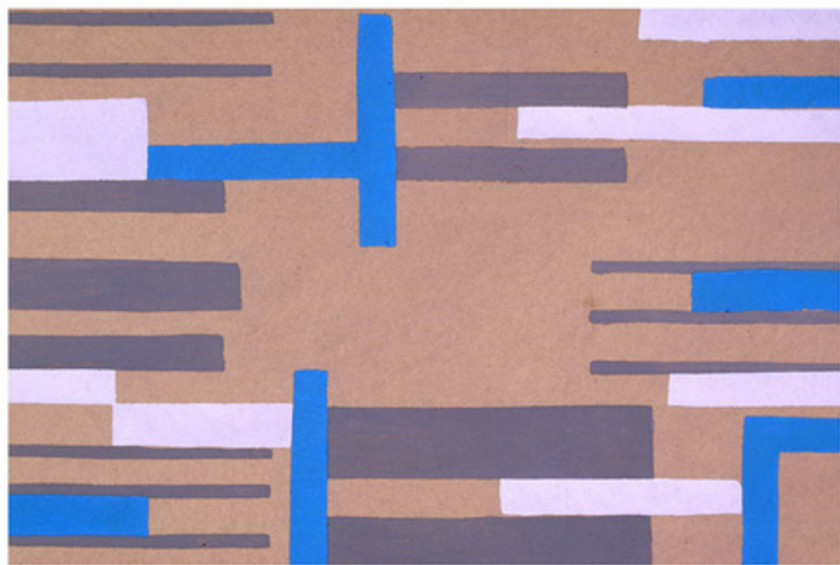Charles O. Hartman

VERSE

An INTRODUCTION TO PROSODY

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Charles O. Hartman

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Introduction

This book explores what seems like a simple question: why are poems usually written in lines? This small puzzle turns out to be connected to larger mysteries. When we read a poem, more of our being is engaged than when we read an instruction manual or an editorial. We feel that poems are a use of language distinct from other uses of it – that in poems words *work on us* in uncanny ways. How might the power of poems' language be linked to the custom of printing them in lines, that is, as *verse?*

Suppose for a moment that you had never learned to read silently. (Nobody did until the Middle Ages, thousands of years after writing was invented.) Every word on the page would pass not only before your eyes but through your mouth and ears. Poetry remembers the time when reading always meant reading aloud. Most of the writing that deluges us every day – newspapers, business letters, emails, tweets – can be read silently with no great loss and with a gain in speed. But in ways we'll examine throughout this book, the meaning of a poem depends on its sound at least as much as on ideas that it may convey. A poem needs the time to be heard.

If you're reading aloud, what happens when the text is divided into units that are (usually) larger than a word and smaller than a sentence – that is, into lines? Isolated this way, a short stretch of language is easier to *hear*. The visual fact of lines paradoxically encourages us to listen to the sounds of the words. Whether or not we can specify exactly what you do at the boundary between lines, and whether or not we can be sure that every reader will do the same thing, you're

bound to take the line breaks as signals for *some* kind of shift in your almost-internal performance of reading. They're cues in a script.

One name for all the aspects of language that silent reading jettisons for the sake of speed, a name that emphasizes how the complex auditory action of words distributes itself through time, is *rhythm*. All language performances – conversation, singing, recitation – have some kind of rhythmic character, but in poems there is a tendency for rhythm to be noticeably *organized* in various ways. (Lines are most often the basic units of organization.) Some of these rhythmic arrangements are based on counting, and we call them *meters*. Others are not. A term that covers all these kinds of rhythmic organizations and focuses on the ways they're shared by poet and reader and therefore become available for the making of meaning is *prosody*. (Linguists use "prosody" in a different though related way. See the Glossary at the end of this book.) All poetry makes use of some kind of prosody, some means by which the poet controls the reader's experience of rhythm. These chapters examine the kinds that poets in English have used.

Formal arrangements of language such as meter and rhyme aren't merely devices or decorative patterns. Like all prosodic controls, they help us hear the poem as a speaking voice. Considered from one odd angle, a poem is a miracle of *bandwidth*. The poet imagines a whole speaking, gesticulating person, complete with a tone of voice and a situation, and compresses that living being into a stream of data only a few bits wide: a few dozen letters and punctuation marks. This stream (after traveling for a day or for hundreds of years, a mile or thousands of miles) reaches a reader who, perhaps without being aware of the process, from this impoverished text imaginatively *reconstitutes* the voice and the speaker, as alive again as at creation. What we call poetic techniques are methods of supporting this marvel of recovery. They often work subliminally on us while we think we're paying attention to what's merely being *said* by the poem.

