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MOVING WORDS

Forms of English Poetry

DEREK ATTRIDGE

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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First Edition published in 2013
Impression: 1

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978–0–19–968124–2

Printed by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Acknowledgements

The debts I have incurred over the forty-five years during which I have been thinking, talking, and writing about the material for the chapters in this book are far too many to enumerate here. If I mention a few by name, this is not to scant my thanks to all those interlocutors who have helped me sharpen my thinking and my analyses, including students, colleagues, audiences at talks, and anonymous reviewers. Early encouragement and advice came from John Hollander and the late Edward Weismiller; more recently I've had fruitful exchanges with, among others, three Toms—Tom Carper, Tom Cable, and Tom Furniss—as well as Martin Duffell, Don Paterson, Natalie Pollard, and Dominic Lash. John Bowen and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst have given me valuable advice, and at Oxford University Press Andrew McNeillie and Jacqueline Baker have been exacting and constructive editors. The three women in my life—Suzanne Hall, Laura Attridge, and Eva Attridge—have continued their tolerant support, for which I am more thankful than I am able to express here.

I am grateful for permission to reprint, in revised form, material first published as follows:

'A Return to Form?', *Textual Practice*, 22.3 (2008), 563–75.

'The Movement of Meaning: Phrasing and Repetition in English Poetry', in Andreas Fischer, ed., *Repetition*, Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 7 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994), 7–29.

'Dryden's Dilemma, or, Racine Refashioned: The Problem of the English Dramatic Couplet', *Yearbook of English Studies* (1979), 55–77.

'Rhythm in English Poetry', *New Literary History*, 21 (1990), 1015–37.

'The Case for the English Dolnik, or, How Not to Introduce Prosody', *Poetics Today*, 33.1 (Spring 2012), 1–26.

'In Defence of the Dolnik: Twentieth-Century British Verse in Free Four-Beat Metre', *Études britanniques contemporaines*, special issue on 'Rhythm in Twentieth-Century British Poetry', ed. Jean-Michel Ganteau (December 2010), 5–18.

'Keats and Beats, or What Can We Say about Rhythm?', in Daniel Thomières, ed., *Le Rythme dans les littératures de langue anglaise* (Reims: Presses Universitaires de Reims, 2005), 99–116.

'Poetry Unbound? Observations on Free Verse' (The 1987 Warton Lecture on Poetry), © The British Academy 1988, first published in *Proceedings of the British Academy LXXIII* (Oxford, 1988), 353–74.

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Introduction

Against Abstraction

I

A moment of intellectual satisfaction I remember with particular vividness from my teenage years occurred when, in high school, I was introduced to the principles of Latin scansion and found that what looked and sounded like a random arrangement of words into lines could, after mastering a few rules, be shown to be anything but random. A dactylic hexameter could be relied upon to have six feet made up of long and short syllables, according to strict rules governing their disposition across the line. There were no exceptions, and no uncertainties: whether a syllable was short or long was a known quantity (a phrase apparently from mathematics, but one which could equally well be from classical prosody), there were reliable rules for elision, and with the help of a dictionary one could turn the apparently arbitrary run of words into a lucid and pleasing pattern. That this pattern did not coincide with anything in the sound of the lines (except in the final feet, where accent and quantity were in sync) was not a problem: the pleasure was an intellectual one, not an aural one. In our English poetry lessons we also learned to scan lines of verse, but the process, although involving some of the same technical terms, was a very different matter: all sorts of uncertainties about stressed and unstressed syllables emerged, there seemed to be no clear rules about what kind of foot could occur where, elision was a mystery, and different poets and periods had different understandings of what constituted a metrical line. I found myself wishing there were a way of writing and analysing English verse that, as with Latin, demonstrated the possibility latent within the haphazard forms of the language for precision and order. That English verse *sounded* much more rhythmically regular than Latin verse only exacerbated the problem: I felt that it should be more, not less, susceptible to rigorous analysis.

