



his is a guide to verse, to the formal structures which are a necessary condition of poetry, but not a sufficient one. The building blocks of poetry itself are elements of fiction—fable, “image,” metaphor—all the material of the nonliteral. The components of verse are like parts of plans by which the materials are built into a structure. The study of rhetoric distinguishes between tropes, or figures of meaning such as metaphor and metonymy, and schemes, or surface patterns of words. Poetry is a matter of trope; and verse, of scheme or design. But the blueprints of verse can be used to build things made of literal, or nonpoetic material—a shopping list or roadside sign can be rhymed—which is why most verse is not poetry.

It is nonetheless common and convenient for most people who don't read carefully to use “poetry” to mean “writing in some kind of verse,” and to regard thereby the design without considering the materials. The most popular verse form in America today—the ubiquitous jingle readers identify with “poetry” even as, fifty or sixty years ago, they did anything that rhymed—is

a kind of free verse
without any special
constraints on it except
those imposed by
the notion—also
generally accepted—that
the strip the lines
make as they run
down the page (the
familiar strip with the
jagged
right-hand edge) not
be too wide

This is as automatic and unpoetic in its arbitrary formality as jingling rhymes on “June” and “moon” ever were; schemes and structures of free verse are as conventional and, for most writers, as “academic” as certain other “official” forms have been in other eras. Major poetry has been built in this form, even as Tennyson could employ the same rhyming schemes as writers of occasional verses for family parties.

Both verse and prose, then, are schematic domains. Literacy used to entail some ability to write in both modes, without any presumption of poetry in the execution of skill in the former. But today sportswriters on the few newspapers we have left know no Latin nor can write good witty verses. We no longer memorize poems at school. Young persons are protected from the prose cadences—so influential on writing in both modes—of the King James Bible by aggressive separatism and the churches themselves; all of us are shielded from Shakespearean rhythm by the ways in which both prose and verse are publicly intoned in America. The territory covered in this guide—this road map through the region of poetry in English—has itself tended to run back into second-growth timber, if not into wilderness.

Some day we will all be reading Blue Guides and Baedekers to what once were our own, familiar public places. In former times, the region of verse was like an inviting, safe municipal park, in which one could play and wander at will. Today, only a narrow border of that park is frequently used (and vandalized), out of fear that there is safety only in that crowded strip—even as the users’ grandparents would cling to walks

that went by statues—and out of ignorance of landscape. The beauties of the rest of that park are there, unexplored save by some scholars and often abandoned even by them.

I am old enough to have grown up in the park, and to map a region one loves is a way of caressing it. (Goethe wrote of counting out hexameters on his Roman lady's back as she lay in his arms: he was mapping her body's curve even as he felt for the ancient rhythm.) I too set out now as a loving rather than merely dutiful tour guide. Even today, when touch seems casual and only discourse intimate, one can't presume on Whitmanic relations with readers. I shall content myself (Inquiry's too severe in prose; / Verse puts its questions in repose) with tapping out my self-explaining diagrams and illustrations of the walks and alleys and bosks and ponds and parterres and follies and hahas and so forth that comprise my territory, as it were, on the reader's hand. After all, this *is* a manual.

The schemes and designs to be explored here include: the structures of lines of verse; patterns of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance; schemes of syntax and word order; groups of lines called strophes or stanzas; overall patterns of repetition and variation (refrains, etc.); and larger arrangements of these. Over the centuries, these forms have come at various times to be associated with one or another kind of poetic use—or with what some critics would call a "theme," a "subject" or an occasion. Sonnets, for example, start out by being about a particular philosophic conception of love, and end up in the twen-

tieth century as descriptions of pictures, explanations of myths, or analytic meditations. And yet the later poems in the history of the form's life—when written by the finest poets—are always in some way aware of, and always engage, that history and the burden it puts on originality.

This little book contains examples of formal schemes of various sorts, and at various levels of organization. Since we are concerned only with verse in English, no historical sketch or comparative analysis of metrics and forms is given, save for a glance at what the meters of classical poetry have entailed for English. But it should be remembered that all poetry was originally oral. It was sung or chanted; poetic scheme and musical pattern coincided, or were sometimes identical. Poetic form as we know it is an abstraction from, or residue of, musical form, from which it came to be divorced when writing replaced memory as a way of preserving poetic utterance in narrative, prayer, spell, and the like. The ghost of oral poetry never vanishes, even though the conventions and patterns of writing reach out across time and silence all actual voices. This is why, to go back to the earlier analogy of architecture, a poet is always like both the builder of houses, with plans "at hand," and the designer or executor of a complicated edifice, drawing and working from complex blueprints.

