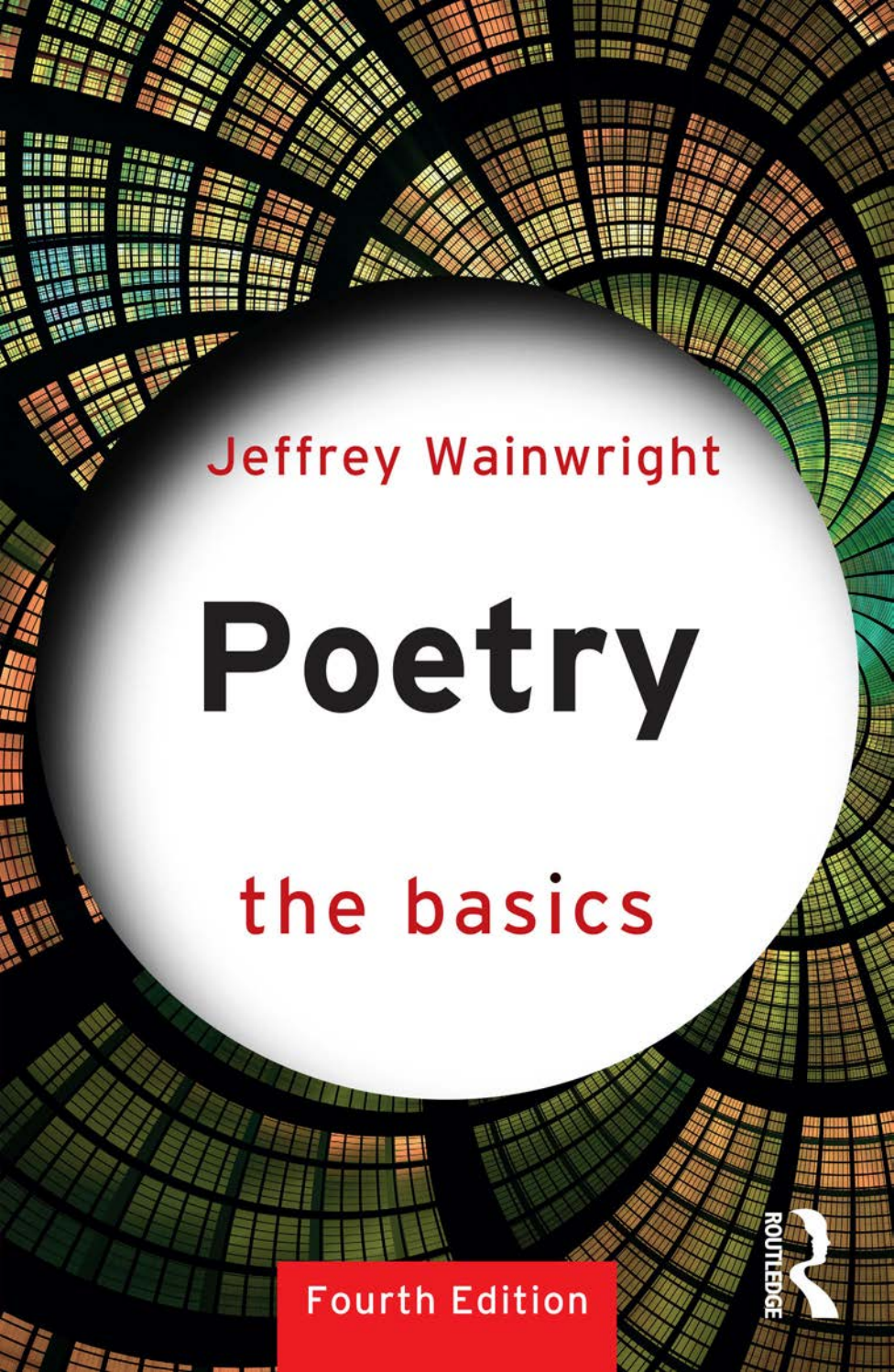




Jeffrey Wainwright

Poetry

the basics

Fourth Edition

ROUTLEDGE



POETRY

THE BASICS

Now in its fourth edition, *Poetry: The Basics* remains an engaging exploration of the exciting and diverse world of poetry. Jeffrey Wainwright's accessible introduction demystifies poetic forms and traditions, which can at first seem bewildering.