English studies at university gave me the opportunity to pursue questions of poetic form in more depth, although the terminology and methods of analysis remained frustratingly inadequate in comparison with Latin. When it came to choosing a topic for a Ph.D. thesis, my enjoyment of the short lyric in English, and my fascination with its flowering in the

Elizabethan period (for which I must acknowledge the remarkable Cambridge lectures of Jeremy Prynne), led to a proposal which involved a comparison of Renaissance poetic theory with poetic practice, starting with a detailed discussion of late sixteenth-century poetic treatises. Those treatises, it turned out, included extensive engagement with the question of English metre, and in particular the project of writing English verse in the metres of classical Latin. Four hundred years ago, I realized, poets and poetic theorists were wrestling with the same problem that had bothered me at high school: if the Latin language could be turned from a random sequence of syllables into a patterned series of longs and shorts with unfailing exactness, why could not the English language be transformed in the same way? If the old rhythms that governed ballads and songs were too crude for these lovers of classical poetry (and we must remember that changes in pronunciation had destroyed the subtleties of medieval versification for Elizabethan ears), perhaps the answer, they reckoned, was to identify long and short syllables in English and deploy them in metrical forms derived from Latin examples.

Nothing of what I read in critical studies of the period seemed to account for either the attraction which so many poets felt towards the naturalization of Latin metres or the doggedness with which some of them pursued the project. The best-known names engaged in the enterprise were Sidney, Spenser, and Campion, but many others were drawn in. What dawned on me as I worked on these efforts was that the enjoyment Latin verse offered to Elizabethan readers was similar to that which I was to feel in the school classroom four centuries later: an intellectual satisfaction in the subjection of the unruly matter of language to exact, predictable, calculable forms, which had little to do with the sound of the lines as one read them aloud. (Latin in England—as in all European countries at this time and for centuries to come—was pronounced more or less in the same way as the vernacular.) In examining the numerous treatises on prosody and the many poems written in imitation of classical metres, I found, rather to my surprise, that I had completed a Ph.D. thesis (later published as *Well-Weighed Syllables*).

In answering to my satisfaction one set of problems—essentially problems of intellectual history—I had only increased my awareness of another set. English metre remained a subject where nothing I had read—and there was a great deal to read—offered anything like the precision of classical prosody. Precision in matters of language was the aim of the discipline of linguistics, and it was to linguistics I turned to try to work out for myself how best to account for the varieties of verse to be found in English. The dominant tradition within literary studies—ironically, a descendant of the classical prosody I wished to emulate—seemed at once

too powerful, allowing pretty much any sequence of words to be scanned as metrical by means of 'licences' such as 'inversion' and 'substitution', and too weak, failing to account for clear rhythmic differences perceptible by the ear, such as the difference between tetrameter and pentameter verse, or for the specific choices made by poets down the ages. Why was pentameter verse overwhelmingly iambic, for instance, or why was tetrameter verse almost invariably rhymed? (I'm using the traditional terms here; later I will introduce others.) Chomskeian linguistics, in the late 1960s when I started my serious study of metre, offered a compelling model: the aim of a prosodic study would be to deduce the 'metrical competence' which underlies judgements made by English speakers as to the metricality or unmetricality of lines of verse, and, more optimistically, judgements about their smoothness or roughness, weakness or strength, closeness to speech or closeness to song, and so on. Some attempts along these lines had been made, starting with an influential 1966 essay by Morris Halle and Samuel Jay Keyser on Chaucer's prosody,[1] but these were, in my view, too preoccupied with a single verse form—the iambic pentameter—and too insistent on isolating a simple key to metricality.

