

The way of talking about poems that we developed in our classrooms – beat prosody – is being used more and more widely in education and in literary criticism; this short introduction to the rhythms of English metrical poetry presents it in an easy-to-grasp form. Although there is no rhythm without at least some suggestion of meaning, and in a successful poem the two always work inseparably together, we will simplify matters by concentrating at the beginning on the most basic rhythms, and using made-up verse that has no pretensions at being richly meaningful poetry. (You will see, however, that questions of meaning enter very quickly into the discussion.) Later, when we have introduced the most important elements of meter, we shall broaden our discussion to real poems – some famous, some little known – and invite you to use what you have learned about rhythm to perform them, to perceive and enjoy rhythm and meaning working together, and to articulate your experience in the simple terms of beat prosody. Our focus is not on methods of analysis but on poems: on the many ways they stir, move, delight, soothe, or excite us, and on the part that regular but always varied rhythms play in creating their powerful appeal.

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BASIC RHYTHMS

1

We all live with rhythms. In fact, we live in and through rhythms: rhythms of walking, talking, breathing, swimming, writing. When our muscles are engaged in any continuous activity, they prefer to tense and relax rhythmically, in time to a regular beat. The songs we sing and the music we listen or dance to can move our bodies and linger in our minds because they use rhythms that arise from these elementary pulses. Rhythms in poetry work similarly, from the nursery rhymes we chanted as young children to the subtle language we hear in performances of Shakespeare. In this opening chapter, you will see (and more importantly hear and feel) how these basic rhythms, at the heart of all metrical poetry, do their work.

We'll start with four lines written in simple rhythms.

First poem

We won't talk of stress,
We won't talk of feet.
We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.

There are more profound poems. But this one reveals in an uncomplicated way a principal point of our Introduction, that **Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeat** so it will be useful as we begin looking into (and listening to) the way metrical poetry creates its rhythm, and the ways we hear those rhythms. Sometimes a person will say, "There is only one way to hear the rhythm in such-and-such a line." But another person may disagree. How can this happen?

Pretty easily, *in some circumstances* – but not in all circumstances. Our first example will demonstrate this. In “First Poem” you will discover that there are two lines which have alternative meters. To perform the lines in the alternative ways is to take a big step toward understanding how to *hear* and *feel* meters, and then recognize metrical norms.

We can tell you that when the lines were written, it didn’t occur to the writer that there could be differing metrical ways of reading them; he wrote with a single rhythm in mind, or, more precisely, with a single rhythm playing on his pulses. But applying the principles we will be studying, you will see how he was wrong.

First, though, an important point: with every example in this book, you must speak the lines aloud. If we are to understand rhythm in poetry, we have to get physical with it, and the only way to do this is to mouth it and hear it.

So, say the following lines aloud:

We won’t talk of stress,
We won’t talk of feet.

Notice that you’ve emphasized certain words more than others. Which were they?

While writing the lines, our not-particularly-inspired poet was emphasizing “won’t” in both lines, the word “stress” in the first line, and the word “feet” in the second line. For him, the lines went like this (we show emphasis by means of bold type):

We **won’t** talk of **stress**,
We **won’t** talk of **feet**.

This means the lines had two beats. Maybe your performance of the lines was just the same as his. But maybe it wasn’t – in which case you had one of the following pairs of *three*-beat lines:

We won’t **talk** of **stress**,
We won’t **talk** of **feet**.

or

We **won’t** talk of **stress**,
We **won’t** talk of **feet**.

This is a significant moment: we see (or hear) plainly that certain lines can have three valid, natural-sounding, *different* performances. And we also notice that the differing performances influence meanings: the first performance emphasizes the things that we *won’t* be doing; the second emphasizes that *we* won’t be doing certain things – but maybe others will; the third is very emphatic, with the lines almost shouting to express opposition even to bringing up the matter of “stress” and “feet.” (One hears such energetic expression at football games: “Block that kick!”)

Let’s now perform aloud the second pair of lines:

We’ll talk about rhythm –
We’ll talk about beat.

Are there three possibilities for this pair, as there were for the first pair of lines? Try them out, continuing with the patterns we’ve just established, one with two beats in each line, two with three beats. Do they all work?

We’ll **talk** about **rhythm** –
We’ll **talk** about **beat**.

and

We’ll talk **about** **rhythm** –
We’ll talk **about** **beat**.

and

We’ll **talk** **about** **rhythm** –
We’ll **talk** **about** **beat**.

What about the first of the three-beat versions of these lines? Why doesn’t “We’ll talk about **rhythm**” work?

The answer is obvious. Nobody who speaks the English language with average fluency pronounces the word “about” as **about**. It’s

always **about**. So for this pair of lines, the only possibilities are the first and third versions.

But just how likely is it that our poet, while writing his brief verse, had the third version in mind? Try the four lines yourself with this rhythm:

We **won't** talk of **stress**,
We **won't** talk of **feet**.
We'll **talk about rhythm** –
We'll **talk about beat**.

Does it seem to you that it's necessary, when presenting this fairly tame message to a reader, to use this degree of energy? Or do you feel, as we do, that these words, when emphasized so much, become more rhythmical than meaningful? That they turn, in effect, toward jazz rhythms and music?

A question still remains, though. If the first two lines of our small example may be performed in three different ways, and if lines three and four may be performed in only two different ways – because the “about” way won't work – and if the over-emphatic, jazzy way of performing all four lines together seems unnatural, what can we suppose the writer wanted us to experience? Will we say that our poet has written a poem using two rhythms, or meters – that is, two three-beat lines followed by two two-beat lines? Or will we say that the poem is one which the writer expects to be performed with two beats in every line?

As we begin our study of rhythm, you may be inclined to insist, “It's a free country. I hear threes and twos, so my answer is number one.” But we trust, with good reason, that after going through this brief book and performing the examples and listening to the differences you yourself are making, you will choose answer two.

Why? As will be demonstrated in the course of our discussion, poets who bother to write in regular rhythms – in meters – prefer to stick to the patterns they've established. It's part of the art. They work to avoid ambiguities of rhythm. They depend on regularity. And they do this so that when, from time to time, they do change the rhythm a little, or even a lot, the change will be noticed by the reader, or listener. And in this way a meaningful emotional effect can be created.

Here is an illustration of how a variation from the expected meter can cause an emotional reaction; it's a slight rewriting of the opening lines of what is probably the most famous American poem, “A Visit from Saint Nicholas,” published anonymously in 1823. Try reading this aloud:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through
the house
Not a creature was stirring – not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung with care
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.

Because the third line is too short, it's jarring, and for no important reason relating to meaning or feeling. Why then would the poet abruptly interrupt the metrical flow of the line to shock the reader into paying particular attention to the ordinary act of hanging up Christmas stockings? In all likelihood, if we were to see this in a book of poems, we would think, “This is a misprint. Something has been left out.” But the author, reputedly Clement Clark Moore, has in fact respected both the pattern of four beats per line and the rhyming pattern that the first two lines set up; so in the real poem he gives us what we're expecting: “The stockings were hung *by the chimney* with care.” And with our expectations fulfilled, we feel satisfied.

Let's move on now and perform the following lines aloud:

Second poem

Hickory dickory dock,
The verse ticks like a clock.
But when the clock unwinds,
Its mechanism grinds,
And it stops.

How did the first line go? How many beats? Most of us will get “**hick-or-y dick-or-y dock**.” And so a three-beat rhythm is set up. But what if some people hear the word “hickory” as a two-syllable word – “**hick-ry**”? There are two common pronunciations for the word, so of course the two-syllable pronunciation is all right. But does it change the number of beats we hear? No, we still have three. And

even if there is any doubt, the following lines (except for the last) will assure us that we have heard three beats, and that the poet intended them: “But **when the clock unwinds**,” and so on.

What does the first line mean? Hickory is a kind of tree, or its wood, or a switch made of this wood. But what is “dickory”? The question may seem odd, and the answer obvious: dickory is a nice-sounding word made up by somebody to add rhyme and rhythm to a children’s poem. But notice, there is a point to be made here that can be applied to many devices of sound and rhythm we may encounter in the most sophisticated, even the most difficult, poems: often the pleasures to be gained from the *sounds* and *rhythms* of words are more important to the poet than the literal meanings of the words – in fact, the sounds and rhythms *create* meaning. Notice that the literal meaning of “hickory” really has no connection with the nursery rhyme, in which a mouse runs up a clock and then, when the clock strikes, runs back down again. Of course we can suppose, or even insist, that the clock must have been made of hickory; but in this case we must ask, which is greater, the pleasure of coming up with an impossible-to-prove “meaning,” or the pleasure of hearing pleasant, childlike sounds and rhythms working harmoniously together?