If the reader doesn't need to be aware of the details behind the work of reading, what use is a book like this? Even as children, after all (or especially as children), we respond to language arranged for the sake of its sounds. Yet the image of transmission I just gave – a poem-channel with a writer and reader at the two ends – is incomplete. There is not one reader but many, perhaps widely distributed in space and time, who read not one but many poems. These expansions change the process. We read as communities and these communities evolve

elaborately over time. Just as native speakers of English don't confine themselves to the few hundred words required for a barter language, so readers and writers of poetry in English have built up rich and varied frameworks of assumption and reference. This book introduces and explains the core elements of those traditions of reading that have to do with rhythm. Rather than cataloguing formal devices as an encyclopedia would, it aims to connect the forms with the meaning and movement of the poetry at as many points as possible.

For a long time – at least from the seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth – poets, critics, and teachers assumed that readers shared knowledge of the traditional poetic norms and terms. Now, for a variety of reasons, people who want to discuss how poems work can no longer count on that widespread, more or less unified understanding. Though this doesn't render all poetry alien, it makes a great deal of English poetry from the past millennium only half-audible to many readers. At the same time, the many school and college courses that introduce students to poetry have too much material to cover – history, biography, cultural background, interpretive techniques, and so on – to give the study of verse *as verse* the class hours it requires. This book tries to fill that gap in as self-contained a way as possible. I've tried to make the book readable for advanced secondary-school students but accurate and detailed enough for a graduate student brushing up on the fundamentals. There's no reason why combining these goals should be especially difficult. After all, my premise is that meter and other formal properties of poems operate as *common ground* among poets and readers. They aren't in the poem so much as in the context we bring to the reading of the poem. It should be possible to explain them in terms available to everyone. There's nothing in this territory so abstruse as to prevent a motivated person from learning it even without classroom help.

I also mean the book both for people who want to learn more about reading poems and for those learning to write them. Again, I can't think of this as a difficult combination. Poetry is a reciprocal act. As poets we read other people's poems as well as our own – otherwise the communities of reading would disintegrate. As readers we're continually recapitulating the poet's act of speaking and hearing the poem as its sound unfurls in time. Reading poems and writing them are, on the most fundamental level, impossible to distinguish.

Though the six chapters in this book sometimes refer to each other, to some extent you can pick and choose. Everyone will want to read the first chapter, "The Iambic Pentameter Line," because it introduces the process of *scanning* a

metrical line and the terminology necessary to talk about this process. We start with the iambic pentameter not because it's the simplest metrical line, but rather because it's the most dominant historically and the most fully elaborated over time. Even if you've already learned about scansion, you'll want to skim this chapter to see how its approach may differ from those you've encountered before. While introducing metrical reading, the chapter fills in some theoretical and historical background as needed.

The next chapter, "Other Meters," extends the methods of Chapter 1 to lines of different lengths and with different metrical bases. These first two chapters concentrate almost exclusively on what happens within a line of verse, the basic unit that poems are usually made of. Chapter 3, "Beyond the Line," examines the ways in which lines are combined – by rhyme, by the groups of lines called stanzas, and by sentences – into larger structures and ultimately into poems.

Chapter 4 deals with what has become a dominant mode in poetry in the past hundred years, nonmetrical or "Free Verse." It asks how this modern mode resembles the metrical verse that predates it and continues alongside it, as well as how the two modes differ. Chapter 5 is devoted to a topic not as commonly included in discussions of poetic form: "Songs." In our experience of poetically formed language, songs may be even more prevalent than free verse, and their prominence goes back much farther.

Chapter 6, "Advanced Topics," will interest a different group of readers. The approach to poetic meter that this book takes as its foundation and develops is not the only one available. The first two sections of this chapter compare it to a couple of the systems developed by linguists and by other literary critics. Different approaches to meter embody different assumptions about how poetic language works rhythmically, and those assumptions suggest different ways of reading. The chapter ends by describing a computer program that can perform a certain kind of metrical scansion and asking what its limitations say about the nature of meter.