The result of several years work on this project was my 1982 book *The Rhythms of English Poetry*. My aim was to show what was lacking in prosodic studies to date, and what could usefully be built on in developing a new model of English metre; and then to use this newly minted theory in analyses of poetic examples which would show its potential contribution to critical readings. I wanted to do justice to the variety of English versification, giving the shorter line its due as well as the more frequently studied pentameter. (That I might have achieved the right balance is suggested by two reviews appearing at about the same time, one of which complained that I had privileged the elitist pentameter over more popular forms, the other that I had allowed the shorter metres to determine my account at the expense of the pentameter.) The debt to Chomsky was most evident in a set of English metrical rules I formulated, including formalizations using symbols derived from generative grammar. More important, and I think ultimately more influential, was my emphasis on the physical nature of rhythm, the task of the prosodist (and, indeed, of the poet) being to show how the surface features of the poem's words tap into the familiar rhythmic sequences heard and felt in many places other than language, and learned by children at an early age. These sequences are based on groups of *beats*, those places we are inclined to mark by a physical movement—a gesture of the hand, a nod of the head—or by a mental

[1] Halle and Keyser, 'Chaucer and the Study of Prosody'.

registration of this potential bodily act. Beats occur in normal English speech when the series of stressed and unstressed syllables approaches a degree of regularity in its alternation; metrical verse is thus a heightening of a tendency present in the spoken language.[2] I was thus able to account for the differences between the pentameter and the shorter metres based on the ubiquitous rhythmic group of four beats.

The Rhythms of English Poetry turned out to be longer and more complex than I had initially intended, and so in 1995 I followed it up with *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*, which was aimed not at the scholar of prosody but the student or writer of poetry. The basic argument was the same, though I used a different set of scansion symbols—more suited to the then new technology of word processing—and set out the types of metre differently; I also included a chapter on phrasal or syntactic rhythm, a subject that remains woefully under-investigated. A third study of metre using the principles of what had come to be called 'beat prosody' was initiated by the poet Thomas Carper, who wrote a more user-friendly introduction entitled *Meter and Meaning*, on which I collaborated and to which I contributed some material. While the subject of poetic rhythm and metre is still for the most part taught—where it is taught at all—in the terms inherited from classical prosody, it is pleasing to note that the alternative approach enshrined in these books is now widely used in the classroom and has proved valuable in a number of critical and theoretical works.[3]

This book is both a continuation of the discussion of rhythm and metre in these earlier volumes, and an exploration of a number of significant issues in poetic form not fully engaged with in them. It combines talks and essays written over the past three decades (in revised versions) with some new thinking about these issues, and uses discussions of particular poems to illustrate the value of close attention to formal detail. The same arguments could, of course, have been made by means of any number of poetic case studies, and a sketch of the earlier texts' origins may help to explain the particular choices within them. In 1979, while writing *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, I attended a performance of Tony Harrison's

[2] Here is a recent phonological account: 'In standard varieties of English, speech rhythm is accomplished such that speakers place stressed syllables at roughly regular intervals of time. As listeners we perceive this as creating a rhythmic pattern, with every stressed syllable representing a rhythmic beat' (Reed, *Analysing Conversation*, 139). As Reed goes on to note, conversational speech frequently departs from this pattern, and my use of the term *beat* in this book is restricted to the highly controlled context of regular metre, a context in which stresses and beats don't necessarily coincide.

[3] See, for example, Creaser, '"Service is Perfect Freedom"'; Duffell, *A New History*: and O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter*.

version of Racine's *Phèdre*, entitled *Phaedra Britannica*, and found myself wondering why rhyming couplets in English don't work very well on the tragic stage when they work brilliantly in French. The result was an article on the nature of English rhyme in comparison with that of French, an article which, in a revised version that reflects many more recent attempts to Anglicize Racine, comprises Chapter 3 of this book. Invited by the British Academy to deliver the 1987 Warton Lecture on English Poetry, I chose another area to which I felt my book hadn't done full justice: non-metrical or 'free' verse; this lecture has been revised as Chapter 9. The wider question of how stylistic, including metrical, commentary feeds into interpretation continued to interest me, and I attempted an answer, illustrated by an analysis of a sonnet by Spenser, in a 1988 talk which forms the basis of Chapter 6.[4] The focus on the iambic pentameter in this essay allowed me to contribute some thoughts about its particular capabilities as a metrical form. In 1990 Ralph Cohen, Director of the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia, invited me to contribute to a seminar series on 'Rhythm, Nature and Culture' being convened by Henri Meschonnic; the result was the essay 'Rhythm in English Poetry', which I reprint in an expanded form (Chapter 5) as a way of introducing beat prosody for readers who are unfamiliar with it, and of demonstrating its usefulness in dealing with three different rhythmic styles. Four years later, I was invited to speak at the annual conference of the Swiss Association of University Lecturers in English, and took this as an opportunity to discuss another crucial aspect of poetic form, the movement of meaning. Drawing on the important work on rhythmic phrasing by Richard Cureton, the talk focused on the question of exact verbal repetition and the challenge it poses to a poem's onward motion (and to accounts of such motion). This talk appears in a revised version as Chapter 2. One of the problems with traditional prosody is its inability to deal with one of most long-lasting and popular forms of verse, the four-beat form sometimes referred to as 'dolnik', a term I have adopted. Chapter 7 brings together material from a number of talks I have given on this mode of verse, moving from its early medieval appearance to recent examples. The origin of Chapter 8 was a talk given in 2003 at a University of Frankfurt symposium held in honour of Ulrich Keller, which I seized as an opportunity to analyse a small corner of Keats's

