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Rhythm, Form, and Diction in Modernist Poetry

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The term "form" was crucial to modernist poets' understanding of their enterprise, but the elusiveness of the concept designated by the word has in crucial respects inhibited critical exploration of modernist poetry; insofar as "form" replaced "genre," the elusiveness of the concept may, of course, have been part of its appeal. Moreover, its elusiveness is such that attempts at clarification lead away from close analysis of modernist verse rhythm and diction. The metaphors that modernist poets used to articulate ideas of form, though fascinating in their own right, were never intended as tools for the analysis of lines of poetry. The present chapter aims primarily to outline the formal options available to modernist poets, in terms of kinds of prosody and choices in relation to lexis, and only incidentally to place those options in relation to the larger ideas of form.

Breaking the Pentameter, and Other Myths

Modernist writers were self-mythologizing: much in their critical writings emphasizes their discontinuity with the immediate past and serves to obscure connections. The most extreme form of such self-mythologizing comes in the Italian Futurists' call to burn the museums (qtd. in Rainey 5), but even writers like T. S. Eliot, seemingly advancing a more subtle position than that of the Futurists and encouraging engagement with literary tradition (canonically in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1919]), nevertheless were selective in terms of what constituted that tradition: the Romantics were largely erased from the canon, and the Victorians seen as little more than late Romantics. Thus, in the field of prosody, a remark such as Ezra Pound's "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave," which appears parenthetically in Canto

LXXXI (*Cantos* 532), gives the impression that the conventional metrical line of iambic pentameter had run unchallenged from Shakespeare to Wordsworth (and beyond) until modernist poets were brave enough to tackle it; it completely obscures the breadth of metrical theory and practice current in the late nineteenth century (for which, see Hall and Martin).

Similarly, the idea that modernist verse, having broken with the rigid pentameter, was *vers libre* or "free verse," and that modernist poems, having broken with the rigid forms of the nineteenth century, were "formless" or "open," serves to obscure the respects in which modernist poets took heed of the rules that had guided their predecessors, and also the respects in which they evolved rules and conventions of their own. It perpetuates modernist poets' definition of their work in terms of what it is not; removed from their original context, such negative definitions become doubly meaningless. Thus, a recent anthology of poetic forms, although it includes a section of "open forms," and contests the notion of a "great disjunction" between formalist and nonformalist work, cannot achieve the reassuring specificity that defines verse forms such as the villanelle and the sestina (Strand and Boland 259). "Open," we might ask, "to what?" Elsewhere, as Eleanor Berry notes, the lack of discrimination in terms like "free" and "open" plays into the hands of critics – largely neoformalists – who would prefer to see modernism as a wrong turn in the history of poetry, a cul-de-sac out of which poetry has reversed (874).

That the validity of the "freedom" of free verse was contested by Eliot and Pound has only served to complicate the picture. In "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917) Eliot wrote that "the most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one." In the same essay he went on to write that "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the freest verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse"; "freedom," he explained, "is only freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation" (*Selected Prose* 33, 34–35). The essay is relatively conservative in that it assumes that the only available forms of "artificial limitation" are traditional. Against Eliot's position, one might argue that, even if some sort of regularity will always emerge in verse, the regularity need not be an established one; it is possible for poets to invent new forms of regularity. Eliot's position grants only a limited validity to new forms of verse, in which they exist to supplement "simple" forms, extending the expressive range of conventional rhythms, but never having an independent existence.

The note of reaction in Eliot's 1917 essay was extended further in the immediately following years in the quatrain poems in Eliot's *Ara Vos Prec* (1920) and Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). Pound later recalled that he and Eliot had felt in about 1919 that the "dilutation of *vers libre*" had "gone too far," reaching a state of "general floppiness." The prescribed remedy was the style of verse exemplified by Théophile Gautier's *Emaux et Camées* (1852) and the "Bay State Hymn Book," characterized by "Rhyme and regular strophes" ("Harold Monro" 590). That modernist poetry can

contain both the irregular rhythms of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the emphatic rhythms of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* is only a paradox if one associates modernist poetry rigidly with one particular verse form.