The second line can have two readings. Speak the line again, several times, and try to say what the two performances might be; then read on.

The verse ticks like a clock.

Here are the possibilities:

The **verse ticks like a clock**.

The **verse ticks** like a **clock**.

What’s your preferred performance? The first is very regular, and so may be said to reflect the regular ticking of a clock. But perhaps you feel that as a line of verse it is a bit mechanical (like clocks, rather than poems). The second performance, with an emphasis on “ticks,” seems more natural and “spoken” (at least to us), and also has more energy. Now if we were further along – if we were at the point of discussing scansion – we would agree that slightly different markings would be

needed for the different ways of performing the line, whichever one you prefer. But for now, we can agree that there are three beats, and to get into the swing of the simple verse, that’s all we need.

The third line is quite regular (an alternate performance that emphasizes “but” rather than “when” is possible though not likely):

But **when the clock unwinds**,

The regularity is no surprise, for a large proportion of lines in metrical poems will be very regular. Why? The poet knows that if there are too many irregularities, the meter will be lost.

The fourth line is quite regular, too; try saying it aloud:

Its **mechanism grinds**,

You will feel two strong beats:

Its **mechanism grinds**,

But wait. We’ve been saying all along that three beats is the norm, the regular pattern, for this poem. Where is that third beat which can be felt, but that isn’t so strong?

Its **mechanism grinds**,

This is another significant moment. The reader has been rolling rhythmically through the poem, and so feels the beat continuing even when the “-is-” in “mechanism” gets nowhere near the emphasis that “mech-” and “grinds” get. Thus the line fits perfectly into the expected three-beat pattern, even though the “-is-” is a gentle pat rather than a thump.

And our last line?

And it stops.

Two beats, maybe? Or one? Take your pick.

So far we have touched on several important points: that in certain circumstances a single line can have different metrical performances; that poets writing metrically tend to stick to their established patterns;

and that it is possible to feel beats on parts of words that have no special emphasis. In Chapters 2 and 3 we will introduce a method of scansion that will make these points even clearer and easier to understand.

Third poem

Whose woods these are I think I know.

Whose words these are perhaps you know.

They're Frost's, who wrote them long ago.

Again we ask you to perform the lines, naturally but with energy. How many beats do you feel? The norm of our first poem was two beats. Then, we gave you a poem with a three-beat norm. And now?

Whose words these are perhaps you know.

Yes, it's a four-beat line, a variation on the opening of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem published in 1923 by the American poet Robert Frost. (We will look at the complete poem in Chapter 2.) Frost's poem has a generally calm and steady four-beat meter, and in these Third Poem lines there is that same regularity (although without Frost's marvelous language).

Even here, though, many people are likely to perform the line with no particular emphasis on "are." That would leave only three prominent beats.

Whose words these are perhaps you know.

But if you listen and feel, the four-beat rhythm that structures the line will be perceived to give a pat, if not a thump, to "are." And if there is any question about the poem's meter – three-beat or four-beat? – the second line will confirm the sense of the poem's intended four-beat norm.

They're Frost's, who wrote them long ago.

It's useful to remember that a poem's larger context is usually a dependable guide for determining the meter of individual lines

because, as we have said, poets writing metrically tend to stick to patterns.

Two-, three-, and four-beat lines like the ones we've asked you to look at and listen to occur in thousands of poems, but one of the most common lines in metrical poems written in English is the five-beat line. So we'll now give you several five-beat lines about a very famous five-beat-line poem.

Fourth poem

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways

She loved her poet-husband. We can hear

The ways she counted beats, so that her praise

Would come as music to our inner ear.

Here we encounter the meter that has been the most common one for serious poetry in English since the late 1300s, when Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales*. In every century since that time, poets writing metrically have used this five-beat line, which has traditionally been called "iambic pentameter." (More information about conventional names for poetic lines and meters, together with a glossary of other technical terms, will be found in Chapter 6: "Names and labels.") William Shakespeare, John Milton, Anne Bradstreet, Alexander Pope, John Keats, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Frost, Gwendolyn Brooks: these are only a few of those men and women who have enriched poetry in English with poems written in this most flexible and natural-sounding line.

Perhaps you are already familiar with a poem called "How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways," which Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61) included in a collection, entitled *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, addressed to her husband, the poet Robert Browning. As we will discuss in a later chapter, "How Do I Love Thee?" achieves harmony and a sense of conviction in large part by means of its formal dignity and artistic control of intense emotion, to which the five-beat meter makes an important contribution.

Though our example, our Fourth Poem, is short on passion, it can help to illuminate the five-beat rhythm and some of the ways

in which that rhythm may be manipulated to create variety and energy. Let's speak the entire Fourth Poem aloud.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways
She loved her poet-husband. We can hear
The ways she counted beats, so that her praise
Would come as music to our inner ear.

First, notice that there's a big difference between how you've moved from line to line in our earlier three poems and how you move from line to line in this poem. You will remember, or you can look back and see, that in "We won't talk of stress," in "Hickory dickory dock," and in "Whose words these are perhaps you know" there was, at the end of every line, a natural pause, as a complete sentence or phrase would finish with a comma, period, or dash. But in Fourth Poem we have . . . what?

If you try reading our Fourth Poem quite fast, rushing from line to line, you may very well feel what you're experiencing is prose, or almost prose – that written out it would look like this:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways she loved her poet-husband. We can hear the ways she counted beats, so that her praise would come as music to our inner ear.

Although a few readers may pick up hints of a five-beat rhythm, this paragraph, when performed, will be experienced by most as what we all expect ordinary paragraphs to be: prose.

But if a poet wants us to perform poems this way – rushing over the line endings and pausing only at punctuation – why does he or she bother to have lines at all? It takes work and some skill to write a line that is both metrical and natural sounding; if prose can do the whole job, why make life more difficult?

The whole job of poetry is more, though, than to make the kinds of "meaning" we look for in prose. As the last line of our example suggests, the job of poetry is to make a music of language – an enlarged experience rather than an experience entirely summed up by "just the facts." And our Fourth Poem gives some hints of how it can be done.

Perform the first two lines again. How do you hear them? Where do you hear their beats? This is one possible performance:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways
She loved her poet-husband. We can hear

Did you find yourself pausing, just a little bit, after "ways" to mark the line's end and prevent the prose effect we've just noticed as a possibility? If so, good. To observe a poet's line breaks does justice to his or her art and effort. On the other hand, was there a big thump on "ways" – a breaking-off of the sentence and its meaning – and a longish pause following? If so, consider a more natural sort of speech in your performance. Pause a bit, but move on. Rewards in pleasure and understanding will come if you do.

Perhaps for some performers a few of the beats in these lines, like the "po-" in "poet" or the "we" in the second line, may have been more pats than thumps. That's just fine, for there is still a sense that the lines have their expected five beats, in this case felt regularly on every other syllable – except for the first word of our poem. Something is different about that word "Elizabeth." If you look at the syllables closely, you will notice that there are two of them between the beats in the words "Elizabeth" and "Barrett": "E-l-iz-a-beth **Bar**-rett." Nevertheless, this slight difference from the regularity that can be experienced in the rest of the first line, and in the entire second line, does not interfere with the hearing of five beats. Instead, there is a light, extra syllable that adds a bit of interest to the first line's music. You can hear and feel the difference between our original version and a revision where a shorter first name noticeably changes the line's rhythm and effect, making it more thumpingly metrical:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways
Cassandra Barrett Browning counted ways

How do you hear the third line? Here are two possibilities. Try them out. Which version sounds more natural to you? More energetic?

1. The **ways** she counted beats, so that her praise
2. The **ways** she counted beats, so that her praise

There is a choice between a very regular placing of the five beats in performance 1, or a varied placing in performance 2, with emphasis on the “so” rather than the “that.” Either performance is acceptable, though we like performance 2 because for us the emphasis on “so” arouses more anticipation to hear the reason for the poet’s counting beats.