[4] A narrower question—how to treat sequences of syllables which appear to have an unwanted stress—became the focus of a 1987 article entitled '"Damn with Faint Praise": Double Offbeat Demotion', the title of which included an example of the problematic sequence discussed in the article. This is one of the more technical talks and articles I have chosen not to include in this volume.

superb poetic achievement and to demonstrate the usefulness of beat prosody in illuminating the relation between the lexical and rhythmic dimensions of English. Other chapters reflect recent developments in the study of poetic form, including the broad question of a much-discussed return to formal issues (Chapter 1) and new theories of the role of sound in poetry emanating from two of the best known of contemporary poets (Chapter 4).

This book is thus both a demonstration of the potential of a certain way of approaching the formal dimension of poetry and an exploration of a number of topics central to any formal poetics. The first four chapters deal with several issues germane to the discussion of poetic form, including syntax and phrasing, rhyme, and the relation between sound and meaning, and the final five concentrate on various aspects of poetic rhythm, including chapters devoted to the three major traditions of English verse, the four-beat form, the five-beat form, and free verse. Examples discussed range from medieval lyric and Elizabethan sonnet to Dryden's heroic drama, Keats's odes, Tennyson's lyrics, and the contemporary poetry of John Ashbery, J. H. Prynne, and Don Paterson. (This promiscuity is not meant to deny historical change, but it is a reflection of some of the important continuities in poetic practice in English over the past 700 years.) The formal questions discussed here cannot, of course, be separated from questions of what, and how, poems mean, and of the feelings they generate (hence the title of this book); I trust that it will be clear that, whatever emphasis the local argument requires, the larger picture always involves much more than form.

II

Contemporary western culture instils in its citizens a thorough familiarity with the notion of the poem. Though actual poems may be published less often, and less carefully attended to, than ever before, they still seem to be part of the landscape, one of the things to make and do with language. Indeed, they are perhaps more familiar than at any previous time, now that every kindergarten child is encouraged to 'write poems'. As a consequence of the 'free verse' revolution and the doctrine of individual expression, poems are no longer widely associated with 'the craft so long to lerne', with self-discipline and a peculiar intimacy with language. In spite of this—to some extent because of it—we know very little about poems and the reading of poems. There is, of course, no lack of testimony in the history of western culture to their possession of a certain kind of power, well beyond the mild pleasure that might be gained from an amateur effusion

in the local press. And there is some evidence of a connection between the writing—and reading—of poetry and the domain of ethics and politics. Even (perhaps especially) historical situations fraught with change have thrown up poetry, often poetry widely recognized as having the highest merit. Men and women have found it worth making sacrifices to write or disseminate poetry in times of crisis. Claims have often been made, explicitly or implicitly, for the moral force of poetry of a certain kind or quality. Yet few would grant poems immediate political or ethical efficacy, except very occasionally—and then in directions that could not have been predicted and that have little to do with what is usually recognized as the power of good poetry. The link between poetry and the ethical remains obscure.