Modern Metrical Practices

Despite the impression produced by Pound's phrase about breaking the pentameter, and Eliot's polarization of free verse against "simple" meters, most modernist poets would have been aware of a variety of verse practices, and, more subtly, of a variety of approaches to the analysis of the verse line. Given the prevalence and prestige of an education in classical languages, many would have been aware of classical quantitative meter, and of the possibility – but also the difficulty – of transposing it into English. Eliot, in a 1917 pamphlet on Pound's poetry, notes "a tendency towards quantitative measure" in Pound's more recent poems, and singles out "The Return" as "an important study in verse which is really quantitative" (*To Criticize* 174). It is to classical metrical analysis that English owes its conventional names for metrical feet. However, in classical analysis the iamb is a foot consisting of a short syllable followed by a long syllable; in analysis of English accentual verse the term has been adapted to indicate a disyllabic foot with the accent on the second syllable (di-dum). The classical trochee (long-short), anapaest (short-short-long), dactyl (long-short-short) have been similarly adapted with the classical long syllable being replaced by the emphasized syllable in English. The two systems are potentially in conflict: the word "bittern" is an iamb in quantitative meter but a trochee in accentual (Carne-Ross 223).

Eliot did not claim that Pound's experiments with quantitative meter were a novelty. Like many modernist poets, he would have known of the brief flourishing of attempts at quantitative meter in the late sixteenth century, in the works of Mary Herbert, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and others (Attridge, *Well-Weighed*), and the further experiments in the second half of the nineteenth century, from Arthur Hugh Clough's controversial attempts at hexameter in *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (1848), to Tennyson's and Swinburne's experiments with alcaics and sapphics (Tennyson's "The Daisy" and others, and Swinburne's "Sapphics"). Even if one accepts that modernist poets made a more concerted effort to "break the pentameter" than their predecessors, it must be conceded that they were building on many decades of questioning and experimentation.

While quantitative and accentual accounts of verse both count feet, another approach in English-language verse has been to concentrate on the number of stressed syllables in a line, and to treat the number of unstressed syllables as variable. The late nineteenth-century exemplar of this approach was Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89), the posthumous publication of whose poems (in 1918) came too late to influence the first generation of modernists, but provided a later generation with a precedent for experimentation, as did Hopkins's letters (published in 1935 and 1938), and notebooks (1937). Though he created an idiosyncratic terminology and way of mark-

ing-up a text, Hopkins's idea of "sprung rhythm" was simple. As he wrote in 1878, "it consists in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account of the number of syllables" (107). He illustrated it by analyzing a children's rhyme. (I have followed the simple convention of marking stressed syllables with a forward-slash [/] and unstressed syllables with an "x"; this convention cannot distinguish between the heavily and the lightly stressed, but is sufficient for present purposes.)

<pre>
    /   /   /
Ding,   dong,   bell;

  /   x   /   x   /
Pussy's in   the   well;

  /   /   x   /
Who   put   her   in?

  /   x   /   x   /
Little Johnny   Thin.

   /   /   x   /
Who   pulled her   out?

  /   x   /   x   /
Little Johnny   Stout.[1]
</pre>

Although the number of syllables in each line varies (3, 5, 4, 5, 4, 5), there is a regular number of stresses in each; or rather, it is possible to perform the poem in such a way that it is given a regular number of stresses. The principle is as musical as that of metrical feet –indeed, Hopkins emphasized its musical credentials – but allows considerably more flexibility.

One version of sprung rhythm that acquired particular cultural prestige in late nineteenth-century England was alliterative verse in models which are traceable to the ninth century and which continued into the fourteenth. The dominant model was a line of four stressed syllables in which the first three alliterated, and in which there was a significant break in the half line. It has been summarized in its crudest form as:

BANG . . . BANG : BANG . . . CRASH

But Anglo-Saxon practice allowed greater variation: the key stress was the first stress in the second half of the line; one of the stresses in the first half had to alliterate with it, leaving it optional for the other (Alexander 18). Pound's 1911 translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer" brought the form to some prominence (*Poems* 236–38). Although Hopkins's own experiments with alliteration drew on a different tradition, the Welsh forms known as *cynghanedd* ("harmony") (108), the publication

of his poems brought further prominence to alliteration as a way of shaping a line. The influence of the alliterative line can be seen in Pound's first published versions of *The Cantos*, "Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length":