Drawing on examples ranging from Chaucer to children's rhymes, Cole Porter to Dylan Thomas, and from around the English-speaking world, it shows how any reader can understand and gain pleasure from poetry. This comprehensive guide explores poetry's relationship to everyday language and introduces major genres and technical aspects. Each chapter proceeds through chronological examples from a wide range of English language poems. They cover all the major genres with informative studies of metre, rhyme, and stanza, showing how these features have developed through traditional to contemporary forms like rap. The book also features an exhaustive glossary to help imbed these technical terms and approaches.

This clear and concise guide offers detailed insight into the nuts and bolts of poetry, as well as exploring its ability to inspire. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the art of poetry, whether as a reader, writer, or student.

Jeffrey Wainwright is a poet, translator, and critic. He taught at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, Long Island University, Brooklyn, and most recently at Manchester Metropolitan University where he was Professor in the Department of English.

The Basics

The Basics is a highly successful series of accessible guidebooks which provide an overview of the fundamental principles of a subject area in a jargon-free and undaunting format.

Intended for students approaching a subject for the first time, the books both introduce the essentials of a subject and provide an ideal springboard for further study. With over 50 titles spanning subjects from Artificial Intelligence to Women's Studies, *The Basics* are an ideal starting point for students seeking to understand a subject area.

Each text comes with recommendations for further study and gradually introduces the complexities and nuances within a subject.

THE BIBLE AND LITERATURE
NORMAN W. JONES

NARRATIVE
BRONWEN THOMAS

LITERARY ANALYSIS
CELENA KUSCH

FOLKLORE
SIMON J. BRONNER

TRAGEDY
SEAN McEVOY

DISCOURSE
ANGELA GODDARD AND NEIL CAREY

MEDIEVAL LITERATURE
ANGELA JANE WEISL AND ANTHONY
JOSEPH CUNDER

CHAUCE
JACQUELINE TASIOULAS

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE
PAUL JAY

ENGLISH GRAMMAR
MICHAEL McCARTHY

PRAGMATICS
BILLY CLARK

SEMIOTICS (FOURTH EDITION)
DANIEL CHANDLER

ENGLISH VOCABULARY
MICHAEL McCARTHY

TRANSLATION (SECOND EDITION)
JULIANE HOUSE

ELT
MICHAEL McCARTHY AND STEVE WALSH

LITERARY THEORY (FOURTH EDITION)
HANS BERTENS

SHAKESPEARE (FOURTH EDITION)
SEAN McEVOY

POETRY (FOURTH EDITION)
JEFFREY WAINWRIGHT

For a full list of titles in this series, please visit www.routledge.com/The-Basics/book-series/B

POETRY

THE BASICS

FOURTH EDITION

Jeffrey Wainwright

Designed cover image: © Getty Images

Fourth edition published 2026

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2026 Jeffrey Wainwright

The right of Jeffrey Wainwright to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published by Routledge 2004

Third edition published by Routledge 2016

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-45578-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-45577-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-37763-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003377634

Typeset in Bembo

by codeMantra

In Memory of Ken Lowe
1932–2009



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Author's Acknowledgements	xv
1 Introduction: Because There Is Language There Is Poetry	1
2 Deliberate Space	9
3 Tones of Voice	35
4 Measures: The Verse Line	60
5 'Free Verse'	91
6 Rhyme and Other Noises	108
7 Stanza	127

8 Image – Imagination – Inspiration	161
9 Writing a Poem Now: Philosophies of Composition	186
Conclusion	212
Glossary	213
Bibliography	239
Index	247

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Extract from the poem 'Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded' by Gertrude Stein, from *The Yale Gertrude Stein* (1930) New Haven: Yale University Press, reproduced with permission from David Higham Associates.

Extract from the poem 'Now the Pink Stripes' by Tom Raworth from *Collected Poems* (2003) Manchester: Carcanet Press. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

The poem 'Ladles and Jellyspoons' from Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (1959) Oxford University Press. Reprinted by kind permission of Iona Opie.

The poem 'That's What You Did and You are My Real Mother' from *Finding the Center: The Art of the Zuni Storyteller*, second edition, translated by Dennis Tedlock from *Live Performances in Zuni* by Andrew Peyneta and Walter Sanchez, reprinted by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. © 1999 Dennis Tedlock. Reprinted with permission of the University of Nebraska Press.

Traditional ballad *Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard* from *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1965), ed. Francis James Child, 5 vols 1882–98, New York: Dover. Reprinted by permission of Dover in the third edition who have confirmed that it is in the public domain and permitted for use in the fourth edition.