What we mean by 'the power of poetry' is itself far from clear. For a particular reader, caught in the contingencies of space and time, and guided by expectation, training, and ideology, only a few poems, perhaps, will seduce or explode with that full force of which poetry is capable; but those that do so pose a challenge to our accounts of language, of meaning, and of action that we are a long way from meeting. In spite of the immense quantity of commentary that surrounds the poetic tradition, we have little sense of why it is that certain organized arrangements of words can have strong and valued effects (whether for a small or a large number of readers), and hence why writers are drawn to handle language in this way. This is not to say that poems are less well served by their commentators than, for example, prose fiction; it is to highlight the fact that the distinguishing feature of poetry, that which makes it *not* prose fiction, is peculiarly ill served. To assert this might seem to imply a definition of poetry, and I had better state immediately that I have no new definition to add to the already long list of inadequate ones. I'm happy to work with the necessarily vague consensus view that, although there is a gradation rather than a clear borderline between what we might on the one hand call 'poetry' or 'verse' (and I'm not making any principled distinction between these) and what on the other we might call 'prose', the former is characterized by the presence of certain regularities not enshrined in the linguistic system and not immediately decodable in terms of semantics—the minimal instance being, usually, segmentation into units other than those sanctioned by the grammar, signalled on the page by visual means.[5]

[5] Here I leave out of account oral poetry, both in the strict sense of poetry that has never been written down, and in the sense of poetry as it is received by listeners to a performance rather than readers who have a page before them. (A poem known by heart constitutes an intermediate case, where the memory may well include a memory of visual cues in addition to temporal unfolding.) In these cases, segmentation is often signalled aurally, either inherently in the poem's metrical or rhyming structure, or performatively, by the reader or reciter responding to the visual cues.

This distinguishing aspect is usually referred to as poetic 'form', and though I shall have to complicate the habitual use of this term, it will serve, with all of its ambiguities, for the moment. Any commentary on a poem that claims to be treating it *as* a poem will necessarily devote some attention to this aspect, and it is here that evaluative criticism is most often disappointing. Turn with a sceptical eye to almost any account of a poem that has a powerful effect on you, and you will find the description of the operation of its formal qualities—if there is one—to be a description that you could imagine being applied to a poem with no evocative qualities whatsoever; read a glowing assessment of the techniques in a poem that has left you cold, and your response is unlikely to change (although, depending on your self-esteem as a reader and the degree of respect you have for the critic, you may be led to feel that it *ought* to change). The enthusiasm of someone you love or admire is likely to be a more effective transformer of your appreciation than any amount of formal analysis, and this is probably how criticism most often works to alter individuals' experiences of particular poems, or of poetry in general.

It's not hard to find the reason for the inadequacy of this kind of commentary; any statement of the type 'in this poem formal property X is valuable because it produces effect Y' seems to imply an algorithm, valid for any poem possessing this property. This implication is usually demonstrably false, for in the next poem in which X is found it will have no such effect; and even if it were true, it would be a mechanical rule of precisely the type all accounts of literature regard as inadequate to explain the special qualities of the 'literary'.[6] On the other hand, if the critic insists that it is only for *this* poem that the statement is valid, we are left wondering what kind of explanatory power it has. We may appreciate formal criticism for its ingenuity and inventiveness, or because it appears to authorize our own enjoyment of a poem, but we're not likely to feel that it has identified the sources of a work's real power. We therefore return to questions of meaning and rhetoric, or biographical source and historical allusion, and the distinct existence of the poem as poem is dissolved (and sometimes the specificity of the work as a *literary* work disappears too).

In a period when the primary focus of critical attention is still for the most part on historical context, on political and ideological issues, on the material, the economic, the psychological, these inadequate accounts of form are rarer than they once were—but only because form is now often simply left out of account. Poetry is talked and written about as though it

[6] See Attridge, *Peculiar Language*, and Chapter 6 of this book for further discussion of this issue.

were prose. Although in some cases it may in fact be being *read* as prose, it seems more likely that poems continue to exercise power in the ways that they always did, but that as soon as a reader turns into a writer, the pressures of the institution—and the historical failures of formal analysis—lead to a concentration on content and context, rather than shape, sound, and movement. This is only part of a wider problem of reductive and instrumentalizing readings of literature, but as far as poetry is concerned, it is a crucial one. However, there are signs that the *Zeitgeist* is changing; more and more voices are to be heard arguing for critical approaches that are alert to the distinctiveness of literature as a cultural practice, and regretting the tendency to dissolve literary studies into a minor branch of cultural history.[7] The chapters that follow are an attempt to foreground and sharpen the notion of form, in the hope that criticism can learn to do more justice to poems as poems.