> Sheep bore we aboard her, and our bodies also,
> Heavy with weeping; and winds from sternward
> Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
> Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess. (*Poems* 328)

Traces of the alliterative line can be seen in later Cantos, for example in Canto XI: "In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it" (*Cantos* 51). This line does not strictly observe the Anglo-Saxon orthodoxies. Firstly, only with an effort can one read it with fewer than five stressed syllables. Secondly, if one takes the stressed syllables to be "gloom," "gold," "light," and "-gainst," then the most prominent alliterating sound, "g," does not follow the rule, though if we take "l" to be the alliterating consonant, we find it present in the first three of the emphasized words, in accordance with the convention. More importantly, of course, Pound employs the alliterating line only occasionally, so that rather than being a structuring principle of the entire long poem, it becomes a resource by which he produces local effects, and with which he is able to weave connections between lines far separated in the poem. (In this regard, form at the level of syllable and line is a resource that enables poets to shape form at a larger, structural level.)

Whereas quantitative, accentual, and alliterative verse differentiate syllables from each other (on the basis of length, emphasis, and alliteration), another significant modernist innovation, syllabic verse, does not; rather, it simply counts the number of syllables in each line. Its appearance may have been influenced by a growing interest in Japanese verse forms such as the haiku, which has three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables respectively; the *Oxford English Dictionary* first records "haiku" being used in English in 1899. Robert Bridges, an English poet not usually seen as a modernist, began to experiment with syllabic verse in 1913, having experimented with sprung rhythm and quantitative measures in the 1870s and 1880s (Phillips). Independently, around the same time, the American Marianne Moore began to experiment with syllabics; some of her earliest poems in this form appeared in *The Egoist* in 1915, notably "The Steam Roller." The English modernist Herbert Read, who was an occasional contributor to and reader of *The Egoist*, adopted a syllabic form for his poem "Monologue Addressed to a Wondering Tyro" (later retitled "Beata l'Alma") (1923). Eliot commended Moore as "one of the few who have discovered an original *rhythm* – in an age when the defect of rhythm is the most eminent failure of verse both English and American. She has found a new verse-rhythm of the spoken phrase" ("Commentary" 343).

Syllabics were and remain controversial, because they seem to remove poetry from the inherent qualities of spoken English, in which there is always emphasis: the standard argument against the form is that native speakers have no intuitive feeling

for the number of syllables in a line. Against this, it has been asserted that one can learn to hear syllables; moreover it might be argued that poetry is always artificial, and that to impose a rule upon it which does not derive naturally from the language is to create the sort of artificial constraint that is necessary to art. One might also argue that syllabics create their own distinctive atmosphere, a subdued, reflective speech that would be much harder to achieve in even the most flexibly employed iambic pentameter.

Reading Modern Rhythms

T. E. Hulme's "The Embankment," a poem which Eliot presented as exemplary in his 1917 article, may be used to demonstrate both Eliot's account and its limitations:

```
   /     x   x  /   x  /  x     /    x  / x x
Once,  in  finesse of fiddles found I  ecstasy,

 x    x    /   x    /    /   x   x    /    / x
In   the  flash of  gold heels on  the hard pavement.

  /    x   /
Now  see  I

  x      /      x   / x   /    x   / x x
That  warmth's the very stuff of  poesy.

 x   /    x     /
Oh, God, make  small

 x   /   /  / x    /  x   x   x    /
The old star-eaten blanket of the sky,

 x   /  x   /  x   /   x   /   x  / x    /
That I  may fold it round me and in comfort lie. (3)
```

The opening line comes very close to being a line of iambic hexameter: if the reader chooses to give an artificial stress to the final syllable of "ecstasy," it gains the extra stress; the inversion of the opening foot is a long-established device in the opening lines of iambic pentameter poems. The second line, the least regular in the poem, may be read with five stresses as marked above, and thus maintains continuity with the poem's other five-stress lines; but it is also possible to rush over "gold," and thus give it four main stresses. In the first published text of the poem, the last two words had been "pavement grey," a grammatical inversion that echoes W. B. Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," and created a more regular rhythm; the phrase was altered to

"pavement hard" in a later version; only in the version printed in Ezra Pound's *Ripostes* (1912) did the rhythmically irregular form seen above make its appearance (Hulme 457).