Extract from the poem 'Trench Town Shock (A Soh Dem Sey)' from *Touch Mi, Tell Mi* (1983) London: Bogle-L'Overture. © Valerie Bloom 1983, reprinted by permission of Eddison Pearson.

'Poem #20', Geoffrey Hill, *Clavics*, Enitharmon Press, 2011. Used by permission of the publisher.

Extract from Edwin Morgan, 'Siesta of a Hungarian Snake', from Edwin Morgan *Collected Poems* (1985) Manchester: Carcanet Press. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

Extract from José García Villa, 'Sonnet in Polka Dots' from *Text-Sound Texts* (1980) ed. Richard Kostelanetz, New York: William Morrow. Permission granted by Lance Villa and the Estate of José García Villa.

D. H. Lawrence 'How Beastly the Bourgeois Is' from *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (1957) London: Heinemann (now Pearson Education Limited). Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education Limited.

D. H. Lawrence 'How Beastly the Bourgeois Is' from The Cambridge Edition of The Poems by D. H. Lawrence edited by Christopher Pollnitz, © copyright 2013 Cambridge University Press, reproduced by permission of Pollinger Ltd on behalf of the Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli.

Extracts from William Carlos Williams, 'The Raper from Pasenack', 'Homage', 'Pastoral', and 'Death the Barber' © 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corp, from *Collected Poems 1909-1939 Volume I* (1988) Carcanet Press/New Directions Publishing Corp, and 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower' by William Carlos Williams © 1944 William Carlos Williams, from *Collected Poems 1939-1962 Volume II* (1991) Carcanet Press/New Directions Publishing Corp. Reproduced by permission of Carcanet Press and New Directions Publishing Corp.

Extract from *I Wanted to Write A Poem* by William Carlos Williams © 1958 William Carlos Williams. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press/New Directions Publishing Corp.

Extract from the poem 'Considering the Snail' in Thom Gunn, *My Sad Captains* (1961) London: Faber. Reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.

Extract from the poem 'Considering the Snail' in Thom Gunn, *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1994 by Thom Gunn. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, LLC.

Extract from T.S Eliot ‘Reflections on “Vers Libre”’, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*, London: Faber & Faber, 1965. Reproduced by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.

Extract from G. M Hopkins, ‘Carrion Comfort’, from W.H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie eds, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1970) Oxford: Oxford University Press. For works in copyright by permission of Oxford University Press on behalf of the British Province of The Society of Jesus.

Extract from Ezra Pound, ‘The Seafarer’, *Collected Shorter Poems* (1968) London: Faber & Faber. Reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.

Extract from Ezra Pound, ‘The Seafarer’, *Personae*, copyright © 1926 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Extract from Jules Laforgue, *Lettres à un ami*, translated by D.Arkell, *Looking for Laforgue: An Informal Biography* (1979) Manchester: Carcanet Press. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

Gary Snyder, excerpt from “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” from *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. Copyright © 1965 by Gary Snyder. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Counterpoint, counterpointpress.com.

Extracts from R.S.Thomas ‘Becoming’ and ‘Welsh’ from *Collected Poems* (1995) Phoenix, J.M. Dent. By permission of J.M. Dent, an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group, London.

Extract from Frank O’Hara ‘Les Luths’, *The Collected Poems Of Frank O’Hara*, copyright © 1971 by Maureen Granville-Smith, Administratrix of the Estate of Frank O’Hara, copyright renewed 1999 by Maureen O’Hara Granville-Smith and Donald Allen. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Extract from Charles Olson ‘The Distances’, originally published in *Yugen* no. 6 (1960) and in *The New American Poetry*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York, 1960), reprinted in *The Distances* (Grove Press, 1960). Works by Charles Olson published during his lifetime are held in copyright by the Estate of Charles Olson. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Extract from *Speech! Speech!* by Geoffrey Hill, Section 110 7/12 *Geoffrey Hill: Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012* (2013) Oxford:

Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

'I'm always true to you in my fashion', words and music by Cole Porter © 1948 (renewed) Chappell & Co, Inc. (ASCAP) all rights administered by Warner / Chappell North America Ltd.

Extracts from the poems by Judith Wright: 'Brevity' and 'Dust' from *A Human Pattern: Selected Poems* (2010) Sydney: ETT Imprint. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty Limited.

Extract from Gwen Harwood 'Long After Heine', *Collected Poems* (1991) Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reproduced by permission of John F. Harwood.