III

When I started reading accounts of the formal properties of poetry in the 1960s, there was, at least among my teachers and fellow-students, something approaching a consensus about English prosody. The dominant critical approach was a blend of American New Criticism and British Leavisism, and the most influential statement of prosodic methodology was probably a 1959 essay by the leading theorists of the former approach, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, entitled 'The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction'. Metre was the name for a pattern of 'feet', the verse line being constituted by a certain number of these feet, as in Greek and Latin but with a preference for repeated feet of a particular type. This pattern was said to be 'abstract', which seemed to mean it ticked away mentally with absolute regularity but was not manifested in sound. Playing across this, and hardly ever actually coinciding with it, was the actual rhythm of the line, emerging from the norms of the spoken language. (Just how the spoken language at once produces the metrical grid and moves away from it was never quite explained.) This interplay between regular and varied, abstract and concrete was what was said to give life to the verse. The variations were for the most part understood as 'substitutions': instead of the expected foot, say an iamb, one encountered a different foot, say a trochee. This account of metre is still very common today.

[7] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of this 'return to form'.

Let us look at an example. It had better be an iambic pentameter, which for the approach I am delineating usually serves as the paradigmatic metrical line. The following is from Milton's *Lycidas*:

> Batt'ning our flocks with the fresh dews of night
> (*Poems*, 447)

These are the five feet a traditional analysis would indicate:

> Batt'ning | our flocks | with the | fresh dews | of night

The second and fifth feet ('our flocks') and ('of night') are clearly weak–strong, and thus regular iambs. The other three feet involve substitutions: the first ('Batt'ning') is a trochee, strong–weak; the third ('with the') is a pyrrhic, weak–weak; and the fourth (fresh dews) is a spondee, strong–strong. (Since we are dealing not with quantity but with degrees of stress, the classical distinction between long and short syllables is replaced by a distinction between stressed and unstressed—or strong and weak—syllables.) As we pronounce these words with these dispositions of strength and weakness, the theory goes, we are aware of the abstract metrical grid behind them; so although we hear the line opening on strong–weak we hear it against an internal, abstract pattern of weak–strong. Here I have to confess my inability to achieve this feat of double hearing; I cannot avoid hearing the first syllable of the line as only strong, with no taint of weakness, and the second as weak, with no suggestion of strength. My experience of Latin verse as a schoolboy, and the similar experience of Elizabethan readers, was of an abstract pattern that matched perfectly the words of the poem as entities on the page; there was no injunction to experience a subtle interplay between spoken line and metrical grid. (Whether there was for the Romans is a question we cannot answer.) And since the metrical pattern was derived from rules that had little to do with the way in which words were pronounced, one didn't face the conundrum of 'hearing' two patterns both built on pronunciation—since there is nothing in the *visual* representation of the language to tell us whether 'Batt'ning' is weak–strong or strong–weak.

Another way of looking at the line, and one that I find more productive, is to say that Milton is using a rhythmic 'figure' earlier poets had used thousands of times, and later poets will keep using: strong–weak–weak–strong. It's frequent at the beginning of the line, but can occur in mid-line as well, often after punctuation.[8] There's no dividing line be-

[8] For discussion of rhythmic figures, see Carper and Attridge, *Meter and Meaning*, chapter 5.

tween the two weak syllables, and no need to think in terms of feet—though one important fact is that the figure contains two stresses we are made to experience, physically as well as mentally, as rhythmic beats—places, in other words, where we would tap or nod if trying to feel the rhythm physically. Others may be able to pronounce 'Batt'ning' with a normal stress while giving a rhythmic tap on the second syllable; I'm not able to do so.

The third and fourth feet also involve, in traditional prosody, hearing one thing and being aware of another, though here a different kind of argument is often made, or rather two dogmas are enunciated, once the line has been sliced into feet. It is asserted (a) that all that matters in the creation of a metrical line is what goes on within the foot, and (b) that two adjacent syllables of spoken English never receive the same stress. In our example, 'the' would be said to be ever so slightly stronger than 'with' and 'dews' slightly stronger than 'fresh'. (Another school of thought within this approach says that it's the job of the *reader* to give 'the' and 'dews' a slight push with the voice in order to sustain the metre.) Thus the underlying weak–strong–weak–strong will be felt beneath the actual weak–weak–strong–strong. I have never seen any evidence for either of these dogmas, and I don't believe a reader unschooled in the doctrine of foot-prosody would hear (or produce) these variations. The difference in strength between 'the' and 'fresh' is an overriding phonetic fact, and must surely play its part in the rhythm. What we have in this part of the line is actually another very common four-syllable rhythmic figure: weak–weak–strong–strong. (The third most common figure is its reverse: strong–strong–weak–weak, as in Keats's line 'And hides the green hill in an April shower', where the figure in question is constituted by the words 'green hill in an'.) To read Milton's line expressively as if it were heightened prose is to give five syllables strong emphasis and, thanks to the inbuilt rhythmic tendencies of the English language, to perceive them as rhythmically equivalent; there is no need to force the words into a fore-ordained metrical structure. (It's important to give all five stresses full emphasis, because to weaken 'dews' would be to allow the line to fall into a quite different metre, one with a triple rhythm and four beats.)

Does the metre, understood as the principle of regular alternation, not play any part then? Are we simply responding to a series of strong and weak syllables? Not at all—the underlying metre of any line is an alternation of rhythmic pulse and rhythmic relaxation, tending always to temporal equivalence. (The often-used caricature of the iambic pentameter as di-dum-di-dum-di-dum-di-dum-di-dum is not a matter of an abstract grid, and wouldn't work if the dums were not pronounced with more emphasis and at roughly equal intervals.) What we experience, I would

argue, is not two levels, abstract and concrete (a model suggested by Hopkins's unfortunate choice of 'counterpoint' as a metaphor), but a real, physical push towards temporal regularity and an equally real pull towards the more varied rhythms of the specific example of English speech. The five points of rhythmic emphasis in Milton's line from *Lycidas*—'Batt-', 'flocks', 'fresh', 'dews', and 'night'—strive to achieve that ideal temporal pattern, while the other syllables exercise their own rhythmic strength to pull against it; and at the same time the rhetorical emphasis provided by the meaning has its own rhythmic agenda to pursue. To read the line in conformity with the underlying rhythm is to chant it in a way that destroys its subtlety, while to read it simply as if it were prose is to risk losing its hold on the rhythmic norm. (For example, the metre requires that the voice dwell on *dews* and *night* in a way that in prose would be unnatural.) The prosodist's scansion marks may look like abstract grids, but what they represent is something both heard and felt.

IV

As will be evident from my earlier biographical summary, questions of poetic form have continued to fascinate me for over fifty years, whatever other fields of study have tempted me during this period. All the time I have been conscious of this area as something of a byway of literary studies, though I have been exploring it long enough to have experienced both the end of a period in which metre was a significant topic and the possible beginning of a period in which it is returning, if not to centre stage, at least to a respectable role in the chorus. In the field of linguistics, however, the study of metre has remained important throughout this period; it has furnished valuable insights into the phonology of a number of languages, and has encouraged linguistic theorists with an interest in poetry to develop universalizing metrical theories on the model of universal grammar.[9] I have always tried to listen to what the linguists are saying, and have found much of value, especially in countering the woolliness which all too often afflicts literary critics when talking about these subjects. If I have often been critical of the approaches adopted by linguists, it has been because their aims are different from mine, with the result that their analyses don't appear to me to contribute to an appreciation of the singularity of individual poets and poems. In spite of this, I number many linguists among the interlocutors it has been my good fortune to have had in this

[9] See, for example, Hanson and Kiparsky, 'A Parametric Theory'; and Fabb and Halle, *Meter in Poetry*.

corner of the literary universe. Sometimes those of us who are fascinated by the minutiae of rhythm and metre forget that our colleagues in literature departments can be less than enthralled by our conversations (whether our jargon is of logaoedic verse and second cretics, or of stress maxima and realization rules); my hope is that in this book I only rarely stray into the realm of technicalities indigestible to all but my fellow prosody geeks.

It remains true that, for the time being at least, what we might think of as technical approaches to the language of literature remain a minority interest in most English departments in the English-speaking world. (Members of English departments in other parts of the world are more likely to have an interest in the workings of the language, as are members of language departments in anglophone countries—and poets.) Better instruction in schools would improve matters, but how many teachers are able to make versification an exciting subject for a lesson? Yet, as I discovered fifty years ago, being able to show how a string of words conforms to patterns that pervade the verse tradition can be an exhilarating discovery. Doing so in a language one speaks fluently, as opposed to the halting Latin which was my portal to prosodic excitement, is all the more stimulating: there can be an interplay between hearing rhythms and noting them on paper, one activity reinforcing the other. And then there is the pleasure of seeing (and hearing) exactly how a poet, while building on an old tradition, has found a way of giving it freshness and new life. What is needed, of course, is a mode of prosodic analysis, and a way of talking about topics such as rhyme, repetition, and sound symbolism, that are not forbidding in their terminology nor confusing in their application.

In revisiting, updating, and in some cases expanding these pieces, I have been struck once more by the amount we still don't understand about the working of poetry as it moves, pleases, and changes us. Although I would like to think that these studies bring us closer to such an understanding, I am not claiming anything like an exhaustive account: part of the reward of investigating formal detail in this way is the enhanced realization of the degree to which poetry resists positivist approaches. Recent developments in 'cognitive poetics', with their aim of providing a neurological basis for the experience of literature, seem to me to demonstrate the same truth. This is not to mystify the realm of the aesthetic (which is already mystified enough), but to point to an essential quality of significant art as a cultural practice, all the more important as the hold of the myth of scientific explanation grows. My goal in this book is to sharpen the questions we ask about poetry, not to solve all the puzzles it poses; and my hope is that doing so will enhance my readers' enjoyment of the poems they read.

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PART I

FORMAL QUESTIONS

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1

A Return to Form?

I

To speak of returns is to speak of departures. The crudest thumbnail sketch of literary studies in the English-speaking world would have it that at some point towards the middle of the twentieth century history left town. The 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the story goes, were dominated by the formalist modes of New or Practical Criticism (aka Close Reading), the 1970s and early 1980s by the equally formalist modes of Deconstruction and Post-structuralism, and then from about the middle of the 1980s history, in the guise of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, reasserted itself, and, although sometimes having to endure the embrace of a less-than-fully-historical Cultural Studies and the dubious attentions of an ever-renewed Psychoanalysis, has been running the show ever since. In recent years, however, more and more voices have been heard proclaiming a return to form as a central issue in literary theory and criticism. Labels such as 'New Formalism' and 'the New Aesthetics' have been bandied about. Is history being edged aside once more as literary form stages a comeback? And if so, in what manner is form best approached, given the changes wrought in our understanding of the literary institution and literary practice over the past forty years?

The coarseness of my sketch (and use of upper case) will have left no doubt that it's misleading in a number of ways, some of which I shall return to in a moment. But in its outlines at least it's widely accepted, and it clearly bears some relation to the actuality of cultural history. It is true, for instance, that much of the most interesting and influential work in literary studies for two decades has involved a close engagement with the historical, cultural, political, social, and economic circumstances within which writing, publishing, reading, and performing have been carried out. Boundaries between what has been traditionally called 'literature' and other kinds of writing have become blurred, and questions of evaluation have receded into the dim background. For twenty years or more, the best graduate students in the best English departments—and such students always constitute a valuable litmus test—have by and large opted