After the uncomplicated third line, the fourth line presents the reader with a choice in the pronunciation of "poesy" that is largely determined by what was done with "ecstasy" in the first line; the words have the potential to rhyme. The fifth line reasserts a regular iambic rhythm, and the sixth again poses problems: I have suggested that "star" and "eat-" are both given strong emphasis, but it would be possible to read "star-eaten" as a dactyl (stress-unstress-unstress): like other lines, this one permits both a four-stress and a five-stress reading. The final line is the most regular in the poem, though there is a degree of choice about how heavily "and" should be stressed. Assuming that it is stressed, we have a regular iambic hexameter line, and, if one subscribes to a conservative position about "simple" meters, the "comfort" described – albeit ironically – in the line is reinforced by the comforting return to metrical familiarity.

However, there is more to the poem than the idea of deviations from a metrical norm will really allow for. It is notable that, if we exclude the initial stress on "Once," the first line is an alliterative verse line: "fin-," "fid-," "found," "ec-." The normal emphasis in "finesse" falls on the second syllable, so the effect is slightly muted, but it is still audible. The possibility that "Once" is somehow an appendage to the line is borne out by the following lines: indeed, the rhythmic structure of the poem consists of short phrases ("Once," "Now see I," "Oh, God, make small") interspersed with longer ones of four or five stresses.

In making my analysis of "The Embankment," it has been necessary to indicate points where the reader – meaning "the reader-out-loud" – is faced with a choice about what to emphasize, and so how to actualize the poem as sound. Poems do not "have" form; rather, as Derek Attridge has argued, they need to be understood as something "taking form, or forming, or even losing form" (*Singularity* 113). This does not mean that the reader can impose any form on a poem: the form that it takes derives from the particular sequence of words on the page; but the form is not rigidly determined by that sequence. Form comes in performance. This performative quality is by no means unique to modernist poems, but they present such choices more prominently than verse of earlier eras, no doubt because there had been such a ferment of speculation about poetic rhythm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Pound influentially wrote that the Imagist poet should "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (*Literary Essays* 3). The dictum not only rejects externally imposed measures of time, but suggests that the foot and the line are not the most important units of analysis: just as the musical phrase brings shape to a group of notes, so the prosodic phrase shapes words. D. S. Carne-Ross has suggested that Pound took from *Notes sur la technique poétique* (1910) by the French theorists Duhamel and Vildrac the idea that a "rhythmic constant" repeats itself from line to line (Carne-Ross 217–18; Duhamel and Vildrac 13–21). In the French exam-

ples, the rhythmic constant typically comprises between four and six syllables within lines of nine to twelve syllables. Its position within the line may change from line to line, so that in one line it forms the opening words, but in the next the closing phrase, while in another – though this is less common – it might be located in the middle of the line. In Pound's "The Return," Carne-Ross identifies a six-syllable unit – for example "These were the Wing'd-with-Awe" – with three stresses in it (221). While the rhythmic constant may be described with conventional prosodic terminology, the idea implies that the lines that contain it may not be adequately described thus. A conventional description of them would, if nothing else, fail to capture the effect of the rhythmic constant pulsing through line after line. Carne-Ross also finds such units within Pound's "The Seafarer," a poem notionally structured as alliterative verse: "hardship endured oft," "many a care's hold," and "weathered the winter" (222): the principle of the rhythmic constant does not exclude all other principles and could serve to unite them. Donald Davie's reading of rhythmic units in Pound's *Cantos* has something in common with Carne-Ross's reading of Pound's lyrics (Davie 75–95). Hart Crane's "My Grandmother's Love Letters" (1920) has, similarly, in an often monosyllabic poem, a dactylic signature threading through: "Grandmother," "memory," "(E)lizabeth," "liable," and so on (Whitworth 130–33).