Two extracts from Thomas Kinsella's 'Downstream', from *Selected Poems* (1996). Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

The poem 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night' by Dylan Thomas from *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (1952) New Directions Publishing Corp. © 1952 Dylan Thomas. Reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates and New Directions Publishing Corp.

Extracts from 'Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers' and 'Why – Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?' by Emily Dickinson. (J 216/F 124). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Boston, London: Little Brown and Co. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942, by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965, by Mary L. Hampson.

Lines 17–23 of 'Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay [Penelope at her Loom]' from *The End of Beauty* (1987) by Jorie Graham. Copyright © 1987 by Jorie Graham. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Extracts from Matthew Welton, 'She makes her music' and 'We needed coffee but...' from *New Poetries II An Anthology* (1999) Manchester: Carcanet Press. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

Extract from 'How to Kill' in Keith Douglas, *Complete Poems* (1978) London: Faber & Faber. Reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.

Extract from 'How to Kill' in Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, Third Edition, by Keith Douglas. Copyright © 1998 The Estate of Keith Douglas. Reprinted with kind permission by Professor Desmond Graham.

Extract from Marianne Moore 'What Are Years?', *Complete Poems* (1984) London: Faber & Faber. Reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd, Simon & Schuster and the Estate of Marianne Moore. Permission for the electronic use of 'What Are Years' from *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (1984) Faber & Faber is granted by the Literary Estate of Marianne C. Moore, David M. Moore, Successor Executor of the Literary Estate of Marianne Moore. All rights reserved.

Extract from John Ashbery 'And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name', *Selected Poems* (1985) Manchester: Carcanet Press. Originally published in *Houseboat Days* (1977). Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press Limited.

Extract from John Ashbery 'And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name', *Houseboat Days* by John Ashbery. Copyright © 1975, 1976, 1977, 1999 by John Ashbery.

Reprinted by permission of Georges Borchardt, Inc., on behalf of the author.

Extracts from Eavan Boland 'In Search of a Language' in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) Manchester: Carcanet Press, 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma' in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) Manchester: Carcanet Press © 1995 by Eavan Boland and 'Contingencies' in *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980–1990*, (1990) Manchester: Carcanet Press. © 1990 by Eavan Boland. Reprinted by permission of Carcanet Press.

Extract from Chris McCully (ed.), 'Fleur Adcock' in *The Poet's Voice and Craft* (1994) Manchester: Carcanet Press. Reprinted by kind permission of Fleur Adcock.

An extract from the poem 'An American Jay' by Vona Groarke by kind permission of the author and The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland from *Spindrift* (2009).

Extract from the poem 'anyone lived in a pretty how town'. Copyright © 1940, 1968, 1991 by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust, from *Complete Poems: 1904–1962* by E. E. Cummings, ed. George J. Firmage. Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Extracts from 'Experiments' from <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html> by Charles Bernstein. Copyright © 1996–2014 by Poets' Ludicrously Aimless Yearning (PLAY). Reprinted with kind permission from the author Charles Bernstein c/o The Permissions Company, www.permissionscompany.com.

The publishers have made every effort to contact authors/copyright holders of works reprinted in *Poetry: The Basics*, fourth edition, and to obtain permission to publish extracts. This has not been possible in every case, however, and we would welcome correspondence from those individuals/companies whom we have been unable to trace. Any omissions brought to our attention will be remedied in future editions.

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the fourth edition, I should like to thank once more students at Manchester Metropolitan University with whom I have worked and who have influenced the book through its various editions; my former colleagues Margaret Beethan, Michael Bradshaw, Laurence Coupe, and Jess Edwards; John McAuliffe and Michael Schmidt; Jon Glover, Antony Rowland, and Judith Wainwright.

I should very much like to thank my editors Karen Raith and Chris Ratcliffe and the several anonymous readers whose comments on previous editions have been both critically perceptive and encouraging.

For material in Chapters 8 and 9 I should like to thank Vona Groarke, Kim Moore and Matthew Welton and James Byrne and Anna Smaill of the sometime *Wolf Magazine*.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my school English teacher, Ken Lowe, who began my love of poetry. All final responsibility is of course my own.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

INTRODUCTION

BECAUSE THERE IS LANGUAGE THERE IS POETRY

It's raining, it's pouring
The old man is snoring
He went to bed
With a bucket on his head
And couldn't get up in the morning.

Children as young as two or three can delight in this rhyme and will try to get their own tongues round it. Why is this? Most simply, it is because they delight in the noise it makes. Just at the time they are sorting words from their whole acoustic world and beginning to use them themselves, here is a piece of language they can understand and whose sounds give them immediate pleasure.