Verse can be organized according to very many metrical *systems*, depending upon the structure of the language in which the verse is written. The systems relevant to verse in English are:

1. *Pure accentual*—the meter of the earliest Ger-

manic poetry; it is preserved in nursery rhymes and in much lyric verse.

2. *Accentual-syllabic*—the verse system which involves such patterns as “iambic,” “dactylic,” etc., all somewhat confusingly named for Greek meters in a totally different system.

3. *Pure syllabic*—the basic system of modern French and Japanese, to cite two kinds of poetry that have used it for centuries; it has been used in English only in the last fifty years or so.

4. So-called *free verse*, of which there are many varieties, developed mostly in the twentieth century.

5. *Quantitative verse* which, save for some grotesque and failed examples, cannot occur in English, but which was the basis of Greek prosody and, later on, of Latin.

Since accentual-syllabism has been so dominant, and so important, during the course of the poetic history of the English language, we will start with it.

Accentual-syllabic verse is built up of pairs or triads of syllables, alternating or otherwise grouping stressed and unstressed ones. Syllables usually keep their word accent, or the accent they would have in phrases in normal speech. *Iambic pentameter*, a line pattern made up of five syllable pairs with the first syllable unstressed, can be illustrated by a line which most perfectly conforms to the pattern itself:

Abóut abóut abóut abóut abóut

or this:

A boát, a boát, a boát, a boát, a boát

(for a monosyllable, with its preceding article, is accented like a word of two syllables). But actual lines of iambic pentameter, because they can't simply repeat identical pairs of syllables, have individual and particular rhythms which depart from the metrical pattern slightly. It is in this variation that the sound of poetry lives. For example, a simple variation of our first example—one that has become a standard pattern in itself—is actually a reversal of stressed and unstressed syllables in the first pair:

Almost "about about about about"

or in the second as well:

Nearly almost "about about about"

But there are ways of departing that seem to obscure the pattern so that they can no longer be considered variations from it:

Almost the sound of the line of "about"s

What we hear is a rhythm of four beats, not five, and the unstressed syllables are grouped into triads of *dum de de*, *dum de de* (called dactyls), even though there are, in fact, ten syllables in the lines.

Most interesting with regard to poetry are the variations—and almost every line of poetry exhibits them—that lie between these extremes. Any poem will be cast in one metrical form or another, and after we read three or more lines it will be obvious which of two patterns even the most ambiguous line is a variation of. Frequently, richness and significance of sound depend upon our ear hesitating for a while between patterns; but there is real ambiguity only

at the start of a poem. An extreme case is the opening of one of Keats's sonnets:

How many bards gild the lapses of time

We might think that a matching line would be:

Read this as dactyls and then it will rhyme

like the one we made up before. But in fact, the sonnet continues in iambic pentameter, and we realize that we had a wildly variant first line instead of a more patterned one. But a better example, also by Keats, can be seen in the second line of his "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time

Here, although only the fourth pair has its order reversed, the line nevertheless resounds with other possibilities. Thus,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time
 Accentually pouncing to so mime
 An antiquated rhythm which had no rhyme.

But the phrase "slow time" resolves itself in the poem because "time" rhymes there only with the monosyllable "rhyme" two lines below (there's no "slow"/"so" chiming, as in our example). When we *scan* a line of poetry, or mark the prominent syllables, we are really showing what its actual rhythm is, and then, by putting this rhythm in alignment with adjacent ones in the poem or stanza of the poem, deciding what their common pattern is. Thus, every line is at once unique and has family resemblances, usually very strong, to its companions in any one poem.

Accentual-syllabic verse is traditionally discussed as sequences of *feet*; and although the terminology is misleading, you can remember that:

A foot | is just | a group | of syl- | lables:
Trochees | (like these), | iambs, | spondees, | paired, while
Dactyls and | anapests | always are | triads of | syllables.

An iamb is a pair with a stress on the second syllable (as in “about”):

Iambic meter runs along like this:
Pentameters will have five syllables
More strongly stressed than other ones nearby—
Ten syllables all told, perhaps eleven.

But

Trochees simply tumble on and
Start with downbeats just like this one
(Sorry, “iamb” is trochaic).

★

“*Dactyl*” means | “finger” in | Greek, and a | foot that was
| made up of | one long
Syllable followed by two, like the joints in a finger was used
for
Lines made of six, just like these, in the epics of Homer and
Virgil,
Save that in English we substitute downbeats and upbeats
for long-short.*

★

In an *anapest* up | beats start out | in reverse
Of the dactyl’s persuasion but end up no worse.
(Yes, the anapest’s name is dactylic—a curse?)