Carne-Ross's identification of the rhythmic constant as a form does not tell the whole story. The extent to which a poem's rhythmic constant is differentiated from its surroundings is left to the individual reader; moreover, the meaning that might be attributed to the repetitions will vary according to context. For Davie, the "large-scale rhythms" of *The Cantos* mirror "the rhythms of discovery, wastage, neglect and re-discovery, that the historical records give us notice of" (83). While a similar reading could be attributed to the rhythmic constant in Crane's "My Grandmother's Love Letters," concerned as it is with memory and forgetting, the scale of discovery and neglect that it embodies is smaller, familial, and more intimate. Moreover, while repetitions of rhythmic patterns contribute to the meaning of a poem, they do so in an elusive, teasing way that is rarely well served by attempts to encapsulate their meaning in a single phrase.

The inclusion of a regular rhythm in an irregular environment is a technique also seen in Eliot's "Ash-Wednesday" (1930) (for another analysis, see Shapiro 91–92). The third paragraph of the first poem runs thus:

> Because I know that time is always time
> And place is always and only place
> And what is actual is actual only for one time
> And only for one place
> I rejoice that things are as they are and
> I renounce the blessèd face
> And renounce the voice
> Because I cannot hope to turn again
> Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
> Upon which to rejoice (*Collected Poems* 85)

The paragraph opens by reasserting the strong iambic rhythm that had been established in the opening lines of the poem. The next line begins by continuing that rhythm in its first four syllables, and the unstressed syllable at the end of "always" seems to promise a stressed syllable to follow. It seems that the phrase "And place is always place" will come, paralleling the phrase about time in the first line. However, the words "and only" appear and break the expected rhythm, inserting an additional unstressed syllable ("and") into the line; the proviso "and only" is given additional emphasis.

This disruption rehearses the larger disruption that occurs in the next line. Again, the first four syllables are regularly iambic, but beyond the "ac-" of the first "actual," the iambic rhythm is thoroughly disrupted:

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    x      /     x    / x x    x    / x x   / x    x     /      /
  And   what   is   actual   is   actual  only   for   one   time
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The last four words of the line allow of multiple rhythmic interpretations. Firstly, an alternative and subtler reading would treat the final word, "time," as more weakly stressed than "one." Secondly, a reader with a preference for a strong iambic rhythm might try to end the line thus:

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   / x     /      x       /
  only    for    one    time
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To my ear, to emphasize "for" is to favor regularity of rhythm over the sense of the line, and also to lose the effect of prose rhythms breaking through the surface of regular verse rhythms. However one scans the line, the two occurrences of "actual" break the texture of the established rhythm.

Because the fourth line of the paragraph revisits the "only for one" formula of the third, an additional rhythmic constant is established within the poem: the rhythmic form here is that of the repeated phrase, hinted at but interrupted in the first two lines – "time is always time," "place is always . . . place" – and here made good: "only for one time," "only for one place."

The fifth, sixth, and seventh lines mark a near-return to iambic regularity, except that each line has an additional unstressed initial syllable: "I rejoice . . . ," "I renounce . . . ," "And renounce. . . ." In addition, the fifth line of the paragraph has an additional trailing unstressed syllable, "and." I would suggest that by this point in the poem the reader has learned to recognize that such syllables do not form part of its rhythmic constant.

The eighth line of the paragraph revisits the poem's opening line ("Because I do not hope to turn again") and reestablishes its regular iambic rhythm. There then follows the paragraph's largest rhythmic surprise, though it should not be completely unexpected. The last two lines could be scanned with a kind of regularity, but I would suggest that the poem has trained us to do something more sophisticated. An almost-regular rhythm could be imposed thus:

```
   /   x   /   x   /   x   /    /   x   /    x  /       x   /
Consequently  I  rejoice,  having  to  construct  something
  x /     x      /    x  /
Upon   which   to   rejoice
```

The more sophisticated reading, which the earlier disrupted lines of the paragraph have trained the reader to perform, allows prose rhythms freer reign. One such rendition would be:

```
   /   x   x   x    x    x   /    /   x    x    x   /        /   x
Consequently  I  rejoice,  having  to  construct  something
  x /      x       x    x   /
Upon   which   to   rejoice
```