Exploring how this works in more detail, I think we can recognize several particular features in its short span. First, it has strong, obvious *beats*, here shown in bold: 'It's **raining**, it's **pouring** / The **old** man is **snoring** / He **went** to **bed** / With a **bucket** on his **head** / And **couldn't** get **up** in the **morning**'. Moreover, there is an intriguing change of pattern within the first four lines. Two strong beats occupy only four *syllables* in line 3 as against the six or seven of the other lines. Then, in the last line, there are three stresses. Line 4 – 'with a **buck**-et on his head' – seems to present a difficulty as the speaker has to scramble over 'with a' to get to the next obviously stressed syllable, '**buck**-et'. Indeed, another version of the rhyme gives 'He got into bed / And bumped his head' which is simpler to say because it is more 'regular', and if we combined the two to read: 'He **went** to **bed** / And **bumped** his **head**' it would be more rigidly patterned still. However, the pleasures of verse don't

come from rigidity but often from a flexing of a basic scheme, and the ‘difficulty’ of articulating lines 3 and 4 presents the same kind of enjoyable challenge as a tongue-twister does. If the game is to recite it ever faster the fun increases until the inevitable hilarious breakdown. However arrived at, it is the not-so-simple irregularities of this simple rhyme that account for its rhythmic pleasure.

At the same time, this little verse is dominated by clear *rhymes*: raining / pouring / snoring / morning, and bed / head. Standing out from the more normal rhythms and sounds of speech this verse encourages a physical response like clapping or swaying, just as modern pop songs do. The importance of the tune always makes it very difficult to compare poetry and song lyrics, but in the words of the Abba song ‘Mamma Mia’, for instance, we can broadly see rhythm, rhyme, repetition of word sound, including *internal rhyme*, and phrase deployed in just the same way as part of the pleasure. It is just those qualities which make the rhyme a favourite with children well before they can make any more sense of the emotional meaning than they can of why a man might go to bed with a bucket on his head.

Rhymes such as these and even simpler ones like the first lullabies are among the earliest utterances we address to children because we know they will respond to these effects. Through evolution, the human vocal tract has become able to give voice to a variety of particular sounds and their complex combinations. With these, we have created languages which can communicate information of very different kinds and to a very high degree of subtlety. As we acquire language, we make and respond to sounds, imitating and relishing them, before we learn the particular ones that go to make up words and discover how effectively word sounds denote objects in our world and carry information to others. However, sophisticated our utterances become the sensuous character of language remains. Many poets have made the same claim. Gordon Bottomley (1874–1948) was among the most emphatic as he resorted to capitals to insist that ‘THE SOUND OF POETRY IS PART OF ITS MEANING’. As the poet **Kenneth Koch** (1925–2002) writes, ‘Each word has a little music of its own’ which, he goes on to say, ‘poetry arranges so it can be heard’ (Koch, 1998, p 28).

A clock in the eye ticks in the eye a clock
ticks in the eye.

A number with that and large as a hat
 which makes rims think quicker than I.
 A clock in the eye ticks in the eye a clock
 ticks ticks in the eye.

As we have seen with the rhyme and the song chorus, the ‘music’ of words is further enjoyed in such sequences as a run of the same consonants (*alliteration*), *rhyme*, or the repetition of certain words or rhythmic patterns. These lines by **Gertrude Stein** (1874–1946) show this kind of fascination. Now, the intrigue extends to the surprising juxtaposition of word meanings, as does the title of the poem itself, ‘Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded’. Stein called her book *Tender Buttons*. Ponder for a moment what associations come with putting the words ‘tender’ and ‘button’ next to each other.

These resources of language, especially *recurrence* – the anticipated pleasure of a sound or shape being repeated – have been used in the pre-literate, oral tradition of all societies for dances, riddles, spells, prayers, games, stories, and histories. The work of the American poet/researcher **Jerome Rothenberg** (1931–) provides a wealth of examples of this from every continent and many cultures. We should not assume though that work of this kind from pre-literate cultures is simple. Often, as Ruth Finnegan shows in her anthology *Oral Poetry*, work such as the Malay form of the *pantun*, which we will meet in its English adaptation in Chapter 7 on *Stanza*, can be very elaborate.