★

Slow *spondees* are two heavy stressed downbeats
They stand shoulder to strong shoulder this way.

*For more on this, see pages 34–36.

We can even observe the echoes of such accentual “feet” in natural speech:

Só námes such as “Jóhn Smith” seém spóndees.
 (Names of pláces, such as “Maín Street”)*
 Thése are mérely goód old tróchees.)

It will be clear by now that different kinds of accentual-syllabic line will “interpret” a stress-pattern of natural speech in different ways. Disyllabic words are stressed either one way or another, and pairs of words that differ by virtue of stress alone will have to play different metrical roles:

These línes can shów you whére the accént wént,
 Bút with their cóntent I’m not yét contént.

And trisyllables, for example, can submit to two readings. We would say that “typewriter” is normally dactyllic-sounding, and placing it in a dactyllic line elicits this character.

Lísten, my typewriter clátters in dáctyls alóng with my
 próse!

But “typewriter” is a compound word, once hyphenated (“type-writer”) before constant use in speech had silenced the second stress; that ghost of accent can be summoned up:

My typewríter in vése dívides its tíme
 Between iamb and trochee. (Now I’ll rhyme.)

Clearly, a little phrase like “open it” will work like a dactyllic single word, just as “of the best” will work like an anapestic one. It will be apparent, also, that accentual-syllabic verse can make much of the variations of stress that occur when we are logically con-

*(Bút a tówn’s “maín streét” ’s spondáic.)

trasting two words or phrases which differ by reason of their unstressed syllable. "A book" is an iamb; so is "the book"; but what we write as "*the* book" (and pronounce as something like "thee book") promotes the unstressed syllable, in emphatic contrast, to something having more of the power of "this book" or "that book." Thus we might, iambically,

Observe the whóre outside the stóre.

But if we mean to single out the allegorical figure of Revelation 17 then she may become trochaic, when

Bábylón we méan here—*the* whore
(Not some hooker by the seashore).

When the older terminology of "foot" for "syllable pair" or "triad" is used, line length is described in terms of number of feet, as for example *dimeter*, *trimeter*:

If shé should wíte
Some verse tonight
This dimeter
Would limit her.

But:

Iámbic trímetér
Is rather easier.

And:

Tetrámetér allows more spáce
For thoughts to seat themselves with grace.

Now:

Hére is *pentámetér*, the líne of fíve
That English poetry still keeps alive;

In other centuries it was official.
Now, different kinds of verse make it seem special.

★

Six downbeats in a line that has twelve syllables
Make up the *alexandrine*, which, as you can hear,
Tends to fall into halves—one question, one reply.

The break that you heard in the last line is called
caesura. Here it is at work in rhymed pairs of lines
called *couplets*:

In couplets, one line often makes a point
Which hinges on its bending, like a joint;
The sentence makes that line break into two.
Here's a *caesura*: see what it can do.
(And here's a gentler one, whose pause, more slight,
Waves its two hands, and makes what's left sound right.)

Two even longer measured lines:

Fourteeners, cut from *ballad stanzas*, don't seem right for song:
Their measure rumbles on like this for just a bit too long.

and, used by early Elizabethans,

A *poulter's measure* (like a baker's dozen) cut
One foot off a fourteener couplet, ended in a rut.

Let us now consider groupings of lines, by rhyme
or other means, remembering first that

A line can be *end-stopped*, just like this one,
Or it can show *enjambment*, just like this
One, where the sense straddles two lines: you feel
As if from shore you'd stepped into a boat;

and remembering secondly that there is a unique
case, outside of line-groups. The one-line poem (in
Greek, a *monostich*) is almost always really a couplet,

an epigram formed by the title and the line itself, as in

A ONE-LINE POEM

The universe

First, then, *blank verse*:

Iambic five-beat lines are labeled *blank Verse* (with sometimes a foot or two reversed, Or one more syllable—"feminine ending").
 Blank verse can be extremely flexible:
 It ticks and tocks the time with even feet
 (Or sometimes, cleverly, can end limping).
 Shakespeare and others of his day explored
 Blank verse in stage plays, both in regular
 And rather uneven and more rough-hewn forms.
 Occasionally, rhyming couplets sound
 Out at scenes' endings, gongs to end the round.
 Milton did other things: he made it more
 Heroic than dramatic: although blind
 He turned its structure into something half
 Heard, half seen, as when a *chiasm*[†]
 (Words, phrases, sounds or parts of speech arranged
 In mirroring) occurs in *Paradise Lost* (he often *enjambes* this way) we see
 Half a line that, reflecting its line-half,
 Cannot sit still to be regarded like
 A well-made picture or inscription, but
 Rushes ahead as sentences do, not like
 Visual melody in a well-shaped line.
 But back again to what blank verse can do:
 In time of old, inversions it contained
 Of syntax, and Wordsworth and Tennyson
 More delicately such arrangements made.
 But Browning and more lately Robert Frost
 Made their blank verse seem natural again,
 The kind of sound our sentences would make

*(Pentameters like this are called *scanzons*.)