In line four, there are again five beats, but one of them is on a word that doesn’t call for any emphasis – “to”:

Would come as music to our inner ear.

Although it would sound very odd – artificial and mechanical – to give “to” the same kind of thump as the other syllables with beats, it is still possible to *feel* the beat on it if the lines have been performed rhythmically and if the word is pronounced clearly, without slurring it into the next one.

In our next chapter, we will begin scanning these lines, and others, to provide more complete visual representations of the features of rhythmical verse that we have thus far been exploring.

FURTHER PRACTICE

The discussion you have just finished reading and participating in has, we hope, given you a good sense of basic rhythms. But you may wish to try your hand at additional exercises to enhance your skill and confidence. Here are several which have proven useful for those new to the exploration of rhythm in poetry.

1 Reading aloud in groups

This chapter has often asked you to speak lines aloud, sometimes in alternative ways, to become conscious of details in your own performances. But you may find it instructive to get together with several other people, or in a class, and recite metrical **stanzas** aloud – meaningfully, and not timidly. You will discover that this “choral reading” will cause you to adjust your pronunciation in order to conform to the shared expectations of the group. When this happens, the underlying structure of beats becomes unmistakable.

Why? Because as individual performances are submerged in the larger group to create a unified effect, the pulse of the most basic pattern of beats is felt. This is a common experience at sporting events when random shouts become a chorus: “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi! Oi! Oi!”

Here are several poems to read aloud chorally. Listen as a single “committee” reading emerges, especially if you read them more than once. (In the “Further Practice” sections of Chapters 2 and 3 we’ll return to these poems for more detailed discussion.)

The first is a short poetic version of part of Psalm 71, written by Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561–1621). Many poets have attempted to put poems from the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Psalms into regular English meters, and the Countess of Pembroke was one of the most innovative writers to do so in the sixteenth century.

Lord, on thee my trust is grounded:
Leave me not with shame confounded;
But in justice bring me aid.
Let thine ear to me be bended;
Let my life, from death defended, 5
Be by thee in safety stayed.

Our “committee” finds four emphasized syllables, or beats, in each line. Even though the typographical arrangement suggests that lines three and six should somehow be different, the basic meter is the same. The indentations are simply clues that lines three and six share the same rhyme: “aid” and “stayed” (meaning “sustained”).

“The Lily,” one of the *Songs of Experience* by the British poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827), has a similar rhythm. The two last lines may seem longer than the first two (they certainly look longer), but are they really of a different metrical length?

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn:
The humble Sheep, a threatening horn:
While the Lily white, shall in Love delight,
Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.

Here our “committee” finds that although there are a lot more syllables in the two concluding lines, there are only four on which

we feel beats. In line three these are “Lil-,” “white,” “Love,” and “-light”; in line four they are “thorn,” “threat,” “beaut-,” and “bright.”

You can of course experiment with choral readings of any number of metrical poems. But here as a final example is the poem whose concluding lines are carved at the base of the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the United States located on an island in New York harbor between the “twin cities” of New York and Newark; it’s “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus (1849–87). It’s helpful to know that the “old colossus,” the Colossus of Rhodes, was a huge brass statue of the sun god whose legs, it was long believed, straddled the entrance to the harbor of the ancient Greek city of Rhodes.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name 5
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
 With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor, 10
 Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

If your committee’s reading emerges, perhaps after several recitations, with a five-beat norm, you’re doing fine. But you’re likely to discover that different people will initially be feeling those five beats in somewhat different places. This is not surprising.

In the next chapter’s “Further Practice” section you can see one possible placing of the beats in these poems. Don’t worry if our “words-with-the-beat” are not yours. After considering beats more fully, and then the offbeats that come between them, you will be able to return to this choral reading exercise and understand why certain differences are to be expected, and how those differences can reveal nuances in the poem’s meaning.

2 Metrical walking and tapping

When walking down a corridor, or along the street, make up sentences (using nonsense words if you like) where there’s an emphasized word or syllable for every step – and different words or syllables coming between the steps. Like this:

The cor-ri-dor is full of junk and I am feel-ing
 STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP
 pret-ty stu-pid as I try to make my way.
 STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP

Or, you can “walk” nursery rhymes or other metrical poems which you may have in your head – or which you can have on a piece of paper and “walk-read” aloud. For example:

Twink-le, twink-le, litt-le star,
 STEP STEP STEP STEP
 How I wond-er what you are.
 STEP STEP STEP STEP

or

I lift my lamp be-side the gold-en door!
 STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP

Some “metrical walkers” like to feel that every first beat in five-beat lines will come consistently on the right foot (or the left). These people are happier when they add an “end of the line” step before moving on to the next line – like this, with the beats beginning with the right foot (Rf):

The wretch-ed ref-use of your teem-ing shore.
 Rf Lf Rf Lf Rf Lf
 Send these, the home-less, temp-est-tossed to me,
 Rf Lf Rf Lf Rf Lf
 I lift my lamp be-side the gold-en door!”
 Rf Lf Rf Lf Rf Lf

With this device you can walk through a great deal of five-beat verse, learning a lot about its underlying rhythm and also noticing those moments of surprise that will create significant meaning when the lines are not marched to, but spoken in a natural way.

If walking is difficult or impossible for you, a similar sort of exercise can be performed by tapping with your foot or finger, or with a pencil in your hand.

E-liz-abeth Bar-ratt Brown-ing count-ed ways
TAP TAP TAP TAP TAP

Incidentally, in the early 1800s the English poet William Wordsworth would often compose his poems out loud while walking along village roads, where others would sometimes observe him. In lines 122 to 130 of the fourth book of his long autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, published after his death in 1850, he expresses gratitude that the dog accompanying him would always give “timely notice” (bark?) when others approached, so that the poet could become “normal” again and be prepared

To give and take a greet-ing that might save
STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP
My name from pit-eous rum-ours, such as wait
STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP
On men sus-pect-ed to be crazed in brain.
STEP STEP STEP STEP STEP

Wordsworth doesn’t specifically say that he stepped to his meters, but he does admit to murmuring and talking to himself while being “harassed with the toil of verse” – evidence of his physical involvement with poetry.

3 An annoying limerick

Here’s a conventional limerick. Perhaps you’ve come across it before.

There once was a diner at Crewe
Who discovered a mouse in his stew.
Said the waiter, “Don’t shout
And wave it about,
Or the rest will be wanting one too!”

Are there any metrical problems with reciting this aloud? Does it seem to you that it’s metrical just fine? It does to us.

But what about this one, also familiar to many?

There once was a man from Japan
Whose limericks never would scan.
When friends asked him why
He replied with a sigh,
“Because I always try to put as many words in the
last line as ever I possibly can.”

All of us familiar with limericks know what that last line is supposed to be: something four-beat, like “I haven’t learned yet – but I can!” So we get the joke when that last line is absolutely not metrical. We’re surprised and amused.

Here’s a question, though. In spite of knowing that you will fail to get that line into four beats however fast you rush through it (you can even *see* that it’s impossible), do you want to make it fit the expected meter? Do you try to do it? Are you not only amused by the limerick, but a bit annoyed by it as well – because it doesn’t play by the rules?

We can’t answer this question for you, but bringing it up seems worthwhile – because, as will become evident in the chapters to come, a more subtle creation of surprise often generates vitality and enhances meaning in metrical poetry.

BEATS

B, b, [B]

2

In our preceding chapter you were asked to recite a number of metrical lines aloud and with energy. You compared your performances with ours. We discovered that most of the time there was agreement about the placing of the beats, but that some of us had slightly differing performances of individual lines with, naturally, slightly differing meanings. For of course in daily conversation our way of saying a sentence can change its meaning: “I’ll never go there again” (but maybe someone else will); or “I’ll never go **there** again” (because the place is awful). And, finally, we observed that some lines can be performed in more than one perfectly natural-sounding way that preserves the expected number of beats. In Chapter 1, then, we did what poets do when they write in meter: they listen for the beat.

Now we come to scansion, a useful device for noting down what the reader or performer experiences when he or she responds to the rhythm of a poem. Scanning a poem simply means showing on paper, through the use of a few clear, easily remembered signs, where the beats and offbeats are felt, and the patterns – quite a small number of patterns – that they produce. If a poem is written in a particular meter (as virtually all poetry in English of the past five hundred years is, and as a growing amount of contemporary poetry is), it’s important to be sensitive to just what’s happening with that aspect of the poet’s performance, in the same way that it’s important to be sensitive to subtleties of language and meaning. What we are going to present in this chapter is a simple way of noting down what people actually do when performing metrical poetry.

