rhythmic phenomenon is more likely to be a reflection of a fundamental property of rhythm than a literary convention. Not that separation of the two is easy to achieve; even in looking at conventional aspects of form it is pertinent to ask why certain poetic choices have become established conventions and others have never been made a second time, and the answer may be that only the former coincide with something in the nature of the medium itself. And if we find elementary patterns repeated again and again in popular verse from medieval times to the present, and reflected in a large body of more literary verse, we can assume that there are reasons for this recurrence which lie deeper than convention. Just as myth and folk-tale reveal in stark form the plots which may be disguised in more self-conscious novels, so nursery rhymes and ballads, which are not the product of a single conscious artistic act (or if they are, have been taken up by audiences because they conform to the popular tradition), present the simplest rhythmic forms in clear outline. One must not, of course, conclude that the reader's or critic's task is done when he has released the popular form from its sophisticated envelope; as we shall see, the artist's problem is in part the *avoidance* of the ever-tempting elementary forms, which his readers, consciously or unconsciously, will be only too ready to find. But without grasping the nature of those elementary forms, we cannot hope to understand the achievement of the complex work of art which builds on them or finds ways round them.

Rhythmic pulses in verse (and in music) tend to fall into groups, each of which the mind perceives as a whole, with a beginning and an end;

we can call such a group an *underlying rhythm*. (One could use the term ‘Gestalt’, though its usefulness in this context is limited by its connotations of visual configuration.) The most common underlying rhythm in English popular verse is the group of four beats, and examples come readily to hand from all periods:

- (3) Adam delved and Eve span;
 B B B B
 Who was then the gentleman?
 B B B B
- (4) It was a lover and his lass,
 B B B B
 With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino
 B B B B
- (5) She was poor but she was honest,
 B B B B
 Victim of the squire’s whim.
 B B B B
- (6) High o’er the fence leaps Sunny Jim,
 B B B B
 ‘Force’ is the food that raises him!
 B B B B

Nor is it confined to the English tradition: Ker (1928, 205–12) traces four-beat rhythms in verse written in Sanskrit, classical and modern Greek, classical and medieval Latin, French, Provençal, and German; and while his examples are not all equally convincing, his evidence does suggest that this form occupies a special place in Western European verse. Burling (1966) goes even further afield in his examination of children’s verse in various languages, and finds four-beat rhythms in the Peking dialect of Chinese, Bengkulu (a language of South West Sumatra), Yoruba, Cairo Arabic, and some North American Indian languages. The four-beat phrase is also, of course, one of the fundamental units in Western musical structures, popular and sophisticated. Indeed it is sometimes argued that four-beat patterns in verse owe their existence to the music with which the verse was originally associated; but I shall proceed on the assumption that Burling is right to feel that ‘we have general rules of rhythm, which are neither predominantly musical nor predominantly poetic, but stand equally behind both music and spoken verse’ (p. 1425).

One can only guess at the reasons for the repeated occurrence of this

form. Burling's appeal to our 'common humanity' does not get us very far, and neither does Ker's assertion that 'this type of verse is natural because it runs in periods of 4, 8, 16, which one may call the natural rhythm for the human race' (p. 206). His hint at the importance of the four-beat rhythm's capacity to enter into larger structures is a valuable one, however, and is taken further by Tovey (1910–11), who states that we have a 'natural tendency to group rhythmic units in pairs, with a stress on the first of each pair; and hence, if our attention is drawn to larger groups, we put more stress on the first of the first pair than on the first of the second; and so with still greater groups' (p. 279). As we shall see later, it is somewhat artificial to isolate the four-beat line as the most fundamental pattern; what seems to be at the heart of simple rhythmic structuring is, as Tovey suggests, the existence of rhythmic pairs, arranged in hierarchies, each pair joining another pair to form a four-unit whole. We can leave aside as unproven the question of whether this is a truly universal characteristic of rhythm. Studies of 'primitive' music and verse have found a wide variety of rhythmic patterning (see, for instance, Nettl, 1956, Ch. 5; and Finnegan, 1977, pp. 90–102), but there is no reason to assume that such art is any less complicated in its elaboration of simple underlying forms than our own. Burling's use of children's verse in his cross-linguistic study is a more useful pointer to what might be considered 'rhythmic universals'. One can safely say, at least, that for reasons which go beyond the separate domains of music and poetry the four-beat rhythm has been a recurrent feature in the rhythmic arts of Western Europe; and it seems likely that this is a reflection of something fundamental in the faculty of rhythmic production and perception itself.