†And see page 49.

If only we could leave them to themselves—
 The road our way of talking always takes,
 Not, like a foul line or state boundary,
 An artificially drawn line at all.

But:

The old fourteener William Blake found to his liking more
 Than old "heroic" verse, pentameters, which must have
 seemed
 Far too *official* for him; so, like Milton with his ten
 Syllables, Blake pushed ahead with the seven stresses he
 heard beneath
 The even fourteeners sanctified for him by balladry
 (For two rhyming fourteeners can / be written out, you see,
 In just a single ballad stan- / za, rhymed *abab*)
 And common hymnody, and Chapman's *Iliad*, and all
 Popular rhyming forms eschewed by Alexander Pope.
 Blake, in *Jerusalem* and *Milton*, twisted the seven-beat line
 With terrible vatic force, & claimed that he wrote in three
 different keys,
 "Terrific," "Mild & gentle," and "Prosaic"; yet it remains
 Hard to distinguish their tones, as it were, from rhythmic
 patterns alone.

Before we move into groupings made by rhyme,
 let us consider the ways in which syllables them-
 selves can reach through, or across, lines. They can
alliterate:

Alliteration lightly links
 Stressed syllables with common consonants.

And they can, without actually rhyming, exhibit
assonance:

Assonance is the spirit of a rhyme,
 A common vowel, hovering like a sigh
 After its consonantal body dies.

We should also remember the following, about rhyme
 itself:

The weakest way in which two words can chime
 Is with the most expected kind of rhyme—
 (If it's the only rhyme that you can write,
 A homophone will never sound quite right.)
 A rhyme is stronger when the final words
 Seem less alike than pairs of mated birds.
 When meaning makes a gap which sound can span, it's
 As if the rhyme words came from different planets;
 Or when a final verb, perhaps, will reach
 Out to rhyme with some different part of speech;
 Or when a word spelled in one way, like "off,"
 Rhymes strictly, with a sort of visual cough
 Of surprise; or when a common word like "love"
 Which rhymed in Shakespeare's time with "move" and
 "prove"

Ends up today a sight-rhyme, as above.
 Some rhymes can trip you as you move along:
 Their lines can seem as smooth as they are strong.
 Like a typewriter's final, right-hand bell,
 A rhyme can stop a line, or it can tell
 The sentence to go on and do its best
 Till, at the next line's end, it comes to rest.
 And if the tone shows signs of letting up, let
 There be a cute rhyme for a final couplet.
 (A serious effect is often killable
 By rhyming with *too* much more than one syllable.)

Internal rhymes can claim a word or name
 And make two words mean something of the same:
 Thus *spring* can *jingle* with its *singing* birds,
 Or *summer hum* with two resounding words;
 The red *robes* of *October's* garish ball
 Make *fall recall* that dropping leaves are all
 We hear; the hard, dry stint of winter lasts
 Through blizzards and through *slow* and *snowy* blasts,
 Until lengthening sunlight hours will bring
 Round in a *ringlike* way again, the *spring*.

One of the most important groupings of lines we have had in English, particularly in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, has been the English couplet, paired rhymed iambic pentameter:

Heroic couplets, classical and cold,
 Can make new matters smack of something old
 And something borrowed (like a wedding, true,
 But this comparison stops short of "blue"
 Yet points out how the marriage of two lines
 Brings forth long children as their length combines
 —And sometimes triplets help to vary the designs). }
 This verse was called "heroic" for the way
 It seemed equivalent, in Jonson's day—
 The seventeenth century—to Homer's long
 Unrhymed hexameters, and Virgil's song.
 With Alexander Pope, we have so pure a
 Way of arranging these, that a *caesura*
 Makes this line pause, makes that one slowly wend
 Its way to join its partner in the end.
 An *end-stopped* line is one—as you'll have guessed—
 Whose syntax comes, just at its end, to rest.
 But when the walking sentence needs to keep
 On going, the *enjambment* makes a leap
 Across a line-end (here, a rhyming close).
 —Milton, in his blank verse, makes use of those:
 His long, dependent clauses are enjambed.
 A somewhat sharp effect, as well, is damned
 Easy—when, reading on, the reader learns
 The maze of verse can have its sudden turns
 And twists—but couplets take your hand, and then
 Lead you back into end-stopped rhyme again.