Technical terms are printed in **bold face** at a principal point of explanation; this may occur more than once for some terms. These terms are all collected in the Glossary at the end, which lists the page on which the term is introduced as well as page numbers for any extended discussion of the term. In this way the Glossary serves also as the most useful kind of subject index for this book. There is also an index of poets and poem titles.

A website to accompany this book is at charlesohartman.com/verse. At least two programs can be found there: a downloadable version of the Scandroid, described in Chapter 6, and a web-based tutorial on scansion.

* * * * *

Though this book distills my own experience as a teacher, critic, and poet, I could not have written it without a world of help. We write in communities too. I thank Natalie Gerber for her generosity and informed intelligence as correspondent and foil, and for enlisting her own classes to locate soft patches in the ice. Tom Cable and other members of the West Chester University Poetry Conference provided useful responses and pushed me in unexpected directions. Wendy Battin, Martha Collins, Mary Kinzie, and other poet friends have given me the benefit of their compatible but distinct views on the intricacies of the art. Davis Oldham and Geoffrey Babbitt not only gave close scrutiny to particular chapters, but tried them out on their own students; many tactics adopted in Chapters 1 and 4 have changed as a result. Julia Proft and Jim O'Connor have provided the expertise I lacked to make the Scandroid (see Chapter 6) into a program someone besides its author might be willing to use.

I'm grateful to Janet Gezari for lending me her faultless editorial eye, her astute sense of what an actual reader might see and want to see, and her encyclopedic delight in English poetry. Alan Bradford provided some crucial historical details. My own students, not only during the several years when I tested parts of this book's method on them, but for the several decades when they helped goad me into formulating it, deserve my cumulative thanks. Looking farther back, I see how indebted I am to my teachers, especially Howard Nemerov, Donald Finkel, Naomi Lebowitz, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who gave me help I can no longer extricate from my own thought. The same is true of my father, Carl Frederick Hartman, who (I think I remember) paid me twenty-five cents an hour in junior high school to read Robert Frost's "The Most of It" and write down what I thought it meant; told me to type out some poems by Yeats as prose to see how they changed; and suggested by his example that music and poetry might live together in one person.

1

The Iambic Pentameter Line

This book is about **verse**: the form of written language most often used for poems.

"Verse" refers to a channel, a medium, not to the content or value of the writing it carries. "Poetry" is a different kind of term, more fluid and value-laden – "sheer poetry," "poetry in motion." "Poetry" has no opposite. But **verse** is so clearly opposed to **prose** that you can see the difference from across the room:

some verse	some prose

For centuries there has been a close association between verse and poetry. Though prose-poems exist and though some print forms like advertisements show the kind of attention to line breaks that poets pay to them, generally when we see a page like the one on the left we're sure that a poem waits to be read.

The polarity between verse and prose looks so simple as to be bald and bland. But it turns out to be freighted with meaning for poems. Poems use verse because verse is language in **lines**. Prose is in lines too, of course (unless it's printed sideways on a very long tape), but the breaks between lines don't mean anything. They're just the places where the text is cut up to fit into the page-box. Verse is verse because every line and line break represents a *decision* by the writer. Poems use verse because poetry, whatever else it may be, does its work by being a tissue of decisions about language. When we read a poem we retrace the poet's path (often without thinking about it) and mimic those decisions within ourselves. Grouping words into lines and dividing the lines carefully turn out to be powerful ways to focus the reader's attention. They contribute to the reader's understanding whether the understanding happens consciously or not.

Verse can be made up of either **metrical** or **nonmetrical** lines. In English, for most of the past thousand years until about World War I, poems almost always used some type of **meter** to organize their lines, and we'll begin with metrical verse. (This will help us make sense of "free verse" in Chapter 4.) The dominant kind of metrical line in English poetry has long been what is called the **iambic pentameter**. We'll work out formal definitions soon, but it's more important to *hear* the tune or movement of the line. Here are two iambic pentameters, both from sonnets by William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Read them *out loud* – this will be an important step throughout this book:

> If thou survive my well-contented day …
> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see …

Let's consider some differences between these two lines before we get to what they have in common. The first line begins by focusing on the charged verb "survive." Then it pauses momentarily, then gathers itself even more tightly around the **polysyllabic** compound "well-contented." (Shakespeare made up this word, which adds to the line's intensity: if we imagine him speaking the line, we see him having to reach for new language, like a singer reaching for a note almost out of range.) The second line consists entirely of **monosyllables** and spreads emphasis fairly evenly among the five main words, "long," "men," "breathe," "eyes," and "see." Again there's a small pause (it sets up a balance between the verbs "breathe" and "see," with their shared vowel sound), but this time it comes just after the midpoint of the line rather than just before it. These are a few of the ways in which the two lines move or

unfold differently. (You can find more.) Within the small, concentrated space of a single line words can speed up and slow down and group themselves in a wide variety of ways. To sum all this up in a single word, the two lines differ in **rhythm**.

Syllables

The terms "monosyllable" and "polysyllable" assume that we're always sure how many syllables a word has. That's not quite true. People from different parts of the English-speaking world may hear words like "fire" and "hour" as having either one syllable or two. How many syllables does "comfortable" have? Or "towards"? In practice, as we'll see, it's unusual for these uncertainties to make any important difference in the *metrical* workings of a line. Notice and enjoy the variety English offers, but don't be anxious about it. When in doubt trust your dictionary, which always gives the syllabification of a word.

Here are two more lines in iambic pentameter, one by Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586), the other by Theodore Roethke (1908–1963). Again begin by reading them aloud:

> Desiring nought but how to kill desire …
> I hear my being dance from ear to ear. …

Listen, as before, for how rhythmic variations in the speed and groupings of words and in the position and strength of the pauses combine to give each line its own "tune." Both lines are organized around repetitions, but the repetitions have different effects on the movement of the line. Sidney begins and ends with forms of the word "desire." (This is the final line of a poem about being trapped by one's own desire.) Roethke, in contrast, repeats "ear," which echoes "hear" at the beginning. In the ballroom in his head all those long *e* sounds (including "being") gambol around the different resonance of "dance." Though we might think of the rhythm in both lines as somehow symmetrical, the symmetry feels like imprisonment in Sidney's line but celebration in Roethke's.

All of these variations may be subtler than any we're routinely conscious of hearing in speech – though we hear a lot more than we're conscious of. Part of a poem's business is to make us more aware of the sound and movement of what we speak.

Rhythm and Meter

We've been listening to differences, but what do these four lines of verse have in common? They're all ten syllables long and the even-numbered syllables are all stronger or louder or more intense than the odd-numbered ones. You may have been aware of these similarities in the lines when you spoke them aloud. (If not, listen to them again.) This common ground is the **meter**. Here's a way to make it visible, using '/' for the stronger syllables, 'x' for the weaker syllables, and a plain vertical bar to demarcate the repeated units:

```
  x   /  |  x  /  |   x   /  |  x  /  |  x  /
  If thou survive my well-contented day …              (Shakespeare)
    x   /  | x   / |x     /  |x   / | x   /
  So long as men can breathe or eyes can see …         (Shakespeare)
    x /|x      /     |   x   / |x  / | x /
  Desiring nought but how to kill desire …             (Sidney)
  x   /  | x  / |x    /    |  x  / |x   /
  I hear my being dance from ear to ear. …             (Roethke)
```

The row of marks above each line is a **scansion** of the line.

Learning how to **scan** iambic pentameter is the goal for this chapter, and the skills this involves underlie everything later in the book as well. In fact the scansion itself is much less the point than the kind of detailed listening that scansion requires. Scansion is just a system of notation, but using it encourages us to apply a close awareness that helps connect the details of the words' sounds with the larger gestures of meaning that the sequence of words performs.

Though later in this section we'll discuss several kinds of variations used in iambic pentameters, in a nutshell this similarity among the lines *is* the meter. All of the many lines we call "iambic pentameters" have the same meter, but each one of those millions of iambic pentameter lines has its own characterizing rhythm. An iambic pentameter is a set of words that fits the pattern

$$x \; / \; | \; x \; / \; | \; x \; / \; | \; x \; / \; | \; x \; /$$

This is obviously not a line of verse, just a skeleton. Marks aren't syllables, of course, but the distinction goes farther than that. We began by noticing differences in rhythm among several lines of verse, and then we noticed the meter which is common to all of them. An unvarying meter underlies the varying rhythms. The poetic meter of a line and the line's rhythm are closely related – after all they're both embodied in the same row of syllables – but while meter is an abstract pattern, rhythm is the far more detailed, textured experience that's available to us as we read each particular line of verse.

There's an analogy with faces. Meter is like *the human face*: a pattern of two eyes either side of a nose, mouth below, ears outboard, and so on. Rhythm is individual like *a human's face*: crow's-feet, the left eyebrow a millimeter higher than the right, the mouth narrower than average, ears sticking out especially far, and so on. Humpty Dumpty complains to Alice that "if you had the two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance – or the mouth at the top – that would be *some* help." We recognize a face in a way and with an ease that Humpty Dumpty just doesn't get. "The human face": our brains are so good at picking out human faces from a visual field that we do it even when they aren't there – in the random knots in a pine wall or leaves in a row of bushes. "A human's face": we can recognize a friend's face in profile thirty yards away in the dusk. As we gain experience in reading metrical verse we soon learn to identify a line as iambic pentameter without stopping to scan it. At the same moment we may well notice its rhythm: the new and individual way in which *this* iambic pentameter embodies the familiar design.

While rhythm can include any and all aspects of language sound, a meter abstracts just a few features from the line's language and organizes them into a pattern. In scansions, which make metrical structure visible, the main marks correspond to the main features that the meter organizes. This mark:

/

indicates a **stressed syllable** or **stress**. This one:

x

indicates an unstressed syllable or **slack**. (In the scansions given earlier, a third mark, |, indicates the division between "feet." We'll return to it later.)

Marks

If you've worked with scansions before, you may remember using different marks. It doesn't matter deeply; we could use ˈ and $ if we wanted, though it would be helpful if we all agreed so we could talk about the scansion (which in a sense is what scansions are *for*). A mark often used in the past for a slack syllable was this: ˘. But historically that mark, the **breve**, really complements the **macron**: ¯ Macrons and breves were used by scholars of Greek and Latin poetry to indicate long and short syllables. In English, while some syllables are inevitably longer than others, what *counts* about a syllable – what we count when we're paying attention to the meter – is not long versus short but stressed versus slack. Much of our vocabulary for talking about meter is inherited from Greek and Latin, but the English language is different from the Classical languages and our meters are based on a different selection of features. It seems unnecessarily confusing to employ the old marks. The stress, /, has long been a common mark, and x for a slack has become fairly common also.

A scansion diagrams just the essential aspects of the *interaction* between meter and rhythm. If we know that a poem is in iambic pentameter, there's no point in diagramming its *meter* alone. That would just be a long list of lines that are all the same: x / | x / | x / | x / | x /. On the other hand, diagramming the *rhythm* in any complete way would be enormously complicated. We would have to have marks to indicate all the degrees of stress (in "Desiring nought but how to kill desire," is "how" more or less strongly stressed than "kill"?); the grouping of words into phrases (in reading the line we might pause after "Desiring" or "nought" but we're unlikely to pause after "to"); the boundaries between words (we would never pause after the first syllable of "desire"); echoes of sound that link separate parts of the line (the hard 't' at the end of "nought" and the hard 'k' at the start of "kill" help give the line its tone of bitter distaste); and many other characteristics of the line's language that distinguish it from other lines but don't participate directly in its meter. If rhythm is like a face and meter is like the human face, scansion is like a police artist's sketch. We know the person is likely to have eyes and a nose, but the sketch can guide our attention to the details and patterns that let us recognize that particular person.

Stress

What is a stressed syllable? Explaining what stress is is easier in person than in print – sound and gestures help – but your own imagination can come to the rescue. Suppose you go to the multiplex with a friend but without much of a plan. You look over the movies being offered and your friend says, "What do you want to see?" Polite companion that you are, you say, "What do *you* want to see?" Your friend starts reading down the list and rejecting one movie after another. Finally you get a little exasperated and say, "Well, what *do* you want to see?"

What you have done with your voice to emphasize one word rather than another, in that sentence whose words never change, is called stress. You stress a word by speaking it a little louder, or lengthening it, or raising (or lowering) the pitch of your voice, or some combination. For our purposes here the physiological and acoustical components of stress don't matter much. But whatever produces it, the psychological phenomenon of stress is a crucial part of our speech. (This is true in English, though not in all languages.)

Stress plays a number of different roles in English speech. The sentences at the multiplex illustrate **contrastive stress**, which is the most conscious kind, a device we use all the time to emphasize how one word is opposed to another. ("I said *dis*courage them, not *en*courage them!") Stress also marks the difference between a **phrase** ("a *French* teacher": someone who teaches French) and a **compound** ("a French *teacher*": a teacher who is from France). At an even finer level of detail, words with the same spelling sometimes function either as verbs or as nouns (or adjectives), and in English speech we distinguish these by stressing different syllables: "If the members of the jury convict him, he'll be a convict." "Did some colonies rebel? Which were the rebel colonies?"

Hearing Stresses

Again it's important to say these sentences out loud. It's not exactly that you're training your ear to hear stress. If you didn't already hear stress very accurately, you wouldn't understand what people say or be able to make yourself understood. Stress is that important in English speech. Rather, you're helping yourself to make your hearing conscious. In many kinds of reading (newspapers,

legal briefs, textbooks) you don't need to be aware of stress, though along with other elements of linguistic rhythm it subliminally influences how you read a text and how much pleasure you take in reading it. When you're reading poetry, though, hearing is essential. Read it aloud whenever you can. Stress is just one kind of detail you'll come to feel in play and at play. To put it another way, read the lines aloud until you can hear the stresses *without* having to make sound to do it.

All these kinds of stress make one syllable feel more prominent than the others around it. This is the basis of the most common kinds of poetic meter in English.

In any English word with more than one syllable, one of them gets primary stress: the first syllable of "butter," the middle syllable of "decision," the last syllable of "insist." These stresses are built into the language, and this has the handy result that if we're not sure which syllable gets the stress we can look it up in a dictionary. (Make sure you know how your dictionary marks stress; there are various systems.) You can practice – again not to train your ear as much as your awareness – by noticing what you stress when you say words like these:

delight	diesel	ridiculous	werewolf
employ	fortification	appreciative	handle

Similarly, in simple phrases made up of monosyllables one is often clearly stressed more than the others: "the *house*," "in *front* of," "on a *dare*." Unfortunately, while the dictionary will tell you which syllable of a longer word gets the stress, it can't tell you whether a monosyllable is stressed or not in all the different contexts where it might appear. But there are fairly reliable rules of thumb that depend on the part of speech of the word. (The terms used here for parts of speech aren't quite the ones linguists would use these days, but they should be familiar.) Some monosyllables are almost always stressed:

nouns	*hand, force, time, itch*
adjectives and adverbs	*blank, first, wild, soon*
verbs	*sit, close, dream, tell*

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(An exception: words like "can" and "do," when used as *auxiliary* verbs, aren't usually stressed. Neither are forms of "be" when they're linking other words together: "Sharon is president.") Some additional words are *automatically* stressed because of what they mean or how they're used, especially interjections – *Ha! Wow! Nuts!* – though they're not very frequent in poems. Other monosyllables are typically *not* stressed:

articles	*the, a, an*
conjunctions	*and, but, or*
prepositions	*in, of, for*

Rather than memorizing lists, you might find it useful to notice what distinguishes these two groups of categories of words. Linguists call them **open class** and **closed class** words. A class of words is "open" if we can easily add new items to it. Nouns and verbs are open classes: the nickname of the Nike logo, "swoosh," is a verb that someone at Nike turned into a noun, and the verb itself was invented in the nineteenth century by someone imitating a certain kind of sound. Since it's easy to create new nouns and verbs, it follows that there are a very large number of both. "Closed" classes, on the other hand, contain far fewer words and almost no new ones. It's extremely difficult to make up a new preposition and get English speakers to agree to use it. When we speak or write, the words we think about choosing in order to convey our meaning are mostly open-class words, so they're sometimes called "content words." The closed-class words that glue the sentence together ("grammar words") mostly get chosen as if automatically, behind our backs. This difference in purposefulness correlates with the fact that open-class monosyllables are stressed and closed-class monosyllables generally aren't. If you're trying to say "The bridge is closed" over a bad phone line, you don't bother to articulate "The" or "is" carefully. You stress "bridge" and "closed" because those carry the key pieces of information.

These lists of parts of speech omit one important category, the pronouns. Again there's a reliable rule of thumb, just one step more complex: pronouns are almost never stressed except through *contrast*. In those sentences at the multiplex, it's contrastive stress that makes one word or another stand out, always in comparison to something else: "What do *you* want to see?" implies, "Never mind for a moment what *I* might want to see." In the same way, in poems we generally hear words like *I*, *you*, *her*, *theirs*, and *us* as unstressed unless something in the

context suggests a contrast. (In "Leda and the Swan" by W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), the blow-by-blow account of the mortal woman's rape by the self-transformed Zeus includes the line, "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast." The opposition between her female human "breast" and the hard, white, alien "breast" of the bird may show up as a stress on "*his* breast" at the end of the line when we read it aloud.) As we scan more lines, we'll watch for examples of how pronouns behave. One pattern is already predictable: *demonstrative* pronouns are frequently stressed because they often imply contrasts (*this* book, not *that* one).

Here we need to take a short detour – it will turn out to be important later – first to complicate this idea of stress and then to simplify it again. Though examples like *improve* and *fragile* suggest that stress is clear and simple, something you can look up in a dictionary, stress can become quite complicated in English speech and even in particular English words. There are actually at least four *levels* or *degrees* of speech stress. Even in a single word like "volunteer" we can hear some of the intricacy that technical phonetic analysis would reveal in more detail. The last syllable clearly gets the primary stress. But the first syllable, while weaker than the third, is still stronger than the second. If we represent degrees of stress with numbers (with 1 for the strongest) the word might look like this:

<div align="center">

2   3   1

vol – un – teer

</div>

Similarly, the first syllable of "caveman" is stronger than the second (we could diagram it as 1–2), but not as *much* stronger as it is in "chairman" (1–3). We hear "chairman" as a single word, while "caveman" still feels like a compound of two words, so that the second syllable retains some of its original stress.

Scoring the changing degrees of stress throughout a word like *incendiary*, let alone an entire iambic pentameter line, could be a daunting task if we needed to achieve this kind of precision. When we're discussing the rhythm of a particular line, it's occasionally useful to seek this high degree of auditory resolution. Yet when we're discussing meter rather than rhythm, we don't need such elaboration. In almost all English metrical contexts, stress basically operates in a *binary* way: a syllable is stressed or not. Though the rhythm of a line like this one by William Wordsworth (1770–1850),

<div align="center">

A sight so touching in its majesty

</div>

is quite complicated, as you can hear when you say the line aloud, nevertheless for metrical purposes we can begin by marking the syllables this way:

<div align="center">

x / / / x x x / x x
A sight so touching in its majesty

</div>

This isn't yet a complete scansion, but it does capture the facts about stressed and slack syllables in the line that are basic to how it realizes the meter.

Feet

The one mark of scansion that we saw earlier but haven't yet discussed is the vertical line that divides **feet**. A **foot** is simply a small pattern of stresses and slacks. The abstract iambic pentameter we saw earlier –

<div align="center">

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /

</div>

– is clearly made up of five units that are the same, and it's useful to have a name for this repeated unit. The traditional names have been around for so long that they're in Greek. In iambic pentameter the unit repeated is the **iamb** – a slack followed by a stress.

The Names of Meters

The names of meters combine an adjective denoting the dominant kind of foot – such as "iambic" – with a noun that signifies a number (also in Greek!) with "-meter" added to it (because what we call a foot the Greeks sometimes called a "metron"). Here are all the nouns in use:

monometer	mon-<u>o</u>-me-ter	a line 1 foot long
dimeter	<u>di</u>-me-ter	2 feet
trimeter	<u>tri</u>-me-ter	3 feet
tetrameter	te-<u>tra</u>-me-ter	4 feet

pentameter	pen-*ta*-me-ter	5 feet
hexameter	hex-*a*-me-ter	6 feet
heptameter	hep-*ta*-me-ter	7 feet
octameter	oc-*ta*-me-ter	8 feet
nonameter	non-*a*-me-ter	9 feet

So "iambic pentameter" means a line of five iambs. In practice the extremes of length (1, 2, 8, 9) are rare.

Now that we've plunged into foreign vocabulary, a word about why we use it might be appropriate. This traditional terminology of feet isn't the only way to analyze meter or metrical lines; it may not even be the most precise. (In Chapter 6 we'll look at a couple of alternatives.) Its greatest advantage is that it *is* traditional: poets and readers have been using these terms for centuries, frequently thinking of and hearing lines as composed of these conventional units, and using these names when they want to discuss what goes on in a metrical line. Presumably an iambic pentameter that falls in the forest makes the same sound as one that has all its parts labeled, and it's possible to feel the movement of the line like a dancer or hear it like a musician without knowing the terminology. But to discuss how we feel and hear the lines we read and write, some analytical tools like names are useful. These are the names that lie to hand.

If all iambic pentameter lines were composed of five iambs, scanning them would be easy but there would be little point to it. In fact only a minority of iambic pentameters are exactly regular. There are two main kinds of variation. We'll investigate "promoted stress" a little later. First we'll discuss **metrical substitution**: replacing one or more of the iambs in the line with a different kind of foot. There are many possible candidates – over two dozen Classical feet with lovely names like "molossus" and "antispast" – but in practice, to scan the vast majority of iambic pentameters in English we need almost nothing besides these four feet:

iamb (*i*-am)	x/	(adj.) iambic (i-*am*-bic)	"improve"
trochee (*tro*-key)	/x	trochaic (tro-*kay*-ic)	"badger"

spondee (*spon*-dee)	//	spondaic (spon-*day*-ic)	"Duck Soup"
anapest (*an*-a-pest)	xx/	anapestic (an-a-*pest*-ic)	"in a bind"

Almost, but not quite. We need to add two special items. One is the **bare stress**, sometimes called a **defective foot**:

/

The other is a tricky beast that replaces *two* iambs. Reasonably enough, it's often called a **double iamb**:

x   x   /   /

The traditional name for this double iamb is **rising ionic**.

A Twist on the Double Iamb

An alternative is to break the double iamb into two feet. The second is a spondee (//), but we don't yet have a name for what precedes it. A name does exist: the **pyrrhic** (xx). But including pyrrhics among the feet that can replace the iamb creates problems. We would need to attach a special rule to it – not just a rule of thumb, but an absolute decree that the pyrrhic can *never* occur *except* before a spondee. (Spondees could still occur without pyrrhics before them, which adds to the confusion.) Forgetting this rule and sprinkling pyrrhics arbitrarily throughout a scansion creates several kinds of confusion. The most important is that it compromises our hearing of many lines by undermining the important concept of promoted stress, which we'll explore shortly. Keeping a special rule in mind that is attached to just one foot is an extra burden. I've excluded pyrrhics in this book's scansions. If you'd rather use the pyrrhic and remember the rule you can, but most people find it easier to remember that the double iamb replaces two iambs.

Incidentally, excluding pyrrhics also lets us declare that every foot contains at least one stress. It's tempting to make this part of a dynamic definition of feet, but this would require a lavish theoretical digression.

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At first this looks like a pretty random collection of syllable patterns (x/, /x, //, xx/, /, xx//). It becomes less arbitrary when we think of each of these potential substitutes for the iamb as performing a particular kind of *operation* on one small segment of a line:

- put more weight on the iamb by adding a stress: spondee (x / → / /)
- stretch the iamb out with an extra slack: anapest (x / → x x /)
- truncate the iamb by removing the slack: defective foot (x / → /)
- swap a slack and the adjacent stress:
  - within the foot: trochee (x / → / x)
  - between feet: double iamb (x / | x / → x x / /)

Each of these variations alters the tune of the iambic pentameter in a characteristic way. Some of them, and some combinations, disrupt the basic meter more violently than others. Any substitution that confuses the meter enough to make it unrecognizable tends to be shunned by poets. For the same reason, notice that our list excludes some theoretically possible feet that would combine *two* operations. The poet could reverse *and* stretch the iamb (making a **dactyl**, /xx), or both stretch *and* load it (making either a **cretic**, /x/, or a **bacchius**, x//). But these double operations distort the iambic pentameter too much, and poets usually avoid them.

Let's look at how these metrical substitutions work in real lines. Here are some rules of thumb for the use of metrical substitutions in iambic pentameter. Though you may find or create lines that violate these rules and yet work recognizably as iambic pentameters, poets follow them most of the time:

1. A spondee can replace an iamb anywhere. An extreme example from John Milton (1608–1674):

$$\underline{/\quad/} \mid \underline{/\quad/} \mid \underline{/\quad/} \mid x \quad / \mid x \quad /$$
Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death

2. A double iamb can replace two iambs anywhere. A start-of-line example from Theodore Roethke:

$$\underline{x\,x\quad/\quad/} \mid x \quad / \mid x \quad / \mid x \,/$$
In a dark time, the eye begins to see