As we’ve already seen, the first part of a metrical line that people usually notice is the beats, so that’s where we’ll begin our scansion.

We looked in Chapter 1 at a First Poem that began, “We won’t talk of stress.” We discovered that the line could be said in three different ways – in one case with two beats and in two cases with three, as you will recall:

We **won’t** talk of **stress**,
 We won’t **talk** of **stress**,
 and We **won’t** talk of **stress**,

Here the beats were emphasized by the use of boldface type. The way our scansion – called beat scansion – indicates a word or part of a word that has an evident emphasis, and so may carry a beat, is by the use of a capital **B**. Here is the simple way we scan the line to indicate the beats in the three performances.

We won’t talk of stress,
 B B
 or We won’t talk of stress,
 B B B
 or We won’t talk of stress,
 B B B

Using a single letter symbol we have indicated our three possible readings: the first, clearly enough, a two-beat line, the second and third three-beat lines.

What about the next line, with the beats scanned in the three ways? Again, simple enough:

We won’t talk of feet.
 B B
 or We won’t talk of feet.
 B B B
 or We won’t talk of feet.
 B B B

You can do the next two lines by yourself:

We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.

We suggest that you write the lines out, mark them, and then compare your performances with ours, given below (p. 28). (Notice that we place the **B** under the first vowel of the syllable that carries the beat.)

Going on to our second poem, you will hear – and see – that it would have the easily recognized beats of its first line scanned this way:

Hickory dickory dock,
B B B

And the second line in one of these two ways:

The verse ticks like a clock.
B B B

or The verse ticks like a clock.
B B B

And the third, a perfectly regular line:

But when the clock unwinds,
B B B

And the fourth – but wait. We noticed that the “-is-” of “mechanism” carries the beat. How can we indicate that this beat is not a thump but a pat? Various ways have been devised for noting a beat that is *not* emphasized, but we will use a lower-case **b** – available on typewriters and computers, and written easily by hand. So we have this:

Its mechanism grinds,
B b B

Three beats, as we know; and the letter B is there three times, though one of them is the pat (**b**) rather than the thump (**B**). (We will consider the final short line in the next chapter.)

We are, of course, talking about thumps and pats in a metaphorical way – nobody is putting a hand on anybody's shoulder, either heavily or lightly. But the metaphor works well enough because it calls attention to what the reader *feels*, and that's the important thing. As we go on it will become more evident that the context of a line provides the expectation of just how many beats we are likely to encounter: “Its mechanism grinds” will have three beats because it can naturally be heard with three beats, and because *every preceding line has had three beats*. A norm has been established and so we hear and feel what we expect to hear and feel.

In Chapter 1 we mentioned that there is an additional fact about poems written in lines with three easily recognized beats. If you pay very close attention to your physical experience, you may discover that in “Hickory dickory dock” the rhythm actually carries beyond the written lines; you may feel an extra beat, a “virtual beat” – [**B**] – that brings the total to four:

Hickory dickory dock
B B B [**B**]

After looking at four- and five-beat lines, we will see and hear how this unpronounced beat is particularly evident in poems written in “ballad stanzas.”

But let's return to our pronounced **B**'s and **b**'s. Chapter 1's four-beat poem was modeled on the opening of a poem by Robert Frost. Here it is with its beats in bold type, then with the beats scanned:

Whose **words** these **are** perhaps you know.
They're **Frost's**, who **wrote** them long ago.

Whose words these are perhaps you know.
B B B B
They're Frost's, who wrote them long ago.
B B B B

If your performance gives less emphasis to “are,” you will of course have a **b** instead of a **B** under that word. Either sounds natural enough.

Now it's time to turn to the real poem, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which has four stanzas of four lines each. Here are the first two stanzas to read aloud:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

5

The four-beat norm is inescapable; and we can feel that the sense created of peacefulness and thoughtfulness is due not only to the description of the scene, and to the poet's musings, but also to the steady regularity of the four-beat rhythm. Now, having read aloud – that essential requirement for feeling and hearing the meter – do a second thing to become even more intimate with the poem and with its rhythm: *copy the eight lines out on a piece of paper*. Double or triple space. Listen to the words as you copy, making sure that you don't drop or add anything. (Scansion is wrecked if you don't copy accurately.)

Now that you have your own copy, and before reading on, put the B's and b's under the first vowels of those words or syllables that carry the beat.

With that done, we can now discuss the places where your scansion – or performance – and ours may differ, and just what the possibilities are. To start, here is our scansion of the lines:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 B b B B
His house is in the village though;
 B b B B
He will not see me stopping here
 B B B B
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
 B B B B

My little horse must think it queer

5

B B B B

To stop without a farmhouse near

B B B B

Between the woods and frozen lake

B B B B

The darkest evening of the year.

B B b B

How closely do you agree with us? Here are the lines where we'd expect to see other possibilities:

- 1: Under "are" a **B** instead of a **b**. Why not? – you would simply have a more emphatically metrical line. But with a little less emphasis on the "are" we give greater emphasis to "woods," the more important word. So we've preferred that performance.
- 2: Maybe you've put a **B** under "in." That would mean giving a lot of emphasis to the word – but does "in" really deserve it? Listen carefully to your own performance again; you might want to reconsider.
- 3: It's very likely that you put the **B** under "will" rather than "He." That's certainly acceptable. Notice, though, what our performance brings to the poem. With an emphasis on "He," the difference between the speaker and the man in the village is made more vivid: "He," being at home, is not concerned with woods on a snowy evening; he's a different sort of person from the one who stops to meditate on the loveliness and mystery of the scene. The metrical emphasis on the pronoun also suggests a connection between feelings in this stanza – where the poem's speaker seems disturbed to think that "He," the villager, might see him stopping – and the feelings in the next stanza, where the "little horse," who likewise prefers houses, must think that the speaker's pausing for a meditative moment is queer. What are your opinions?
- 4: Our performance is likely to be yours, though putting the **B** under "fill" rather than "up" is a possibility. Such a performance could give an even stronger sense of the snow actually burying the woods.

- 5: A very regular line; there aren't any natural-sounding alternatives.
- 6: Perhaps a **b** rather than a **B** under the "out" in "without" would indicate your way of saying the line. Incidentally, you may notice that the "house" part of "farmhouse" gets pretty much of a thump – perhaps nearly as much as the "farm" part. A North American pronunciation would be more likely to do this than a British one, but it's still not enough of a thump to attract a beat, which would break Frost's pattern by giving us five **B**'s in the line. It's not likely that he would have done it, so we won't either. (Later we will see how beat scansion can show nearly equal emphasis on "farm" and "house.")
- 7: Another perfectly regular line.
- 8: As with line two, we suggest that if you put a **B** rather than a **b** under "of," reconsider. A general rule is not to thump articles (*a, an, the*) and prepositions (*with, of, by, to*, and so on). In some circumstances, of course, general rules are broken; listening and feeling will tell you what to do.

A general observation about performing and marking beats: some performers, particularly beginners, indicate mostly strong beats – **B**'s – when scanning metrical verse in English. As they become more sensitive to their own practice, though, they tend to develop more nuanced readings which draw on the full resources of the spoken language – observing the beats but not giving them excessive emphasis. So try, then, to listen carefully and avoid over-emphatic performances which, like our "We **won't** talk of **stress**," become chant-like and move away from the tones of a speaking voice. In reciting nursery rhymes it's fine to emphasize every beat strongly – even those syllables that would be quite weak in normal speech. But poets writing metrical verse take advantage of the possibility of using unemphasized syllables for beats, and the most persuasive and moving performances reflect this.

These two stanzas from "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" are only half of the poem, and you may want to complete the scansion, so here is the text of stanzas 3 and 4, which you can copy out and use for marking beats. Then, you may compare your performance with ours, which is given later in the chapter (p. 28).

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake. 10
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep, 15
And miles to go before I sleep.

By the way, when you do exercises like this, try to mark the beats quickly, at the moments you experience them when reading aloud. If you pause within lines and start staring at the words on the page, the physical activity of feeling the beats can become the visual or mental activity of working out a puzzle. It won't help at all, and it's a good way to complicate your life needlessly.

Now, having considered Frost's four-beat lines, we'll complete our scanning of the beats in our Chapter 1 verses by marking the beats in these five-beat lines with the **B**'s and **b**'s that match up with the emphasized and unemphasized syllables. Here is what we came up with first in the previous chapter:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways
She loved her poet-husband. We can hear
The ways she counted beats, so that her praise
Would come as music to our inner ear.

This performance of the four lines would be scanned as follows:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning counted ways
B B B B B
She loved her poet-husband. We can hear
B B B B B
The ways she counted beats, so that her praise
B B B B B
Would come as music to our inner ear.
B B b B B

But you will remember that the third line had an alternate performance, which we see here:

The **ways** she counted beats, so that her praise

This performance would be scanned with the third and fourth beats heard in the words “beats” and “so”:

The ways she counted beats, so that her praise
 B B B B B

Not complicated. But perhaps you have noticed that the basic rule for meter in English poetry – that rhythm is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats – seems to be broken here, because we have two **B**’s together, with no syllable between them. (You may have even noticed that our line “The verse ticks like a clock” could be performed with beats coming side by side.) Don’t worry. This chapter’s concern is only with beats. In the next chapter we will get to offbeats, and when we do you will see that useful signs are available to show just what is happening when our performances give us these kinds of change in a line’s rhythm, its music.

We have now discussed the meanings of **B** and **b** in scansion, and how they provide visual representations of the rhythms discovered by reading lines naturally and with energy. After discussing our three-beat poem, though, we referred very briefly to an additional beat symbol, the [**B**], which is particularly useful in showing what is happening rhythmically in an often-encountered stanza of verse, the “ballad stanza” (also known as “common meter” or “common measure”), where four-beat lines alternate with three-beat ones. To hear and feel what’s going on, perform aloud the following stanza from a poem by the English poet Robert Herrick, who published “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” in 1648:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 Old time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dying.

Here’s our performance, with its “visible” beats indicated by bold type:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 Old time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dying.

Do you sense, as we do, that the second and fourth lines continue on metrically beyond the words that are read and spoken? Test the notion. Recite and compare Herrick’s stanza with this altered version – which we’ve concocted:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 Old time is still a-flying on;
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dead and gone.

Notice that when a poem has a very rhythmical four-beat line, one expects the next line to have four beats as well. That expectation is satisfied by our lengthened versions of Herrick’s lines. But even the shorter lines which the poet originally wrote, where only three beats are “visible,” the missing fourth beat is felt as an evident pause when the line is performed. With an extra beat occurring after “flying” and “dying,” the number of experienced beats in all of the lines comes to four. When this beat is included in scansions, as is most usual with ballad stanzas, it is represented by [**B**]. We call this extra beat a **virtual beat**, because it isn’t created directly by language but, instead, by our tendency to perceive simple rhythms in four-beat units.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 B B B B
 Old time is still a-flying;
 B B B [**B**]
 And this same flower that smiles today
 B B B B
 Tomorrow will be dying.
 B b B [**B**]

Perhaps your performance, and scansion, had a few more **b**’s in the place of our **B**’s (as for “while” and “still”), and perhaps you gave

more emphasis to “will” than we did. But the important thing to notice is that not only do the four-beat lines have their expected four **B**’s; the three-beat ones also have four beats – three spoken **B**’s plus the additional [**B**] that indicates the “beat without a word,” or virtual beat, which is felt as a strong pause coming at the ends of the lines. (A composer setting this stanza to music would almost certainly take into account the virtual beats, perhaps by stretching out the last syllable of “a-flying” and “dying.”)

Having discussed and practiced the scansion of beats in the kinds of lines that make up so large a part of the metrical poetry in English, we will turn, in our next chapter, to filling out our scansions with the offbeats.

PERFORMANCES, WITH COMMENTARY

Here are our performances of the second part of our first example.

We’ll talk about rhythm –

B B
B B B

We’ll talk about beat.

B B
B B B

And here is how we would do the final verses of Frost’s “Stopping by Woods.”

He gives his harness bells a shake

B B B B

To ask if there is some mistake.

B B/b B B

The only other sound’s the sweep

B B/b B B

Of easy wind and downy flake.

B B B B

10

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

B B B B

But I have promises to keep,

B B b B

And miles to go before I sleep,

B B B/b B

And miles to go before I sleep.

B B B/b B

15

Note that in the above performance we’ve brought out the beats prominently; the only clearly unemphasized syllable that carries a beat is the third syllable in “promises.” (This is a syllable that can’t be given emphasis without sounding forced, and a more “spoken” performance will still allow the syllable to be experienced as a beat.) But perhaps your performance was somewhat less metrically emphatic, and so you marked some of our **B**’s as **b**’s. We’ve added “/b” after those **B**’s that could just as well have been **b**’s. You will decide for yourself how the two performances differ, though for us a strongly emphasized “before” in the last two lines suggests an energetic moving toward the future, whereas an unemphasized “before” suggests a tired longing for rest.

FURTHER PRACTICE

In the “Further Practice” section of Chapter 1, we considered choral readings, walkings, and tappings of poems by Mary Sidney, William Blake, and Emma Lazarus, along with several lines by William Wordsworth. Further consideration of these verses may be useful here, with the beat symbols instead of STEP or TAP. We have just noted in our discussion of Robert Frost’s poem that differing performances will result in some people emphasizing a word that carries the beat while others will not give the same word any particular emphasis (though it will still carry a beat). So here we may review the possible choices between **B** and **b** in the “step-or-tap” poems and briefly comment on different meanings that can arise from the choice one makes.

This is the way we'd do the beats for the poem by Mary Sidney. Instead of using **B/b** to show that a beat may or may not be emphasized, as with the Frost poem, we'll show our alternative performances on separate lines.

Lord, on thee my trust is grounded:
 B B B B
 Leave me not with shame confounded;
 B B B B
 b
 But in justice bring me aid.
 B B B B
 b b
 Let thine ear to me be bended;
 B B B B
 b
 Let my life, from death defended,
 B B B B
 b
 Be by thee in safety stayed.
 B B B B

5

How do the two proposed readings of the second line (with or without emphasis on "not") differ? Here's what we'd say: when the "not" is emphasized, the plea "Leave me not" seems very strong: "Don't leave me, Lord, because I am bewildered and confused by shame." When there is no particular emphasis on "not," the meaning shifts to emphasize the "shame" of the speaker: "Don't abandon me to being so shameful a person."

Small **b**'s instead of large **B**'s in the third line make the performance less insistently metrical; consequently, the principal words for those things the speaker is pleading for – "justice" and "aid" – are given greater prominence. It would be possible to debate the emphasis, or lack of it, on "bring"; however, we would argue for not emphasizing the line's first word, "but," although of course it carries the beat.

The third alternative performance that we've proposed is in line four, where a lack of emphasis on "me" suggests the speaker's humility, particularly when contrasted with the strongly emphasized "thee" in the last line.

Finally, the absence of alternative performances in the last two lines, at least as we hear them, allows the eight emphasized beats to express the strength of the poet's convictions.

Of course, you may prefer still other alternative performances, such as having unemphasized **b**'s at the start of the concluding lines. If so, how would you say those performances alter, even slightly, the meanings that the lines convey?

Here is Blake's "The Lily," with our sense of the beats indicated:

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn:
 B B B B
 The humble Sheep, a threatening horn:
 B B B B
 While the Lily white, shall in Love delight,
 B B B B
 Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.
 B B B B

This seems straightforward enough to us, and we'd bet that a choral reading would arrive at this disposition of beats. But looking (and listening) carefully, one discovers that if one isolates the third line and considers it without its larger context, an alternative performance suggests itself:

While the Lily white, shall in Love delight,
 B B B B B B

A line with six beats. Do we have a situation, then, where Blake shifts from four- to six-beat lines? Perhaps this seems like a real possibility; but for us to take it seriously, we would most likely have to find six beats in the final line as well. Will that work?

Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.
 B B B

There's the problem. We might be able to wrench the line into six beats, but feeling a beat on "a" – the first possibility we'd try – raises real doubts. So the four-beat "committee" reading deserves to prevail.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 B B B B B
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 B B B B B
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 B B B B B
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 B B b B B
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 b B B b B
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 B B b B B
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 B B B B B
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 B B B B B
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 B B B B B
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, 10
 B B B B B
 Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
 B B B B B
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 B B b B B
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
 B B B B B
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"
 B B B B B

To give and take a greeting that might save
 B B B b B
 My name from piteous rumours, such as wait
 B B B b B
 On men suspected to be crazed in brain.
 B B b B B

BEATS 33

OFFBEATS

o, O, -o-, [o], ô

3

Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats. This is the principle we first proposed in our Introduction. And in Chapter 2 we showed how the scansion indicates the beats with **B**'s in their three varieties – **B**, **b**, and [**B**]. So you have already learned the first part of the system. And perhaps you have become more aware than ever before of those pleasing rhythms in metrical lines that readers take from the printed page and perform either aloud or in their own "inner ears." For the second part of the system, the offbeats, there is a larger variety of possibilities; we'll begin looking at and listening to them now.

We know, from our rule, that the offbeats will come between the beats. And in the heading of this chapter you will see the symbols for the five different sorts of offbeat that we will encounter most frequently in metrical verse.

The easiest way to become familiar with the different **o**'s is to listen to them in use. So we'll start with our First Poem. Here's where we found the **B**'s in our three performances of the poem's first line:

We won't talk of stress,
 B B
 or We won't talk of stress,
 B B B
 or We won't talk of stress,
 B B B

Where are the offbeats? Easy – between the beats. So they're marked this way:

We won't talk of stress,
 o B -o- B
 or We won't talk of stress,
 B o B o B
 or We won't talk of stress,
 o B ô B o B

In this example you can find three of the most common kinds of offbeat:

In our two-beat performance, we have a **double offbeat** (-o-), where two words, "talk of," are hurried over and are *together* felt as an offbeat.

In the first of our three-beat performances, there is an entirely regular alternation of beats and offbeats, so **single offbeat** (o) symbols are used to indicate it.

In the second of the three-beat performances, we have the **implied offbeat** (ô), an offbeat which occurs where there is no word or part of a word that occupies the space between two beats (and where no punctuation or other obvious break creates a distinct pause). We sense this necessary pause because an energetic performance of the words "**won't talk**" creates an eddy in the smooth flow of the line. This tendency to sense a pause or hesitation, though not an actual moment of silence, between strongly stressed syllables is a feature of the way English is spoken, a feature which metrical verse makes use of – though it always produces a disruption in the regular alternations of the rhythm. (Users of word processing programs will find several easy ways of keyboarding the implied offbeat symbol, ô, in the list of scansion symbols, page 149.)

Let's scan our second line, in its three performances:

We won't talk of feet.
 o B -o- B
 or We won't talk of feet.
 B o B o B
 or We won't talk of feet.
 o B ô B o B

And now let's complete the scansion of our final lines – which have only two possibilities of performance (because we don't want to mispronounce “about”). Notice that our implied offbeat now is experienced between the vigorously emphasized “**about**” and the equally emphasized syllables “**rhyth-**” and “**beat**”:

Two-beat version:

We'll talk about rhythm –
o B -o- B o

We'll talk about beat.
o B -o- B

Three-beat version:

We'll talk about rhythm –
o B o B ô B o

We'll talk about beat.
o B o B ô B

For those occasional instances where we encounter double offbeats with certain *emphasized* syllables, the -o- symbol can be varied. If your performance gives an emphasis to the first syllable of the double offbeat, this symbol will indicate it: =o-. If the second syllable of the double offbeat is emphasized, this symbol is used: -o=. In *exceedingly* rare circumstances both offbeat syllables can be emphasized: =o=. (This would represent a very energy-charged performance indeed.) Here are examples, in two-beat lines:

With song in the street,
We'll say, “Hear the beat,”
o B =o- B

Or being discreet,
We'll murmur, “Nice beat.”
o B -o= B

If noises compete,
We'll shout, “Far-out beat!”
o B =o= B

In this context of two-beat lines, perhaps one will suppress a bit of the natural emphasis on “Hear,” “Nice,” and both parts of “Far-out”; what our = sign indicates is just this tension between a word that demands a certain degree of emphasis and a meter that demands – at this point – very little.

The two opening lines of our second poem are scanned in the following way, by adding the offbeats between the *pronounced* beats we noted in Chapter 2. You'll see just how the rhythms of the lines as we heard them have been represented very fully by our B's and our three different kinds of o.

Hickory dickory dock,
B -o- B -o- B

The verse ticks like a clock.
o B o B o B

or The verse ticks like a clock.
o B ô B -o- B

Here there are regular offbeats, double offbeats, and an implied offbeat (between the strongly emphasized words “verse” and “ticks” in the last example). Notice that the first of the two alternative ways of performing the second line means treating the word “ticks” as having no more emphasis than words like “the” or “a”: this only happens if we're *chanting* the verse, which means exaggerating the beat-offbeat pattern. As we said earlier, the second alternative is closer to the way someone would speak this sentence normally.

Let's complete our scansion of the pronounced syllables in our second poem by adding the offbeats:

But when the clock unwinds,
o B o B o B

Its mechanism grinds,
o B o b o B

And it stops.
-o- B

or perhaps And it stops.
B o B

How would you read the unwinding-clock line if it went like this?

But when the clock winds down

If we say the line in the rhythm established by the previous lines, we will experience emphases not on two of the line's final words, like "clock unwinds," but on three of them: "clock winds down." Rather than sensing three beats in a row, though, we'll feel the two beats where we expect them with an offbeat in between. For this situation, we have another type of offbeat, the **emphasized offbeat**, whose symbol is a capital **O**:

But when the clock winds down

o B o B O B

Emphasized offbeats will be turning up in many of the lines we'll be encountering, making their contribution to the spoken quality and energy of the poems in which they occur.

It may seem to you that we're accumulating quite a number of symbols. But one soon becomes familiar with their use; and when that happens, problems vanish and we discover that we are responding fully to the pleasures of rhythm that centuries of poets writing metrically in earlier periods and our own have prepared for us.

Let's now complete the scansion of the first two stanzas of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," showing Frost's use of some of the different kinds of beat and offbeat. Note that just as the scene is a calm and "easy" one, the scansion is on the whole very regular – the **B**'s and **o**'s follow each other with a confident orderliness. Our own preferred performance – perhaps not yours – for line three is given here; note how the "beat, double offbeat, beat" pattern works, and listen carefully to how it sounds:

Whose woods these are I think I know.

o B o b o B o B

His house is in the village though;

o B o b o B o B

He will not see me stopping here

B -o- B o B o B

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

o B o B o B o B

My little horse must think it queer

o B o B o B o B

To stop without a farmhouse near

o B o B o B o B

Between the woods and frozen lake

o B o B o B o B

The darkest evening of the year.

o B o B o b o B

5

We gave our reasons in Chapter 2 for preferring an emphasis on "He" in the third line. It will become clear, as we encounter more instances, that the "beat, double offbeat, beat" pattern is a very common one for the beginnings of lines in innumerable poems.

You may remember that also in Chapter 2, when discussing the beats in line six, we said that later "we will see how beat scansion can show nearly equal emphasis on 'farm' and 'house.'" Let's look at that now, because it will give us another chance to use our symbol for an emphasized offbeat. Though the two parts of "farmhouse" probably aren't given as much emphasis as, say, the two parts of the common slang phrase "far-out," you might wish to emphasize the "house" part in your own performance and mark it accordingly. So here's how it would look, using the symbol **O**:

To stop without a farmhouse near

o B o B o B O B

We've been saying right along that even small differences in performance will create differences in meaning; if in this line "house" were emphasized along with "farm," the entire absence of dwellings, of other people, might be brought out more strongly. Perhaps, too, we would be reminded of the other house in the poem, the house of the owner of the woods; then our sense of the solitariness of the person who stops by woods on a snowy evening would be enhanced.

If you scanned the beats in the last two stanzas of Frost's poem, as suggested in Chapter 2, you may want to complete your scansion now by including the offbeats. That will be easy, because all of the offbeats are single ones coming regularly between the **B**'s and **b**'s, just where one would expect them.

FURTHER PRACTICE

Here are completed scansions of the poems to which beats were added at the end of Chapter 2. These are our preferred scansions. What alternatives can you suggest? How do they change, even subtly, a line's meaning, or its tone?

You may find that occasionally you feel there is an unstressed syllable not marked in the scansion: would you, for instance, pronounce "threatening" and "conquering" as two or three syllables? Both are common pronunciations. We've already seen a different kind of example in "flower" – one or two syllables? Although these different pronunciations mean different scansions, they don't cause any significant disruption to the flow of the rhythm – partly because the additional syllable is always a very weak one (you may even be unsure as to whether you do hear it as a separate syllable), and partly because single and double offbeats play a very similar role in the alternating rhythm of English meter.

First, the poem by Mary Sidney (p. 30):

Lord, on thee my trust is grounded:

B o B o B o B o

Leave me not with shame confounded;

B o b o B o B o

But in justice bring me aid.

b o B o b o B

Let thine ear to me be bended;

B o B o b o B o

Let my life, from death defended,

B o B o B o B o

Be by thee in safety stayed.

B o B o B o B

Here is our performance of Blake's "The Lily" (p. 31). You will note that we hear an emphasis on the word "stain" in the final line; as it is part of a double offbeat, the =o- variation of the double-offbeat symbol is used.

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn:

o B o B o B o B

The humble Sheep, a threatening horn:

o B o B o B o B

While the Lily white, shall in Love delight,

-o- B o B -o- B o B

Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.

-o- B -o- B =o- B o B

What meaning, by the way, do you take from this enigmatic little poem, which we've now encountered for a third time? Is the Lily, delighting in Love, an emblem of virtue and purity as opposed to the Rose and Sheep, with their more complex, partly hurtful double natures? Or is the Lily simply less overt in acknowledging her complexity?

It isn't easy to choose. That word "while" in line 3 can mean both "even though" (a contrast) and "at the same time that" (a similarity). Then too, the unexpected emphasis on the word "stain" in the final double offbeat seems odd when the expected emphases would be on "beauty" and "bright" alone. (Compare Blake's line with this: "Nor a thorn nor a threat in her beauty bright.") What do you think? Is Blake here asking us to consider questions whose answers must be decided by each of us individually?

Our completed scansion of "The New Colossus" (p. 32) would be as follows (the symbols under line 5 indicate a disagreement: one of us gives "Is" some emphasis, the other doesn't). Note again, in line 9, the instance of a double offbeat with one of its syllables emphasized. Do you feel that this performance of the line – a necessary one, we would say – thus adds energy to what the statue, the Mother of Exiles, announces?

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,

B -o- B o B -o- B ô B

With conquering limbs astride from land to land;

o B o B o B o B o B

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

B -o- B o B o B o B

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 o B o B o b o B o B
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name 5
 o b o B o B o b o B
 b -o- B
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 B -o- B o b o B o B
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 O B O B -o- B ôB o B
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 o B O B -o- B ôB o B
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 B =o- B o B o B o B
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, 10
 o B o B [o] B -o- B o B
 Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
 o B o B o B -o- B ôB
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 o B o B o b o B o B
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
 O B o B o B o B o B
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"
 o B o B o B o B o B

We find particularly moving the four emphasized words at the beginning of line 7, "Glows world-wide welcome" (made even more prominent by the alliteration of "world-wide welcome").

Finally, the Wordsworth lines (p. 33), where his dog's warning of approaching people permits the poet

To give and take a greeting that might save
 o B o B o B o b o B
 My name from piteous rumours, such as wait
 o B o B o B o b o B
 On men suspected to be crazed in brain.
 o B o B o b o B o B

Notice that with the completion of the scansion for the first line, an alternative scansion suggests itself:

To give and take a greeting that might save
 o B o B o B -o- B ôB

This seems to us perhaps the more interesting performance, because the stronger emphasis on "might" in "might save" hints that the poet is expressing, with this word, his uncertainty that he will ever escape being thought of as crazy by the practical people in his neighborhood.

RHYTHMIC FIGURES

5

Poets writing in regular meters can vary their patterning of emphasized and unemphasized syllables only within strict limits, or else the lines will cease to be metrical or will be heard as some other meter (as when five-beat lines collapse into a four-beat rhythm). In exploiting these limited possibilities, poets down the centuries have used the same short metrical sequences time and time again, and in scanning and responding to metrical poetry it's helpful to be able to recognize them and understand some of their uses. We call these mini-patterns **rhythmic figures**, and in this chapter we'll ask you to look at, and listen to, the most common of them. The five major figures have already been encountered in earlier chapters, though we didn't dwell on them there; now we can revisit some of those examples with a different purpose. Two of these figures involve three syllables – **o b o** and **B O B** – and the other three involve four syllables – **B -o- B**, **-o- B ô B**, and **B ô B -o-**.

1 o b o

Again and again, it has become clear that syllables without any particular emphasis can be felt as beats. Here are some examples:

Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

The darkest evening of the year.
o b o

Lazarus, "The New Colossus":

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
o b o

Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze
o b o

In these examples, the words we've marked as **b** are all words normally pronounced very lightly. In reading these lines, there's no need to give them extra emphasis: because of the situation in which we encounter them, they can happily function as beats in the rhythm of the line as long as they are not rushed in pronunciation. That situation is evident from these examples – between two other lightly pronounced syllables that are functioning as offbeats.

There is one other place where a beat on a syllable which is not emphasized is easily felt, and that's at the end of the line:

A host, of golden daffodils;
o b

Again, a performance doesn't have to give an artificial emphasis to the last syllable of "daffodils"; because it falls between an unemphasized syllable functioning as an offbeat and the end of the line, the beat is felt when the word is given a normal pronunciation.

It is often tempting to give a little extra weight to these **b**'s to help bring out the alternating pattern of the meter, and in some instances this can be justified. The more appropriate a chant-like reading is, the more one can add a bit of emphasis that wouldn't be there in a prose version. In *The Song of Hiawatha*, a poem which imitates the meter of a Finnish epic, the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) uses lines whose norm is to begin with beats, even when they're unemphatic words:

Listen to this Indian Legend,
B o b o B o B o
To this Song of Hiawatha!
b o B o Bo B o

Neither "to" in these lines would be stressed in prose, which is why we mark them **b** rather than **B**. But one kind of performance of the poem would give them at least a certain degree of emphasis.

You may notice, by the way, that just as the last syllable of a line of verse whose norm is to begin with an offbeat can be an unemphasized **b**, the first syllable of a line whose norm is to begin with a beat can also be an unemphasized **b**. (The usual labeling of these two kinds of verse as “iambic” and “trochaic” will be discussed in our next chapter.)

When, however, the poet is not seeking a chant-like performance but is imitating closely the sounds and rhythmic movements of spoken English, it’s much more appropriate to leave **b**’s as unemphasized. Here’s Shakespeare’s Hamlet:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 o b o
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 o b o

It would be painful to have to listen to an actor who thought it was right to emphasize “in” and “of” in these lines!

The rhythmic effect of using many **b**’s is often to speed the words up and lighten the movement of the verse, as they provide a way of keeping the rhythm going without the weight of many emphasized syllables. If you look back at Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” you’ll see that the sprightly lilt of that poem comes partly from the considerable number of **b**’s, either in the **o b o** sequence or in **o b** at the end of the line.

2 B O B

Our next rhythmic figure is the mirror-image of the previous one. Just as an unemphasized syllable can function as a beat when it comes between similarly unemphasized syllables (or at the end of a line), so an emphasized syllable can function as an *offbeat* if it has emphasized beats on both sides. We’ve already encountered many examples, including these:

Herrick, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”:

And this same flower that smiles today
 B O B

Hardy, “I Look into My Glass”:

For then, I, undistressed
 B O B
 By hearts grown cold to me,
 B O B

Dickinson, “I Like a Look of Agony”:

The Eyes glaze once – and that is Death –
 B O B

Once again, there’s no need to give an artificial pronunciation to bring out the alternating pattern of beat-offbeat-beat: the natural rhythm of spoken English, working with the expectations the poem has already set up, will do the job for us. Many of these words *demand* a strong emphasis. If we don’t stress “same” in Herrick’s line, we lose the emphatic point the poet is making about the short-lived beauty of the flower; if we don’t give “glaze” as much weight as “Eyes” and “once” in Dickinson’s line, we short-change a powerful description of dying. The commas around Hardy’s “I” show that it must be emphasized. Only “grown” could perhaps be spoken with less of a thump than its neighbors, if we wanted to put more emphasis on “cold” – though we’d still probably want to scan it as **O**, since it keeps much of its normal weight.

Emphasized offbeats are also possible at the beginning of the line, before an emphasized beat. (You can see how similar this is to the occurrence of **b** at the end of a line after an **o**):

Lazarus, “The New Colossus”:

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 O B

Hardy, “I Look into My Glass”:

Part steals, lets part abide;
 O B

Because the **B O B** figure produces three heavy syllables in a row (or two in the case of **O B** at the start of the line), it often has the effect of slowing down the movement of the words. We've already pointed out how appropriate this can be in the made-up example we used to introduce the emphasized offbeat: "But when the **clock winds down**." Hearts growing cold and eyes glazing are also events that happen slowly, and are evoked slowly in the lines by Hardy and Dickinson.

3 B -o- B

Another very common rhythmic figure in verse where the lines normally start with an offbeat is the **B -o- B** figure. When this figure occurs, as it very often does, at the beginning of the line, it is called "initial inversion" because it inverts, or reverses, the expected sequence of offbeat-beat. We've already observed how frequently initial inversion occurs; here are some of our many examples:

Herrick, "To Virgins, to Make Much of Time":

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may
B -o- B

Lazarus, "The New Colossus":

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
B -o- B

Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze
B -o- B

("Fluttering," here, is pronounced as two syllables; if pronounced as three syllables, the triple-offbeat sign would be used: ~o~.)

Dickinson, "I Like a Look of Agony":

Men do not sham Convulsion
B -o- B

The **B -o- B** initial inversion is so familiar that it doesn't necessarily have a direct impact on the meaning of the line in which it occurs. But if the opening word is one that gains from a little extra rhythmic prominence – like "gather" and "fluttering" in our first and third examples – then this way of starting a line notably enhances that word's expressive power.

Another rhythmic figure, which feels just like the **B -o- B** initial inversion, happens *within* lines of regular meter. It's as though an initial inversion is occurring *not* at the beginning of the line, but after a break caused by a virtual beat – as though the line were beginning again. If one needed to give it a name, the figure might be called medial (or "in the middle") inversion. We've seen it many times, first encountering it in our chapter on basic rhythms: "The **ways** she **count-ed beats**, so that her **praise**." This figure occurs when we have, *first*, a virtual offbeat after a beat (often signaled by a punctuation mark), and *second*, the **B -o- B** figure.

Describing how this figure works and feels is more involved than hearing it. Perform the following examples aloud, with energy; the figure's rhythmical pattern will be clear. These famous lines are spoken by Shakespeare's Macbeth in a moment of horror and defiance:

Is this a dagger, which I see before me?
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee!
B [o]B -o- B

Wordsworth's *Prelude* gives us another instance:

Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
B[o]B -o- B

And we discussed another line of his that uses it:

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof
B [o]B -o- B

Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, extracts a different quality from the same figure:

Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind,
 B [o] B -o- B

It's easy to feel the same rhythm at play here as in our examples from the beginnings of lines. An essential difference, though, is that in these cases the **B -o- B** figure is preceded by a real break in the rhythm, and this can be used for dramatic effect – as in the first two of our examples. The speaker in each of these lines stops for a moment, and then plunges on with an exclamation: “Come, let me clutch thee!”; “oh, at that time.” You won’t expect this rhythmic figure to occur very often in poetry that imitates song, but when an energetic speaking voice is being heard in the verse, its use is particularly effective.

Occasionally the double offbeat associated with the **B -o- B** figure has a little more weight on one or other of its syllables. In the Wordsworth line you might, for instance, want to give “that” in “oh, at that time” a bit of emphasis. You know already how to show this in the scansion: **B -o= B**.

4 -o- B ô B

Our next rhythmic figure embraces four syllables, and moves smoothly from a double offbeat to a pair of emphasized beats separated only by an implied offbeat – the slight pause induced by the side-by-side beats.

Lazarus, "The New Colossus":

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
-0- B ô B

Wordsworth, "Strange Fits of Passion":

All over the wide lea
-o- B ô B

Shakespeare, Sonnet 29:

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes
-0- B ôB

This rhythmic figure mounts a challenge to the smoothness of the meter: first the double offbeat postpones the expected beat, then the two emphasized beats momentarily retard the onward movement. The implied offbeat that separates them doesn't do more than the minimum necessary to keep a sense of alternation going. It's a figure poets will use sparingly – too many of these, and the meter will break down. But used carefully, it can add greatly to the verse's evocation of emotion, imitation of movement, and emulation of the speaking voice. How it does this will, of course, be a product of the specific words the poet chooses.

5 B ô B -o-

Our final rhythmic figure is the reverse of the previous one. Now the pair of beats, with the implied offbeat separating them, is followed by the double offbeat. This is the least common of our five figures, but Shakespeare's Sonnet 50 uses it a surprising four times, at least if we opt for it and for the modern pronunciation of "instinct" over other possible readings:

As if by some instinct the wretch did know
 B ôB -o-

The bloody spur cannot provoke him on
B ô B -o-

That sometimes anger thrusts into his hide;
B ôB -o-

For that same groan doth put this in my mind-
B ô B -o-

The challenge to a smooth alternating rhythm is even stronger with this figure than with the previous one, as there's no double offbeat to ease the way into the disruptive pair of emphasized beats. Only *after* the beat, implied offbeat, beat sequence does a double offbeat come to lighten and restore the regular meter. This degree of rhythmic tension is entirely appropriate for a poem expressing pain and grief.

This figure is related to our third rhythmic figure, **B-o-B**, when it occurs within the line – it is, that is to say, a type of medial inversion.

You will discover that occasionally there are lines which do not definitely fall into one pattern or the other – where the unpronounced offbeat might either be implied or virtual, depending on whether or not your performance has a break. But the differences in the way the rhythm operates, and therefore the meanings it conveys, are usually very marked. Compare the last line quoted above with this rewritten version:

Here both “show” and “this” have their own rhythmic space, with a virtual offbeat taking up the pause in between. In both versions the alternating rhythm is put under some strain, but the first seems more uncertain and tense, the second more assertive and clear-cut – and less appropriate for the mood of the sonnet.

There is no code that will assign specific meanings to each of these rhythmic figures. Although it's possible to generalize, as we have done, about the meanings and the feelings they may suggest – like tension, or sprightliness, or speed – the figures are always used in particular contexts, and embodied in particular words, to produce unique effects that can't be legislated for in advance, and which individual performances may define differently.

by the English Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821). In this stanza the speaker urges anyone who is subject to an unexplained fit of melancholy to increase that “anguished” but “wakeful” mood by contemplating the purest forms of beauty. The meter is the familiar five-beat iambic pentameter line, and we have scanned only the syllables that occur in rhythmic figures, with underlining to show the figures more clearly.

RHYTHMIC FIGURES 85

sand-wave,” “some rich anger,” “feed deep, deep”). This variation in pace contributes to the richness of the poem’s texture, a richness which provides us with one more example of intense beauty to add to those it mentions. And the concrete images are all the more vividly realized when the rhythmic figures encourage the performer to linger over the words that present them.

NAMES AND LABELS

6

Throughout our discussion of poetic meter and the beat–offbeat method of scansion, we have principally used labels like “four-beat line” or “five-beat line.” The reason for this is probably clear. Since the rule for meter in English is that **rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats**, we wished to use labels that would continually reinforce this basic understanding. You have probably noticed, though, that from time to time the label “iambic pentameter” has slipped in during discussions of the kinds of five-beat lines to which we have paid considerable attention, as in Shakespeare’s and Browning’s sonnets.

In our Introduction we described our dissatisfaction with Greek labels like iamb, trochee, and anapest, and how we found scansion by beats and offbeats much more helpful in reading and enjoying actual poems. Yet having learned to understand and work with these simpler, more useful concepts, we can admit another truth: those Greek words have been in use for a long time in discussions of poetry, and as labels – rather than as keys to what’s really going on in metrical lines – they can be a useful shorthand for describing particular sorts of meters.

So in this chapter we will discuss some common names and labels. But nothing more complex will have to be learned about scansion; that job has been done. And if any of these names and labels seem to complicate your life unnecessarily, don’t worry. If you’ve improved your hearing of the rhythms of metrical poems in English, and if you’ve learned how, with beat scansion, to share in written form the essentials of your performances, you’ve eaten the cake – all the rest is icing.