Of course,

Couplets can be of any length,
 And shorter size gives greater strength
 Sometimes—but sometimes, willy-nilly,
 Four-beat couplets sound quite silly.
 (Some lines really should stay single:
 Feminine rhymes can make them jingle.)

These *anapestic tetrameter* couplets, by the way,
 were used widely in the late eighteenth and the early
 nineteenth centuries; they can seem either active or
 passively elegiac:

There are rhythms like this that you'll frequently meet:
 They resound with the pounding of regular feet,
 And their anapests carry a narrative load
 (The hoofbeats of horses, of course, on the road).

★

But they lie by the side of a whispering stream
 Flowing slowly as time, gliding by in a dream.

Now, then:

Tercets are groups of three; they are a band
 —Playful, like couplets that get out of hand—
 Of lines that fly far, then come back to land.

★

A *quatrain* has four lines
 As one can plainly see:
 One of its strict designs
 Comes rhymed *abab*.

★

Another way of rhyme can come
 From *abba* (middle two
 Lines holding hands as lovers do)
 In Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.

★

After the heyday of such rhyme's renown,
 After the weariness of World War I,
 Modern poets built in a sad letdown
 By rhyming quatrains thus: *abax*.

★

The *ballad stanza's* four short lines
 Are very often heard;
 The second and the fourth lines rhyme
 But not the first and third.

★

The ballad stanza in a hymn
 Waits on the music's pleasure,

And hymnals (hardly out of whim)
 Call it the "common measure."

★

(The attic heart's—theology
 Reformed—this hymnal scheme
 In Emily Dickinson's—Amherst—house
 And slanted—away—the rhyme.)

★

"Long measure" in the hymnody
 Means even quatrains just like this,
 Whose music sets the spirit free,
 Doctrine dissolved in choral bliss.

★

Translating Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*,
 Edward Fitzgerald, it would seem, forgot
 To rhyme the third line with the other ones.
 (The last line underscored its lonely lot.)

He didn't, really: I meant no aspersion.
 His gloomy quatrains were an English version
 Of just that rhyme scheme (and God knows what else)
 He found in the original in Persian.

★

Lord Byron, seeking out a verse to dally in
 While roaming through *Don Juan*, came to see
 The point of imitating the Italian
 Poets back in the sixteenth century:
Don Juan's stanza, jumping like a stallion
 Over its disyllabic rhymes, and free
 Of too much room to roam in, came to seem a
 Verse pattern all its own (*ottava rima*).

★

One more famous stanza should be described here;
 It can come rhymed, unrhymed, or what you will, at
 Least in English, named for the great Greek poet
 Passionate Sappho . . .

Sapphics: four-line stanzas whose first three lines are

Heard—in our hard English at least—as heartbeats,
 Then, in one more touch of a final short line,
 Tenderly ending.

★

Rhyme royal is a stanza form of seven
 Pentameters, which Chaucer filled with scenes
 From *Troilus and Criseyde* and with heaven-
 Sent birdsong in the *Parlement*, its means,
 More limited than are *The Faerie Queene's*.
 “Royal”?—from a poem by Scotland’s first King James.
 (Some scholars differ: so it is with names.)

★

A true *Spenserian stanza* wakes up well
 With what will seem a quatrain first; in time
 The third line rings its “a” rhyme like a bell,
 The fourth, its “b” resounding like a dime
 In a pay telephone—this paradigm
 Demonstrating the kind of interlocking
 Of quatrains doubling back on the same rhyme
 Ends in an alexandrine, gently rocking
 The stanza back to sleep, lest the close be too shocking.
 (And so the questions that the last lines ask
 The alexandrine answers, as a pleasant task.)

There is a famous way of interlocking tercets:

The unrhymed middle line, in the tight schema
 Of tercets spinning out a lengthy text
 (Dante gave us this form, called *terza rima*),
 Rhymes, after all, with the start of the next
 Tercet, then helps set up a new unrhyme
 That, sure of foot and not at all perplexed,
 Walks across blank space, as it did last time.
 (A couplet ends this little paradigm.)

In general,

A *stanza* in Italian means “a room”;
 In verse, it needn’t keep to square

Corners, as of some dismal tomb,
 But wanders anywhere:
 Some stanzas can be built of many lines
 Of differing length;
 Their variation then combines
 With rhymes to give it strength.
 Along the way
 Short lines can play,
 And, at the end, a longer and more solemn
 Line extends below, a broad base for a column.