It will be evident that each pair of lines quoted above forms a single unit; the sense of completion after the second line is appreciably stronger than after the first. It is reinforced by the different kinds of syntactic break at these points, though it is clearly not *caused* by these breaks. And if we examine a typical nursery rhyme, we find a second pair of lines complementing the first pair, and producing another fourfold structure (I indicate the main beats):

(7) Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
 ^B ^B ^B ^B
 To see a fine lady upon a white horse;
 ^B ^B ^B ^B

Chapter 5

The five-beat rhythm

In the last chapter, we reached some firm conclusions about the rhythmic structure that underlies the types of verse that were our prime concern there. Almost all nursery rhymes, ballads, hymns, and other forms of popular verse and song use the four-beat rhythm as the basis of their metre, most often in groups of four lines or in simple variations on this basic structure. Lines with three main stresses usually imply a fourth, unrealised, beat; and lines with six main stresses usually resolve into two units of three, each with an unrealised fourth beat, as, for instance, in the first line of the poulter's measure couplet. Similarly, lines of seven main stresses are for the most part felt as two four-beat groups, with a final unrealised beat, as in fourteeners or the second poulter's measure line. Eight main stresses are interpreted as four plus four, though it is unusual to find lines of this length unless the rhythm is dipodic, making the whole line a larger-scale four-beat unit. The metrical pattern which realises the basic four-beat group is sometimes divided, as in the limerick, where the third group appears as two and two; and occasionally two-beat lines occur alone with the rhythmic effect of a half-line.

When we turn to poetry of less popular origins, we find that a large part of it makes use of the same elementary rhythms, though the underlying form may not be as clearly manifested. There is, for instance, less reliance on the 4×4 structure; many poems are written in a continuous series of four-beat rhyming couplets, or in stanza forms more elaborate than the popular four-line one. Restrictions on the number of syllables in a line are usually tighter, and a regular duple rhythm with only a limited degree of variation is common. One line, however, which is to be found in a large proportion of literary verse from Chaucer to the present day, and which is the medium of many of the greatest achievements in English poetry, is very rare in popular verse, and cannot be seen as a realisation of an underlying four-beat rhythm:

- (1) To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes
 B B B B B
- (2) Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
 B B B B B
- (3) Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon
 B B B B B
- (4) Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings
 B B B B B
- (5) The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds
 B B B B B
- (6) The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas
 B B B B B

The fundamental reason why poets over the centuries have turned to the five-beat line for their most ambitious verse is an obvious but frequently overlooked one: it is the only simple metrical form of manageable length which escapes the elementary four-beat rhythm, with its insistence, its hierarchical structures, and its close relationship with the world of ballad and song.

The difference in rhythmic character between the four-beat and the five-beat line is often blurred in metrical studies, but some writers have commented on it, and perhaps even overstated it: Ker (1928, pp. 205–6) claims that the four-beat measure ‘agrees with certain common tendencies or habits in the human mind, and is in a sense more natural, more easily found out and appropriated, than, say, the ten-syllabled line, which is often difficult to understand and imitate’, and both Lewis (1938) and Burling (1966; 1970, Ch. 10) assert that whereas four-beat structures are appreciated without instruction, the five-beat rhythm requires training before it can be perceived. Malof (1964) argues that the four-beat line is a ‘native’ English pattern to which the language is ‘naturally attracted’, as opposed to the ‘foreign’ pentameter tradition (p. 586); but while this may throw some light on the history of English metre, it is misleading as a synchronic description: as we have seen, it is precisely the ‘naturalness’ of the four-beat line as an elementary rhythmic form that lies at the heart of its relative insensitivity to the distinctive rhythms of a particular language. Literary criticism is perhaps too eager to ask what the formal (and other) properties of poetry manage to get into language; sometimes it is more enlightening to take note of what they succeed in keeping out. To understand the special character of the five-beat line, therefore, it is essential to be aware of the properties of the four-beat rhythm which it escapes, and to examine its strategies of evasion.

What is remarkable about the five-beat line is not only the success with which it has been used over a wide range of poetic kinds, but the tight constraints observed by the poets who have used it. It is worth quoting Ruskin's comment on this point, the classical vocabulary of which is easily translatable into other terms:

Upon adding the fifth foot to our gradually lengthening line, we find ourselves fallen suddenly under hitherto unfelt limitation. The verses we have hitherto examined may be constructed at pleasure of any kind of metre – dactyl, trochee, iamb, or anapaest. But all at once, we now find this liberty of choice refused. We may write a pentameter verse in iambs only.

A most notable phenomenon, significant of much more than I can at present understand, – how much less explain; [. . .] the historical fact being quite indubitable and unalterable, that no poet has ever attempted to write pentameter in any foot but the iamb, and that the addition of another choreus [trochee] to a choreic tetrameter – or of another dactyl to a dactylic one, will instantly make them helplessly prosaic and unreadable. (1880, pp. 55–6)

At least two of Ruskin's contemporaries had attempted – not wholly without success – these 'unreadable' metres (see below, pp. 130, 131); but the essential validity of the observation remains. In this chapter we shall examine the distinctive characteristics of the five-beat rhythm by comparing it with the four-beat form already discussed. In asking to what extent these characteristics reflect the nature of the five-beat rhythm itself, rather than literary convention, we can hope to reach a fuller understanding of its special status in the English poetic tradition.¹

5.1 UNDERLYING RHYTHM AND METRICAL PATTERN

That a five-beat rhythm is a less simple and less salient perceptual form than a four-beat rhythm scarcely needs demonstrating; if experimental evidence is required, Woodrow (1951, p. 1234) reports that subjects find rhythmic groups of five more difficult to impose on a sequence of undifferentiated sound stimuli than groups of two, three, four, or six. Or if we attend to the elementary rhythms of popular music, we find that a five-beat bar or a five-bar phrase is rarely to be encountered. The

reason for this difference is equally obvious: a four-beat rhythm, and its manifestation in different line-lengths, is the product of the fundamental doubling principle discussed in the previous chapter, whereas a five-beat group cannot be divided into rhythmically equal components larger than its five subdivisions. From these elementary facts spring most of the differences in poetic potential between the two rhythmic forms.

The five-beat line does not bring with it the sense of a strong underlying rhythm; it observes the heightened regularity of movement created by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, without those rhythmic pulses grouping themselves consistently – and insistently – into twos and fours, and without any tendency for dipodic rhythms to make themselves felt. For this reason it strikes the ear as more faithful to the natural rhythm of speech: it is not that five-beat groups are in any way indigenous to English, but that such groups impose themselves less strongly on the movement of the language. In other words, five-beat lines exhibit a different relationship between the two rhythmic principles that collaborate in the creation of metrical form: the rhythm of language speaks louder, the elementary rhythmic form more softly. This is not to say that four-beat verse in the literary tradition encourages the reader to use unnatural pronunciations to bring out the rhythm, but that the rhythm, established by the normal movement of the language, is perceptually stronger and is more likely to influence those aspects of pronunciation where variation or choice is possible. This difference can be strikingly reflected in the way a poet writes: Byron's verse in five-beat lines, for instance, tends to be much more subtle in its rhythmic variety and emotional colouring than his verse in four-beat forms, while Wyatt writes more smoothly and lyrically in four-beat forms than in the longer line.

The hierarchical organisation of four-beat verse is not confined to the individual line, as we have seen; the doubling tendency produces pairs of lines, and pairs of pairs in the ubiquitous 4×4 structure. But the five-beat line, itself not generated by such a process, is less likely to generate it over a larger span; the quatrain, therefore, does not hold pride of place among five-beat stanza forms as it does among four-beat, and the five-beat line has an independence as a rhythmic unit which makes it the ideal medium for the poet who wishes to avoid the stops and starts of stanza forms altogether. And by not taking part in the rhythmic swing of the 4×4 structure, with its emphatic beats and dipodic tendency, the five-beat line is, once again, more able to

reflect the rhythm of the spoken language. Although we can refer to underlying rhythmic structures of, for example, 5×2 or 5×4 , these do not have the same cohesion as the 4×4 structure, and the true underlying rhythm of five-beat verse is always the single five-beat unit.

The metrical patterns which realise four-beat verse can, as we have seen, vary a great deal; certain beats can be unrealised, for instance, and the line-divisions need not coincide with the four-beat groups. The five-beat rhythm, on the other hand, can only be manifested as five realised beats. (Because of this, the term *pentameter* is less misleading than such terms as 'trimeter', 'tetrameter', or 'heptameter', which tend to mask the unity beneath the various realisations of the four-beat rhythm.) This difference is another result of the relative weakness of the five-beat group as a rhythmic Gestalt. To omit the final beat of a pentameter is to deliver it over to the four-beat pattern which is always waiting for an opportunity to gain dominance, whereas to do the same in the 4×4 structure may, as we have seen, serve only to strengthen the underlying rhythm. Nor does the five-beat line break naturally into two; its rhythmic unity is not strong enough to survive division, especially since an uneven distribution of beats is unavoidable. The following example is from a broadside ballad, in which the literary tradition has clearly influenced the popular one:

(7) Intomb'd he now doth lye,
 B B B
 in stately manner,
 B B
 'Cause he fought valiantly,
 B B B
 for love and honour:
 B B
 That right he had in you,
 B B B
 to me he gave it:
 B B
 Now since it is my due,
 B B B
 pray let me have it.
 B B

A sequence of four five-beat lines has been divided by syntax and rhyme into an eight-line stanza of three-beat and two-beat lines in alternation. Although the three-beat lines carry echoes of the popular four-beat pattern, any such expectations are constantly being frustrated by the shortness of the two-beat lines. Instead, we remain aware of the five-beat groups, with the only true pauses occurring after

every second line; and the break enforced by lineation, syntax, and rhyme after three beats imparts a clipped, staccato movement to the verse. Five-beat lines are, of course, often divided internally by syntactic breaks, but it is one of the advantages of the pentameter as a vehicle for long poems that the rhythmic structure does not create pressure for one particular subdivision. The most rhythmically balanced line results, it is true, from a pause after the second or the third beat, and poets favouring regularity usually prefer one of these positions if the line is to have only one break; this was incorporated into prosodic theory by some eighteenth-century poets and critics (see Dillon, 1977). But even this allows variety, and does not result in the perception of the line as an edifice built up from smaller blocks.

The traditional stanza forms in which five-beat verse has been successfully written all use undivided pentameters, sometimes with an occasional six-beat line; and because each five-beat line is rhythmically independent, rhyme plays an active role in binding lines together. When a poetic style demands tightness of organisation together with the freedom to employ speech rhythms, the pentameter couplet offers the ideal combination: the adjacent rhymes create strong formal units larger than the line, while the five-beat rhythm remains a flexible medium for the spoken language. Not surprisingly, therefore, the couplet form seems more appropriate to the controlled wit of *The Dunciad* than to the free-ranging fantasy of *Endymion*. On the other hand, because the five-beat line is under no rhythmic pressure to form four-line groups, it lends itself more fully than the four-beat line to the creation of complex stanza forms. These are capable of combining a sense of large-scale freedom almost as great as that of blank verse with a formal orderliness unmatched by any other metrical form (and in this case Keats furnishes some of the finest examples). Because such forms do not have an underlying rhythmic structure with a natural end, they often make use of some special device to achieve a feeling of closure, such as the couplet with new rhymes in the rhyme royal stanza (*ababbcc*) and the ottava rima stanza (*abababcc*), or the final six-beat line in the Spenserian stanza (*ababbcbcc*). Simple stanzas of four lines do, of course, occur in five-beat verse, the most famous example being Gray's *Elegy* (which has provided the name *elegiac quatrain* for the stanza), and the usual rhyme-scheme of this stanza, *abab*, can, especially if the syntax emphasises the divisions between lines and pairs of lines, induce something of the continuity, and the rising and falling intonation, of the 4×4 structure:

- (8) Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
 Their homely joys and destiny obscure;
 Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,
 The short and simple annals of the poor.

In such verse, the five-beat line is brought back to the lyrical symmetries from which it is more usually the means of escape, and the weightiness of the longer line is blended with the formal completeness of the metrical structure to create a meditation free from the rough rhythms – and one might add, the rough emotions – of real speech.

5.2 DUPLE AND TRIPLE, RISING AND FALLING RHYTHMS

The greater sensitivity of the five-beat line to the rhythms of speech, and its consequent use in the literary tradition by poets who wish to capitalise on the expressiveness of those rhythms, goes part of the way towards explaining its other characteristic features in English verse. Where there is a choice to be made between different realisations of an underlying rhythm, a poet who has already chosen the five-beat rhythm for this reason will opt for those realisations which increase rather than diminish its capacity to evoke the spoken language; and we have seen from our discussion of four-beat verse that this will mean duple rather than triple rhythms, and rising rather than falling rhythms. Run-on lines, an absence of rhyme, and the avoidance of dipodic alternation, are also features which minimise the connection with song, and so are likely to characterise five-beat verse. And since the same choices have been made by generations of poets, they have become established accompaniments to the pentameter. To regard this as a full explanation of the limitations in the use of five-beat verse, however, is to cast poets too completely in the role of servants rather than masters of literary convention. Who knows how many attempts to fashion other varieties of five-beat verse have never reached the light of day because their inventors sensed that something deeper than poetic convention was being challenged? It is worth at least asking to what extent their choices have to do with the rhythmic properties of the form itself rather than the example of previous poets.

We have seen that the four-beat rhythm not only manifests itself in a variety of metrical patterns (with unrealised beats and divided or combined lines), but that those metrical patterns can in turn be