Of course a system that marks only a simple binary of "stressed" versus "unstressed" does not adequately indicate the emphasis that might be given to the third syllable of "consequently," or to "I." It is also important to acknowledge the rhythmic effect of the slight caesura after "consequently." This is significant, because it has the effect of cutting away the word from the music of the line. If we remove "consequently," the phrase "I rejoice" takes its place in the sequence of anapaestic phrases noted earlier: "I rejoice," "I renounce," "And renounce." Taking this principle further, we might also mentally bracket out "having to construct," and note the parallel between "I rejoice that things" and "I rejoice . . . something." To put this another way, phrases that have a regular meter and a musical quality find themselves juxtaposed with phrases that have an irregular rhythm. The "form" of the poem, in a larger sense, lies partly in the contention of these different rhythmic patterns. While an interpretation of "Ash-Wednesday" lies beyond the scope of the present chapter, it is possible to sketch a reading in which the rhythmic contrasts mark two contending discourses or views of the world, one uncomplicatedly rejoicing, the other aware of the obstacles to joy created by modern self-consciousness.

In some respects, Eliot's rhythmic effects in "Ash-Wednesday" are an extension of a cruder device seen in some of Pound's satirical poems from the period 1913 to 1916, collected in *Lustra* (1916). The effect involves establishing a relatively regular rhythm only to undercut it bathetically in the final line of the poem: the simplest example is the final line of "The Bath Tub" (first published December 1913), "O my much praised but-not-altogether-satisfactory lady"; the same effect appears in "The Lake Isle" (first published September 1916), with its final lines "save this damn'd profession of writing, / where one needs one's brains all the time" (*Poems* 294). In these poems, the disruption of regular rhythm signifies the limitations of conventional poetic discourse and of the associated worldview; the closing lines undermine the pretensions of the body of the poem. In "Ash-Wednesday," because the rhythmically uneven phrases are not a means of creating closure, they are not privileged over the rhythmically regular; in consequence, the two remain in uneasy tension.

"Inane phraseology"

Although modernist poets overemphasized their difference from preceding genera-
tions, there nevertheless were discontinuities, and there was a genuine ferment of
interest in verse technique in the early twentieth century. Of the many reasons that
might be adduced – and setting aside the explanation of experiment for its own sake – two
categories stand out: those connected with poetic diction, and those connected with
form in a larger and less tangible sense.

  The artificiality of the language of poetry, its separation from "ordinary language,"
is not necessarily to its disadvantage: if poetry is an art, then some sort of artifice is
only to be expected. However, at least since William Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to
the *Lyrical Ballads*, poets and critics have been aware of poetry's tendency to settle
into a distinctive lexis which carries none of the advantages of poetic artifice and all
of the disadvantages of cliché. In his Preface, Wordsworth had contrasted "poetic
diction" with "the language really used by men": the former was characterized by
"gaudiness and inane phraseology," and by poetic devices such as the personification
of abstract ideas; ordinary men spoke "a plainer and more emphatic language," and,
"being less under the influence of social vanity," conveyed their feelings in "simple
and unelaborated expressions." The risk was that the plainness of such language might
be mistaken for "triviality or meanness" (596–600). While "poetic diction" points
primarily to lexis, similar problems are also found in matters of grammar. To what
extent can poetry make use of word orders rarely used in speech or in prose? For
example, reversing the usual English word order of adjective plus noun to make
combinations such as "pavements grey" (Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree") or rear-
ranging the usual sentence structure of subject-verb-object to allow phrases such as
the one Wordsworth quoted disapprovingly from Gray, "morning smiles the busy race
to cheer" (601).

  While the poetic diction that Wordsworth rejected was particular to his own
culture and time, and even the resort to plainness as an antidote to elaboration was
culturally specific, Wordsworth's recognition that poetry easily falls into the use of
"mechanical device[s] of style" continued to be relevant into the early twentieth
century, as did his recognition that it needed "experiment" to rescue it (600). The
condemnation of cliché was prominent in Pound's prescriptions for Imagist poets.
Pound warned poets to "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal
something," and warned that "influence" should not mean "that you mop up the
particular decorative vocabulary of some one or two poets whom you happen to
admire"; he mocked a war correspondent who had used a poetical epithet like "dove-
grey" or "pearl-pale" in his dispatches (*Literary Essays* 4–5) (The phrase "dove-grey"
was one that Yeats had first used in *The Wanderings of Oisin* [1899], and later in "A
Poet to his Beloved" [written 1895], while "pearl-pale" had appeared in the same
poet's "He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes" [*Poems* 5, 98]). Pound picked out a
phrase from Ford Madox Ford's poem "On a Marsh Road" as another contemporary

piece of poetic diction: "Don't use such an expression as dim lands of peace. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete" (5). In making these criticisms, Pound was not following Wordsworth; indeed, he repeated Ford Madox Ford's criticism that Wordsworth, in looking for "the ordinary or plain word," "never thought of hunting for le mot juste" (7). But Pound shares with Wordsworth a dislike for poetic devices that have become mechanical.

Pound's distaste for conventional meters is closely allied with his antipathy to cliché. Many poetic clichés evolve as easy solutions to the problems posed by meter and rhyme: words are "shovelled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound" (3). In his 1917 booklet on Pound, Eliot criticized Shelley on similar grounds, for "leaving blanks for the adjectives" in his poetry; Eliot argued that Pound's quantitative measures, despite their supposed "freedom," imposed a discipline on the poet such that every word mattered (*To Criticize* 169). By "blanks" Eliot presumably means adjectives that are so completely subordinated to the rhythm of the line that any other metrically equivalent adjective might be substituted without the reader noticing the semantic difference. Grammatical inversions are often encouraged by the need to fulfill the requirements of rhyme: by using the inversion "pavements grey" in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," Yeats is able to find a rhyme for "day"; it would be impossible to find a full rhyme for "pavements" in "grey pavements" (*Poems* 74). Free verse freed poets from making compromises when looking for the exact, precise word. It did not, in Pound's view, free them from the demands of crafting a musical line.

If the avoidance of cliché is a negative justification for metrical experimentation, then the expansion of poetic diction is a positive one. It has been argued that Robert Bridges's experiments with a "loose alexandrine" (a line of twelve syllables with six stresses) had the aim of freeing his diction; Bridges was looking for a "carry all medium" that could contain both low and high diction (Stanford 23, 26). Similarly, Marianne Moore's syllabic lines enabled her to collage prose quotations into the line without breaking its formal rules: for example, the quoted phrase "impersonal judgment in aesthetic / matters, a metaphysical impossibility" derives from a piece of music criticism that had appeared in the *North American Review* (Schulze 191).

The breadth of diction possible in the new verse forms enabled poetry in several respects. It enabled poets to use vocabularies that reflected, as the Scottish modernist Hugh MacDiarmid put it, "the enormous range and multitudinous intensive specialisations of contemporary knowledge" (485). It enabled poets to contrast high diction against low, producing bathetic or ironic effects that are characteristic of modernist "form" in a more abstract sense of the word. Eliot's use of "etherised" in the opening lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an interesting text to consider in this connection, not because it is typical, but because it only tentatively accepts the unusual term:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table; (*Collected Poems* 3)

The first line establishes a clear regular pulse (which would be iambic if there were a first unstressed syllable). "When the evening is spread out" allows the reader more scope in choosing which syllables to emphasize and how heavily. If we follow the example of the first line and find four stressed syllables, they are likely to be "eve-," "out," "-gainst," and "sky," though it is also possible to find five and additionally to emphasize "is." The slight irregularity at the start of the line is smoothed away by the regular iambics of the last four syllables, "against the sky." The third line, while still allowing four main stresses (the "pay" of "patient," the "eeth" of "etherised," "-pon," and the "tay" of "table"), more considerably disrupts the rhythm. As with the second line, there is the possibility of finding a fifth stressed syllable ("-ised"); there is also the uncertainty about whether to break the line after "patient" or after "ether-ised." Quite apart from the unexpectedness of the image presented in the third line, the word "etherised" is crucial to this disruption: if one does not emphasize "-ised," then the scurry of unstressed syllables (augmented with the "u-" of "upon") creates an awkwardness around the word, accentuated by the unstressed ending of "table"; if one were to emphasize "-ised," it would create a half rhyme with the "I" and "sky" of the first and second lines, which would cause the line to sound as if it has ended prematurely. The third line has some of the bathetic qualities of Pound's closing lines in "The Bath Tub" and "The Lake Isle," though the satirical effect is much subtler.

Although he relies on the openness of free verse to a wider range of vocabulary to facilitate the entry of "etherised," Eliot does not wholly assimilate the new term: rather, the rhythmic form of the lines leaves relations between tradition and innovation at an uneasy truce. While the bathos of the third line marks the previous lines as false, the rhythmic disruption also suggests that "etherised" may not fully belong in the world of the poem. While the expanded range of rhythmic methods in modernist verse enables the inclusion of a wider vocabulary and of verbatim quotations from nonliterary sources, "inclusion" need not denote that the poem ceases to differentiate between kinds of discourse.

Modernity and the Inexplicable

The belief that a poem should communicate at a level that is nonrational and non-verbal, which began in the late nineteenth century with the Symbolist movement, may have contributed to the modernist interest in the power of new verse forms. In 1900 when the Symbolist influence was still strong in his thinking about poetry, Yeats wrote in "The Symbolism of Poetry":

> The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of con-templation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. (*Essays* 159)

Modernist poetry did not necessarily seek to emulate the hypnotic qualities that Yeats found in poetic rhythm, but many modernist poets subscribed (implicitly or explicitly) to the ideas that poetry communicates something more than, or indeed entirely other than, its literal meaning, and that rhythm is one means by which it communicates. Rather than attempting to express an emotion, communicate a message, or depict a scene, modernist poetry in the Symbolist tradition was often attempting to evoke a mood: something less individually personal than an emotion, less specific than a message, and less tangible than a scene. Eliot, writing about Pound's technique in 1917, seized upon a critic who had written that Pound "scorn[ed] the limitations of form and metre," and often broke out "into any sort of expression which suits itself to his mood" (*To Criticize* 165). It was, responded Eliot, precisely the "adaptability of metre to mood" that constituted Pound's technique. Though not as significant as it had been to the Symbolist movement, "mood" was important to modernist poetry, and rhythm was a means of evoking it.

Eliot's remarks about Swinburne in his "Reflections on *vers libre*" suggest that the advantage of rhythmic innovation was that it evaded rationalization. There was an unexpected quality to Swinburne's "system of prosody" (by which Eliot presumably meant the use of quantitative meters), but "When the unexpectedness, due to the unfamiliarity of the metres to English ears, wears off and is understood, one ceases to look for what one does not find in Swinburne; the inexplicable line with the music that can never be recaptured in other words" (*To Criticize* 185). The poet constantly aims to produce a mood that escapes explication and understanding. The mood should evade "capture": that the ideal poetic music cannot be recaptured "in other words" anticipates the New Critical doctrine of the "heresy of paraphrase" and also hints at the modernist antipathy to mechanical reproduction.

The motivation of producing unexpected and inexplicable music was by no means universal. In returning to the chiseled rhythms of Gautier and the Bay State Hymn Book around 1919, Eliot and Pound were adopting an underlying meter that was itself easily understood, and even if that does not imply that the music of individual lines was recognizable, it suggests that the unexpected qualities were located elsewhere: in Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales," for example, the regularity of rhythm contrasts with the unexpected leaps in narrative logic.

While no single idea lies behind modernist approaches to poetic form, and while a poet's practice in any individual poem will be dictated primarily by the needs of that poem – or rather, of the creative impulse behind it – it is apparent that many modernists were motivated by the desire to communicate thoughts, ideas, or moods that went beyond those articulable in ordinary language: the entrancing, the unexpected, the inexplicable. Unusual metrical systems can achieve such effects, but when widely adopted they lose the effect that comes with unfamiliarity, and their systematicity becomes plain to see. More durably effective are systems of prosody that allow for repetitions of "rhythmic constants" or other kinds of rhythmic motif: returning and disappearing in the course of a long poem, such motifs can tantalize the reader with the awareness of something familiar yet not ordinarily tangible. Through the

use of rhythmic effect, modernist poets negotiate their complex relation to modernity. They create new forms, if "form" be understood in the sense of "the specific properties of a single work," its *Gestalt* (Attridge, *Singularity* 107); but they avoid the taint of mass production that would come from producing something in an already familiar form, form in the sense of the merely generic. By drawing on a wealth of inherited techniques, and adapting them to new needs, they make it new, and by evading systematization, they create new forms that retain their freshness.

Note

1 In his letter to Richard Watson Dixon, Hopkins presents this traditional nursery rhyme without line breaks (108); I have retained his scansion, removed his italicization, and added line breaks.

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