Sonnets can be of two general sorts—the so-called Elizabethan form, with three quatrains and a couplet, or the Italian kind, with an *octave* rhymed *abba abba* and a *sestet* of various groupings of *cde*. Here are the two types:

The kind of *sonnet* form that Shakespeare wrote
 —A poem of Love, or Time, in fourteen lines
 Rhymed the way these are, clear, easy to quote—
 Channels strong feelings into deep designs.
 Three *quatrains* neatly fitting limb to joint,
 Their lines cut with the sharpness of a prism,
 Flash out in colors as they make their point
 In what logicians call a syllogism—
 (If A, and B, then C)—and so it goes,
 Unless the final quatrain starts out “But”
 Or “Nevertheless,” these groups of lines dispose
 Themselves in reasoned sections, tightly shut.
 The final couplet’s tight and terse and tends
 To sum up neatly how the sonnet ends.

★

Milton and Wordsworth made the sonnet sound
 Again in a new way; not with the sighs
 Of witty passion, where fierce reason lies
 Entombed in end-stopped lines, or tightly bound
 In chains of quatrain: more like something found
 Than built—a smooth stone on a sandy rise,
 A drop of dew secreted from the sky’s
 Altitude, unpartitioned, whole and round.

The *octave's* over; now, gently defying
 Its opening tone, the *sestet* then recalls
 Old rhythms and old thoughts, enjambed, half-heard
 As verses in themselves. The final word,
 Five lines away from what it rhymes with, falls
 Off into silence, like an echo dying.

There have been other slight variations on fixed sonnet patterns, some of them—like film stars that are shaped by, and shape, their roles—informing and being blooded, at once, by major poetic occasions.

Another sonnet form, though hardly shocking,
 Presents us with three quatrains, like the rest,
 But runs the rhymes into an interlocking
 Pattern that asks the poet for his best
 As each new quatrain puts him to the test
 (Or, her, as the case often is), by way
 Of having at such moments to divest
 Himself of rhyme-words waiting, an array
 Of crowded sounds he'd treasured up all day.
 No need for noisy ingenuities,
 Though; one needs but two rhymes on *d* and *a*
 (-*Ay's* the last *c*-rhyme: there were four of these.)
 Such lines that intertwine, like cooked spaghetti,
 Were used by Spenser in his *Amoretti*.

Milton once composed a "tailed sonnet" of twenty lines:

After the *sestet* of a sonnet, six
 More lines are added, playing more than tricks,
 And thereupon we fix
 Two shorter, caudal lines that cannot fail
 To drag it out; we hammer on a nail
 And thereby hangs a tail,
 But I'll not tell it now; instead, we'll call
 It quits, and close in couplet after all.

★

And as for *Modern Love*, George Meredith,
 Who brooded most ironically upon it,

Used an extended variant of the sonnet
 To do his sad demystifying with
 (Of Eros, and of Hymen, God of marriage,
 Who, to the sound of flagrant, wailing willows
 And low reproaches muttered on the pillows,
 Descended in an armor-plated carriage).
 Behold the form that disillusion takes!
 The *abba* quatrain of the old
 Italian mode, its stories oversold,
 Goes rambling past the point at which it breaks
 Off, and the sestet finishes. Unsweet
 Sixteen, this sonnet-pattern might be named,
 Ending in embers where once passion flamed,
 Sadder and wiser and not half so neat.

★

One final recent variant of sonnet form works
 Its way purely syllabically,* in unrhymed lines
 Of thirteen syllables, and then squares these off with one
 Less line in the whole poem—a thirteener-by-thirteen.
 But hidden in its unstressed trees there can lurk rhyming
 Lines like these (for instance); as in all syllabic verse
 Moments of audible accent pass across the face
 Of meditation, summoning old themes to the fair
 Courtroom of revision, flowing into parts of eight
 And five lines, seven and six, or unrhymed quatrains,
 Or triplets, that like this one with unaligned accents
 Never jingles in its threes or imbecilities.
 Then the final line, uncoupled, can have the last word.

Before we examine some of the more extended
 traditional forms, we might consider the working of
 other systems of verse listed on page 5. *Pure accentual*
 meter, which we all know from the first oral poetry
 we hear—nursery rhymes and so forth—measures
 stressed syllables only:

In *accentual meter* it *doesn't matter*
 Whether each *line* is *thin* or *fatter*;

*See the next page for why this line doesn't seem to scan.

*What you hear (this matters more)
Is one, two, three, four.*

In medieval times,

The oldest English accented meter
Of four, unfailing, fairly audible
Strongly struck stresses seldom
Attended to anything other than
Definite downbeats: how many dim
Unstressed upbeats in any line
Mattered not much; motion was measured
With low leaps of alliteration
Handily harping on heavy accents
(Echoing equally all vowels,
Consonant cousins coming together).