More familiarly, the early enthusiasm for nursery rhymes, chants, schoolyard games, songs, advertising slogans, and jingles all feature the same kind of *gestural* characteristics. ‘*Gesture*’ is an important concept here. What I mean by gesture in language are those qualities we employ to signal our meaning strongly by emphasizing particular word sounds, rhythmic sequences, or patterns, such as those we have recognized in the pieces above. Thus, the words will catch our attention not only through a grasp of their dictionary meanings but also through their sensuous impression, not unlike indeed, the way we accompany speech by hand gestures and variations of *tone*. The incantatory, ‘musical’ qualities of beat, drum, and dance are close to this and are part of the close relation between poetry and song. Indeed, the term which is still key to both – *lyric* – points to this

connexion. Lyric refers to that kind of *verse* most readily associated with the chanted or sung origins of poetry, traditionally to the harp-like stringed instrument known as the lyre. We still refer to the words of songs of all kinds as lyrics, and poetry that is closest in style and span to songs, as opposed to poems that tell substantial stories or are the medium for drama, are defined as lyric. I shall have more to say about this *genre* of poetry in Chapter 3, 'Tones of Voice'.

In poetry without music these qualities have become formalized into what are its most prominent distinguishing features: its *rhythms*, that is the way a sequence of words moves in the ear, and its *metres*, that is the regular patterning of such movement into the poetic line. The character of the many different kinds of poetic line will be explored in separate chapters.

So, while the evolution and use of language has obviously been functional, exchanging information with the necessary clarity, its sounds and shapings, both spoken and written, are also inevitably gestural. Of course, those instrumental uses of language will be as simple and direct as possible, like the bald instructions for using a computer: 'Press Enter'; 'Select the file to be moved'; 'Double-click the Mouse icon'. But even the specialized language associated with computers is not literal but *metaphorical*: the mouse, windows, desktop, and bin. My computer manual promises 'Right Answers, Right Now', and the simple emphasis of this punchy phrase – repeating 'Right' – is the kind of language I am calling gestural. This snatch of a conversation is invented, but I think it is recognizable:

So I had to go back to the bank. No sign of it there. Back to the butcher's. No sign of it there. Back to the chemist. No sign of it there. Back to the deli. No sign. Back to the café. No sign. Where was it? Slap-bang in the middle of the kitchen table.

The speaker wants to express tedium and exasperation at mislaying a purse and these repetitive, truncated phrasings with their slight variations impress this upon the listener. These are the gestural features of language.

So, the argument of this chapter is that poetry is not really a peculiar, demarcated zone out of the mainstream of language-use, but that language is inevitably and intrinsically 'poetic' in the qualities that I'm calling gestural. However, historically, these qualities have

been highlighted and formalized for particular uses and occasions. Poetry is a form for special attention and one that calls unusual attention to the way it is formed.

The ancient ceremonial aspect of gestural language persists in our desire for special forms of language for particular occasions. We all know for instance how difficult it is to ‘find words’ of condolence. In greetings cards, at weddings, funerals, in sorrow and commemoration, and in love, wherever we feel the need for heightened, deliberate speech, wherever there is a need for ‘something to be said’, we turn to the unusual shapes and sounds of poetry. This is also why we might be drawn to write poetry in order to form an utterance that is out of the ordinary and commensurate to the weight or the joy of the occasion. Always at such times we will encounter the familiar difficulty of finding what we know to be the ‘right words’.

The deployment of impressive sounds and shapes, the deliberate speech required by that ‘something to be said’, has been known in the western tradition as *rhetoric*. In this emphasis, from *Paradise Lost* to a local newspaper’s *In Memoriam* verses, poetry can be seen to be a part of rhetoric.

However, every experience with language teaches us that communication is frequently less transparent than we would wish. Disappointment at the failure of language to be clear and at its capacity to mislead and sway us into deception has marked our thinking about language for centuries. Ambiguity, double meanings, ‘equivocation’, intended, and not intended, all manner of ‘*-speaks*’ – ‘double-speak’, ‘media-speak’ – result from, or exploit, the potential anarchy of language. Often, it seems ‘words run away with themselves’ and take us with them. This may lead into a cheerful gallimaufry of free association and *word-play*, or into saying things we did not mean. Those ‘right words’ can be very elusive.

As a form of utterance that is especially sensitive to all the various resources of language in both its *semantic* (i.e. meaningful) and its sensuous dimensions, poetry has taken upon itself the freedom and opportunity for wordplay, and also its responsibilities. Because language is as it is we might say anything. Because life is how it is we need to watch what we say.

Through language we can not only convey common information but also achieve a vast capacity to generalize particulars and to abstract from experience. We can also invent and fantasize and relay

any of this to others. Its immeasurable creative flexibility enables an enormous range of associations and communications. So, since the nature of language itself does not necessarily oblige us to be purpose-like, it also enables associations which may seem purposeless. It is often irresistible – even just for the hell of it – to remove its use as far as possible from any externally driven direction.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett observes the essential biological function of language in evolution, but continues, ‘once it has arrived on the evolutionary scene, the endowment for language makes room for all manner of biologically trivial or irrelevant or baroque (non-functional) endeavours: gossip, riddles, poetry, philosophy’ (Dennett, 1984, p.48). On this view, *all* poetry, including the most rhetorically purposeful, might be seen as ‘baroque’, perhaps ‘trivial or irrelevant’, and we shall look at the philosophical problems surrounding rhetoric and *figurative* language in Chapter 8. But when the owl and the pussycat go to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat, then we can see that language can indeed promote those endless associations in ways that seem especially ‘baroque’. And delightful.

So language can be deployed ‘uselessly’, and an alternative emphasis to the rhetorical one would see poetry as the space where the glory and freedom of the possibility to say anything is specialized:

an orange the size of a melon rolling slowly across the field
where i sit at the centre in an upright coffin of five panes
of glass

Such a relish as this from **Tom Raworth’s** (1938–2017) poem ‘now the pink stripes’ may be inspired by a desire to explore the light-spirited freedom afforded by language in a space not subject to instrumental demands. There can be a sheer game-playing element in such poetry, a love of messing with words because we can. Alternatively – or in addition – it may be a response to a disillusionment with the use of language in the ‘real’ world of affairs, transactions, and ‘information’. This doubt as to whether language really does simply transport common sense from one person to another is deep and long-lived. In **William Shakespeare’s** (1564–1616) *Twelfth Night*, the clown Feste complains that language has been so much discredited by being used to lie and deceive that ‘words are grown so

false I am loath to prove reason with them'. Feste claims here that the character of social discourse has become so unreliable that language itself has become discredited.

Beginning in the 1970s the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets have taken a similar view. This appellation, which comes from the title of one of the principal journals associated with the movement, draws attention to language as itself a material rather than an invisible medium *through* which we make meaning or 'express' ourselves. They question the whole idea of poetry as personal expression of experience, ideas, or emotions but focus instead upon the features of words as objects in themselves. Further, they challenge the dominance of what **Charles Bernstein** (1950–) calls the 'authoritative plain style' of modern industrialized, business-oriented society. Its increasing standardization claims a monopoly over coherence and excludes tones and styles of speaking and writing that do not conform to 'mannered and refined speaking'. How Bernstein and other writers associated with this point of view respond in their own poetic practice will be explored in Chapter 9, 'Writing a Poem Now'.

All of these pleasures and problems are with us because of the character of human language. What we have come to call poetry gives us a constructed, deliberate space in which to enjoy and to tussle with the experience of language. Reading or writing a poem offers a practising awareness of the problems of language and meaning – specifically of what we must say and how we can best say it. *Because there is language there is poetry*: in the rest of this book I shall try to set out some of the principal ways that poetry in the modern English language has been made across the whole spectrum of rhetoric and nonsense.

SUMMARY

In this introductory chapter, we have looked at:

- The character of human language, especially with regard to its sounds.
- The pleasure of rhythm and rhyme from children's verses onwards.
- How language operates functionally, uses *gesture*, but can also work 'uselessly' – and enjoyably.

- The problem of finding ‘the right words’.
- The basic idea of rhetoric and the challenge of nonsense.
- The continuity between the general use of language and poetry *and* its distinctiveness.

FURTHER READING

Finnegan, Ruth. (ed.) (1982) *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Hughes, Ted. and Heaney, Seamus. (eds) (1982) *The Rattle Bag*, London: Faber.

Opie, I. and Opie, Peter. (1959) *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, London: Oxford University Press.

Rothenberg, Jerome. (ed.) (1968) *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetics from Africa, America, Asia and Oceania*, New York: Doubleday.

Trask, R. L. (1988) *Language the Basics*, Second edition, Ch 3, ‘Language and Meaning’, London: Routledge.

DELIBERATE SPACE

*Jimmy Fryer Esquire,
Walking along a telegraph wire
With his shirt on fire!*

I have used the word *gesture* in Chapter 1 to describe those aspects of the nature of language other than those covered by dictionary definition and word-order. These gestures are similar to the physical gestures and tones of voice in conversation. Obviously, it is common and important that we use clear, ‘cold’ instrumental language in everyday life so that we know to meet inside or outside a cinema, or take two per day after, not before meals. But, as we have seen, little or no communication is confined to transmitting information in this way.

All the resources of verse emphasize the gesturing elements of words and their combinations in ways that draw attention and impress. These include sound effects like ***alliteration*** and ***assonance***; ***repetition***; ***rhyme***; ***rhythm*** and ***metre***; figures of speech or ***tropes***; ***limericks***, ***sonnets***, ***haiku***; and all the other verse forms that we shall meet later. (All of these highlighted terms are defined briefly in the **Glossary**.) Even poems that do not manifest such features so obviously – or indeed aim to avoid them altogether – are still *shaping* words in some deliberate forms.

This chapter will suggest that poetry can be seen as *a particular space*, created or adapted by the poet out of the flux of language-use with great deliberation. A poem is a part of the functioning and the gesturing of the words we use every day, but it is also set aside.

Just as a prayer-mat is made of fabric found everywhere but, once laid out, marks off a space from the surrounding daily world, so does the shape of the poem organize language into a space for pause and for different attention. It is a space *in time*, just as the prayer is, one marked by the *rhythms* of pace and pause, and the sensations and ideas in every word. This space is shaped in the mind of poet and listener, and when the poem occupies a physical space on the page, its impression is also in the formation made by the letters. Some poems, as we shall see, exist primarily, or even entirely in visual space and have virtually no temporal existence, just other poems have their life entirely in the time of the voice rather than the written page.

In later chapters, we shall look at the various features which mark out this space and fill it, but first I want to explore what this space might be, and the kind of effects it creates. I shall begin where poetry began in *oral* recitation and performance. I shall look at children's rhymes and oral poetry from Britain and elsewhere and move from that to look at how strongly visual spaces are created in the familiar space of the printed page.

ORAL TRADITION AND CHILDREN'S RHYMES

As we can see from

Jimmy Fryer Esquire,
Walking along a telegraph wire
With his shirt on fire!

a prime motive for manipulating words in gestural ways is pleasure: the simple sensuous exhilaration that comes of making up such a combination of sense and sound, or of adapting it, or certainly of uttering it. The delight in this verse comes from the *semantic* absurdity – the picture the words show us of someone walking along a telegraph wire perhaps as yet unaware of his predicament is just wonderfully silly, just like the man with the bucket on his head. Besides the relish of others' discomfiture which is so much a part of children's cat-calling, the image's impossibility is also part of its pleasure. Words can be put together in ways that offer a little holiday from reality, a momentary fantasy.

But there is more to it than this. Certain ‘manipulations’ are more effective than others, and sound, timing, and rhythm, for example, are all crucial. Poetry works on the ear. It is a form developed for and in performance, within a long *oral tradition*.

To understand the effects of these oral origins, we can return to the playground and Jimmy Fryer. As we have said, the rhyme offers a certain pleasure through the absurdity of what it describes, but the coincidence of the word sounds is no less striking. The name ‘Fryer’ offers the chance of the *rhymes* of ‘Esquire’, ‘fire’, and ‘wire’, although it is just as likely that in earlier versions of the joke the point was to mock the use of the pompous title *Esquire*. It could easily be adapted, for example, to read:

Jeffrey Wainwright Esquire,
Walking along a telegraph wire
With his shirt on fire!

The gender of ‘Esquire’ would present a momentary problem, but, it’s easy to imagine such further adaptations as:

Kylie Fryer Esquire,
Walking along a telegraph wire,
With her skirt on fire.

The schoolyard poet would certainly substitute *skirt*, not *dress*. Any polysyllabic word like *overcoat* or *handbag* would certainly make the line a clumsy mouthful, but not all *monosyllables* are equal. The lighter vowel sound and the soft slipping-away –ss of *dress* would dissolve the mocking bite of harder sounding words like *skirt* and *shirt*. Of such details are successful verses made, and the ear for it is vitally related to the fact that children’s verses have an oral existence. Their precision has been honed by repetition and the fact that the playground can be a very critical arena. With one verbal slip, the mocker could instantly become the mocked. Imagine for instance the embarrassment of a child eager to pass on this rhyme,

Good King Wenceslas
Knocked a bobby senseless
Right in the middle of Marks & Spencer’s