The spirit of purely accentual verse was summoned
up by an eminent Victorian:

Sprung rhythm is modern accentual, counting the downbeats.
Instead of pentameter, Gerard Manley Hopkins' verse
Rains down in no shower, but as the sound of a town beats
Down on the ear in a queer-clear way; his terse
Compound words, noun-to-noun-tethered, togetherd with
strange
Wordings (not absurdings) roamed his rhythms' range.

★

Verse called *skeltonic*
Is not cacophonous;
Jiggly and jumpy,
Loose, somewhat lumpy,
Pleasing or prating,
Graceful or grating,
It's always elating,
Often alliterating
Short lines, and neat,
With double downbeat
(Don't scan them in "feet")
Whose rhymes repeat
Forever—no feat

When the measure's meet—
Mixed in with lines like these,
Clearly accented in threes,
Named for John Skelton,
Scholar-poet who dwelt in
Diss, Norfolk, and then
Paraded his pen
To great reknown
In London town
(Born, as far as we know,
In 1460 or so,
Did this world resign
In 1529).
Such lines, so crammed,
Would be doubly damned
Before being enjambed,
Their line-endings lopped,
Criminally cropped
With syntax dropped.
They are all end-stopped.
A skillful skeltonic
May be macaronic.*

Pure syllabic verse—sometimes called “*isosyllabic*”—
is an importation into English from other languages.
Its lines can be of any length.

Whereas iambic verse will let you hear
Five downbeats, countable inside your ear,

*(In Latin, *id est*,
A magpie's nest
Of languages various,
Stern or hilarious:
Deutsch and *Français*
Together can play
In this wanton way
With *la lingua Italiana*,
Hoy y mañana
When readers understand 'em:
Quod erat demonstrandum.)

Lines made up of ten syllables purely
 Without any arrangement of downbeats
 Will not seem to be in any meter,
 And rhyme becomes something this form defeats.

Thus decasyllabic verse in French or
 Japanese, unaccented, will sound like
 Something strange to English ears, which still lust
 For downbeats, drumbeats (*something*) in a line,
 A last syllable at least, stressed, which hits
 The nail of a rhyme-word: thus rhyme limits,—
 If we are to *hear* it (not as above)—
 Pure syllabic wandering. W.

H. Auden and Marianne Moore both wrote
 In syllabic meter like this, which can
 Always regain a pure *iambic* voice
 By sorting out the accents in its words
 In any line, or rush into hiding
 Again, in caves of accentless shadow.

★

And stanzas made
 up of lines
 of varying length
 like this one—
 with four, three, five, three, six
 syllables, and then one of eight—
 are quite clearly
 of the same
 form as each other;
 but only
 the counting eye can tell:
 You use your fingers, not your ear.

One conventional pure syllabic form, borrowed from
 Japanese poetry, has been popular in English verse
 for over twenty years:

Haiku, with seven
 Syllables in between two
 Shorter lines of five,

Gently—like cherry
 Blossoms in a breeze—allude
 To just one season
 Sometimes: they are a
 Peculiarly Japanese
 Form of epigram.
 In them, brevity
 Lights up with significance
 Like a firefly.

The *cinquain* in older French verse was any kind of five-line stanza. But in English,

Cinquains
 Have lines of four
 Syllables, six, and eight,
 Ending, as starting, with a line
 Of two;
 But when
 Iambs align
 To the trained ear these seem
 To form a line of twelve, and then
 Of ten.
 Cinquains
 In English verse
 Were devised by a bard
 Whose name (alas!) was Adelaide
 Crapsey.

Accentual-syllabic, pure accentual, and pure syllabic verse all count or measure units—either syllables or just accented ones or both—to determine a line. But various kinds of unmeasured verse exist, and have for ages. The most influential of these is the verse form of the Hebrew Bible, as it was translated into English and thereby resonated throughout the language in quotation, allusion, and echo.

The verse of the Hebrew Bible is strange; the meter of Psalms and Proverbs perplexes.

It is not a matter of number, no counting of beats or syllables. Its song is a music of matching, its rhythm a kind of paralleling.

One half-line makes an assertion; the other part paraphrases it; sometimes a third part will vary it.

An abstract statement meets with its example, yes, the way a wind runs through the tree's moving leaves.

One river's water is heard on another's shore; so did this Hebrew verse form carry across into English.

Modern *free verse*, influenced by the inventiveness of Walt Whitman in English (and Arthur Rimbaud among others in French), can be of many sorts; since a line may be determined in almost any way, and since lines may be grouped on the page in any fashion, it is the mode of variation itself which is significant. Here are examples of a number of different types:

Free verse is never totally "free":

It can occur in many forms,

All of them having in common one principle—

Nothing is necessarily counted or measured

(Remember biblical verse—see above).

One form—this one—makes each line a grammatical unit.

This can be a clause

Which has a subject and a predicate,

Or a phrase

Of prepositional type.

The in-and-out variation of line length

Can provide a visual "music" of its own, a rhythm

That, sometimes, indented lines

like diagrammed sentences

Can reinforce.

Our eye—and perhaps in a funny, metaphorical way, our breath itself—

Can be dragged far out, by some rather longer line, across the page,

Then made to trip
On short lines:
The effect is often wry.
Yet such verse often tends
To fall very flat.

★

Another kind of free verse can play a
sort of rhythmic tune at the end
of lines, moving back and forth from those that stop
to those that are enjambed as
sharply as that first one.
Aside from the rhythmic tension
Of varying the ebb and flow of
sense along the lines, of making them seem
more (like this one), or less, like measured lines
(like this
one), this sort of free verse can direct our attention
as well as any iambic line, for
instance, to what our language is made up of:
it can break up compound words at line-ends, sometimes
wittily,
(like someone talking in winter of a whole hiber-
nation of bears)
like tripping hurriedly over what, when you look
down, turns out to have been a grave
stone.

★

Some free verse is arranged in various
graphic patterns like this that suggest
the barely-seen but silent ghost of a
classical verse form
like a fragment of Sapphic . . .

★

Free verse can, like a shrewd smuggler, contain more
Measured kinds of line, hidden
inside its own more random-seeming
ones; and when a bit of song
comes, blown in on a kind of wind, it will move

across my country
 'tis of thee, sweet land
 of liberty,
 of thee
 I sing—the accented verses get cut up
 by line breaks that reveal something about them we'd
 never seen before: it's a little
 like putting a contour map over a street plan
 (*Customs inspector: are you
 trained to hear heroic couplets beating
 on the ear if they are hidden in the linings
 of free verse, as in the case of these above?*)

★

Free verse can build up various
 stanzalike units without
 rhyme or measured line length to hold
 them together, but the power of blank
 space between them marks out their rhythms
 as surely as the timing of some iambic clock
 but, of course, silently: the
 ear alone can't tell where they end.

★

Free verse can be a way of making lines that surge
 With a power of rhythmic motion, pulsing and oceanic, then
 Break, as if a jetty of tumbled boulders had thrust a long
 finger out into the
 Surf, making the rumble of water irregular, keeping
 The lines from becoming too
 Metrical, marked with the yardstick
 Of dactyls.

★

A milder kind
 of *vers libre*
 as it was called
 earlier in this century
 Hardly ever enjambed its lines,
 but used the linear unit

and even stanzalike
gatherings of lines
as a delicate way of controlling,
of slowing
the pace of the reading eye
or speeding it up across the page again.

It could single out
words
and hang them in lines all their own
Like sole blossoms on branches,
made more precious
by their loneliness.

★

And to be able to wander, free
(in a wide field, as it were)
verse can amble about
on a kind of nature walk
the lines following no
usual path, for
then the poem might seem
to have wandered into
another kind of meter's backyard
but
sometimes
seeming
to map out the syntax,
sometimes
seeming to do almost the
opposite,
this kind of meandering verse can
even
oddly
come upon a flower
of familiar rhythm
a sight for sore
ears, or encounter
a bit later
on,
once again a patch of

trochees growing somewhere
(like an old song)
and
 take one by the
stem
 and
break
 it
off

And, finally, a unique kind of rhymed free verse, but of a sort that really can only be considered as antiverse:

Because light verse makes meter sound easy,
 And because saying something just for the rhyme is inept
 and, well, cheesy,
 Even when you spice up rhyme
 With jokes about sagely beating thyme
 (Although *that* line is more compelling
 As a joke about English spelling)
 A famous comic writer whose name follows developed a
 deliberate and highly skilled method of writing lines that
 didn't even try to scan so that the general effect was of
 a metrical hash:
 Ogden Nash.

One formal aberration has reappeared from time to time, in the Hellenistic age, in the Renaissance, and in modern decades. The so-called *pattern-poem* (or "shaped verse" or, as Guillaume Apollinaire referred to his own French exercises, "calligrammes") is composed in, or typographically arranged in, shapes of images of objects or abstract forms, from some aspect of which the poem's "subject" or occasion will arise. An instance of a sort that is composed directly, rather than arranged by a compositor after being written, is this: