Your Feet's Too Big: Downsizing English Metrics

William Wilborn

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Classical English metrics, as in Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, is a method of grouping the local rhythms of language into two ascending levels of organization, the foot and the line or verse. Unfortunately our understanding of this method has long been clouded by theory. That is because verse is more like dancing than computation.

A gardener at Rydal Mount remembered watching Wordsworth as he composed. In his innocence he reveals the physical basis of practical metrics. Essentially he tells us that for Wordsworth iambic meter was walking:

I think I can see him at it now. He was ter'ble thrang [busy] with visitors and folks, you mun kna, at times, but if he could git awa fra them for a spell, he was out upon his gres [grass] walk; He would set his head a bit forrad, and put his hands behint his back. And then he would start bumming, and it was bum, bum, bum, stop; then bum, bum, bum, reet down til t'other end [of the walk], and then he'd set down and git a bit o' paper out and write a bit; and then he git up, and bum, bum, bum, and goa on bumming for long enough right down and back agean.

Not being poets or gardeners, linguists invent overly complicated metrical systems, imposing subtleties derived from spoken English on the very different realm of metrics. For example, because they distinguish multiple levels of stress (or "accent"\(^1\)) in spoken English, linguists have posited a similar complexity in verse.

In spoken English an unexpectedly emphasized word in a sentence is semantically significant: "She BOUGHT a wrench" means something different from "She bought a WRENCH." The accented word stands out from and governs the meaning of the sentence, as in Hamlet's

To be, or not to be: THAT is the question...

But in metrics there are only two levels of stress, and they apply only within the foot: viewed purely metrically, "that" is a strong stress relative to the weak "is," and has no relation to other stresses, weak or strong, in the line.

This distinction must be grasped if meter is to be understood. Words live a double life in metrical poetry: they are the semantic and syntactical elements of sentences exactly as in everyday speech; but they function simultaneously as syllables in a narrow range of metrical feet.

Thus metrical analysis based on speech misses the purpose of metrics, which is to provide an independent rhythmic paradigm - akin to walking - for speech. Unlike Gerald Ford, Wordsworth could walk and speak at the same time, and his walking limited his speaking in

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\(^1\) I will speak of semantic or sentence "accent," reserving the term "stress" for metrics. To be consistent, I should call accentual-syllabic meter "stress-syllabic," but the traditional term is too well established.
ways that he found necessary to poetic composition. This is an essential lesson: for a poet metrics must be an ingrained habit, a kind of *muscle memory*. And the reader must cultivate similar habits if he wishes to appreciate poetry written in this way.

Yet such habits are difficult to observe. When we see a stranger successfully parallel-parking a car, we assume that he is using the method we use. If we asked him, we might be surprised. Perhaps he has no conscious method at all. Perhaps he just knows how to do it.

It is the same with any procedure we observe in others. Thus I choose to observe myself. I am a practicing metrical poet. I have a way of parallel-parking that I have refined over the years. I do not have to think about it while doing it, and I generally succeed in placing my little Honda safely among the SUVs. If not, as Woody Allen says, I can walk to the curb from here.

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*Meter* in English from the Renaissance on has meant *accentual-syllabic* meter. This system combines elements from two older sources. Old English meter (*Beowulf*) is *accentual*. This means that a line of verse must contain four stressed syllables. The number of syllables per line is not prescribed. (I ignore other criteria.)

French meter, on the other hand, is *syllabic*. The classic French line of verse, the Alexandrine, consists of 12 syllables, with little importance given to stress. Again, I simplify.

Modern English meter results from a fusion of these two systems as one of many consequences of 1066. Scholars have argued for generations about the meter of Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote both in French and English. His English meter seems an amalgam of the two systems, not yet an alloy.

This uncertainty persists into the renaissance. Unlike Chaucer, Surrey, for example, counts syllables. His sonnets have 10 per line. But his rhythm is clearly and heavily iambic, which suggests that iambic pentameter is becoming a norm. But the criticism of the time did not understand this development. Critics did not yet recognize that a standard line of "iambic pentameter," for example, consists of five two-syllable *feet*. This adds up to ten syllables per line, but this number is incidental: it is the five feet or *measures* per line (penta-meter) that is crucial.

The novelty in this merging of accentual and syllabic systems is a new conception of the foot as defined by a pattern of *stress*: the foot is seen as a cluster of either - and only - two or three syllables, each with a specific pattern of stressed and weak syllables. I maintain that a foot can have but one stress, which must be on the first or last syllable of the foot. This allows only four types of feet: the iamb (\(\_\_/\)) and trochee (\(\_/\_\)) for two-syllable feet, and the dactyl (\(\_/\_/\)) and anapest (\(\_/\_/\)) for three-syllable feet. The reader may ask, Why banish the spondee (\(\_/\_/\)), the pyrrhic (\(\_/\_/\)), the amphibrach (\(\_/\_/\)) and the amphimacer (\(\_/\_/\))? Don't they make it easier to scan more language as metrical?

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2 The terminology of accentual-syllabic verse derives from classical Greek metrics, which is based on stress but on syllable *length*, a quality - actually a *quantity* - that has never meant much to English ears. Somehow, between Chaucer and Surrey, English poets begin to employ a system of metrical feet which can be described in Greek terminology only if *stress* replaces *duration* as a defining element of the foot. Unfortunately, when in the Renaissance this terminology is used, a stressed syllable is called "long," an unstressed "short." At the same time, actual iambic pentameter is referred to as "decasyllabic," as if only the number of syllables in the line counted.
The answer of course is yes, but prose is not verse. "If all men are brothers, what is the meaning of brotherhood?"

Here I must introduce a principle that goes far beyond our subject. I believe that nothing that cannot be perceived in the reading of literature can properly be called an element of form. Thus, to invent an extreme example, I might compose a novel without using the letter "x". It is unlikely that any reader would ever notice this unless alerted. I mean that although the absence of "x" could be ascertained by drudgery or computer, it could not be experienced by a reader. In fact the deliberate suppression of the commonest letter "e" could only be inferred from the stilted prose that would result. (The word "the" could not appear!)

Clearly a writer may include or exclude whatever he wishes in composing a work. Exclusions can rarely be noticed without the aid of some academic guide. Inclusions may or may not be perceptible. For example, if George Herbert's "Easter Wings" is read aloud, the listener cannot detect its typographical shape. My point is that any inclusion or exclusion that can only be appreciated (or resented) after the fact cannot be regarded as part of the form of a work. William Carlos Williams admired "The Waste Land" as first published in The Dial; but when it was reprinted as a pamphlet with the added footnotes, he felt betrayed: a masterful invention now appeared to be a pedantic rag-bag of quotation.

Applying my principle to metrics, I say simply that if meter is to be a genuine element of form, it must be perceptible - experienced, felt - by the writer in composing and by the reader in reading. Sensitivity to the foot and the line must be internalized by writer and reader as a small range of essentially physical alternatives, like the waltz and the foxtrot.

My objection to the spondee and other exotic feet is that they cannot easily be perceived because they present an ambiguity in relation to the feet surrounding them:

\[
/ \circ \circ \circ / \circ / \circ \circ / \circ
\]

Is this a trochee followed by an amphibrach, a spondee and an anapest? If so, it is tetrameter. Or is it a trochee, an iamb, an iamb, a trochee and an iamb? Then it is pentameter. My rule requiring one stress per foot at the beginning or ending of the foot makes the meter perceptible, as it clarifies where the feet begin and end. This enables us to perceive the number of feet in the line.

Corollary to this simplified system is the axiom that there are but two meters in English, the double and the triple. The double consists of the iambic and the trochaic, the triple the anapestic and the dactylic. My focus in this essay is on double meter, which I shall simply call "iambic," treating trochaic meter only as a variation.

To avoid at the outset the most outstanding confusion of metrical theory, I begin with a distinction between accentual-syllabic meter and folk meter. I give special attention to iambic tetrameter, since it is so easily confused with folk meter.

FOLK METER

Just as accentual-syllabic meter is in essence learnèd, folk meter is essentially illiterate. It is the meter of people who cannot read, of children, of peasants and of slaves. It has served as the basis of lullabies, children's play songs and work songs from time immemorial. Whether we trace it back to the heartbeat we hear in the womb or to the fact that we are bipeds, we must
recognize that its origins are essentially of the body. We all know folk meter because we have all been children. Even autistic children who can hardly speak can often sing and recite folk meter.

The limerick is a folk form with a triple rhythm. It is often called dactylic or anapestic. But it is not an accentual-syllabic form at all, because it has a beat. The stresses (on the first syllable of each "bar") are isochronous, that is, they fall at exact and regular intervals like the beat in music. In fact, the limerick is best seen as a waltz without a melody. Folk-meters also incorporate rests:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Said the worldly Arch-bishop D'Abate,} & \\
\text{"Holy water makes excellent latte,} & \\
\text{The wine, while sub-sacral, goes nice-ly with mack 'rel} & \\
\text{And the wafers with duck liver pâté."} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Poulter's measure is the same form with a double rhythm:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ON GINSBERG} & \\
\text{His only gift was brass.} & \\
\text{The rest of it he stole.} & \\
\text{He could n't tell his private ass} & \\
\text{From the universal whole.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

The limerick may be said to be in 3/4 time, poulter's measure in 2/4. This is a more informative description than one using accentual-syllabic terminology. Musical terminology explains both the regular beat and the rests at the end of lines 1,2 and 4. The "eighth notes" can be regarded as pickup notes.

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3 My musical notation throughout is simplistic. The important point is that the limerick is triple rhythm and poulter's double.
The simplest way to put all this is that folk meter is musical meter without melody. Take any folk song and recite it as speech and you have folk meter. This means that the sentence structures - clauses and other syntactical units - of such poems are typically congruent with four-beat lines, reinforced by rhyme:

/ / / /  
Mary had a little lamb;
/ / / / / 
Its fleece was black as coal. (rest)
/ / / / 
It followed her to school one day
/ / / / / 
And swallowed Mary, whole. (rest)

In musical terms, this ditty is in 2/4 time, which means that each musical phrase (or line) has four measures. Each syllable is the equivalent of a quarter note. The stresses or beats are isochronous. (Think of children skipping rope. Each stress falls as the rope hits the ground.) It is confusing to call this meter iambic (or trochaic) tetrameter, although that terminology may appear to describe it. This is the parallel-parking conundrum again: the method actually practiced is not what we think it is.

A BAD CASE OF THEORY

Here is Poe's description of the meter of "The Raven":

Of course I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or metre of the "Raven." The former is trochaic—the latter is octametre acatalectic, alternating with heptametre catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrametre catalectic.

He continues:

. . . the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short; the first line of the stanza consists of eight of these feet, the second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds) . . .

Further complicating the picture with quantitative terminology ("long" and "short" syllables) followed by the novelty of dividing feet into fractions!

But is it not clear that "The Raven" is pure folk meter?

Once upon a midnight dreary,  
while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious\textsuperscript{4} volume of forgotten lore—  
While I nodded, nearly napping,  
suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping—  
rapping at my chamber door.

"'Tis some visitor," I muttered,  
"tapping at my chamber door—  
Only this and nothing more."

This is a four-beat line in 2/4 time. The "catalectic" lines (although organized in stanzaic patterns) are simply lines ending in a rest.

Poe's meter is in fact identical to that of Longfellow's "Hiawatha":

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

Longfellow claimed he got his meter from the Finnish Kalevala, but everyone hears the insistent beat of Indian drums. In other words, this is unambiguous folk meter.

**ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC METER**

Accentual-syllabic meter is capable of greater emotional subtlety than folk meter because its stresses deliberately do not fall with beat-like regularity. When read that way - as by naive speakers like Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they become comic. Here are lines that must be read as accentual-syllabic:

\textsuperscript{4} Poe would see this line as a half-line of "trochaic octameter," thus:  
\[ / \text{oo} \ | / \text{oo} \ | / \text{oo} \ | / \text{oo} \]

-- a trochee, a dactyl, a trochee and a dactyl. But it is more truly seen as

\[ \begin{array}{c} \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \ \downarrow \end{array} \]

that is, as four measures of 2/4 time, with triplets substituting for two quarter notes in the second and fourth measures.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep, 
But I have promises to keep, 
And miles to go before I sleep, 
And miles to go before I sleep.

Children learning to read verse will chant this stanza as if they were skipping rope. But this is not folk meter. The stresses are not beats: they must not occur at regular intervals. The two identical lines must pointedly be read differently. In music, this deliberate loosening of the regular beat is called rubato. It is a special effect in music; but in accentual-syllabic verse it is the norm.

It is normal because the irregular timing of accents is an essential element of emotional meaning - of nuance - in spoken language. We are all familiar with the robotic quality of computer speech. This is caused by the stringing together of words pronounced "correctly" according to the dictionary but without the many adjustments of timing and emphasis that give specific meaning to an utterance.\(^5\)

In folk meter, semantic accent is stylized as isochronous beats. This imposes a strangeness - an artificial regularity - which we perceive with pleasure precisely because of its regularity. Accentual-syllabic meter, however, offers a very different pleasure. We recognize the line by its number of feet, but we are charmed by the temporal freedom of the stress within the foot. It is this local freedom of stress within a flexible global constraint of numbered feet that constitutes the "music" of accentual-syllabic verse.

As an example of the wrong-headed attempt to apply musical analysis to accentual-syllabic verse we may cite Sidney Lanier, in his Science of English Verse. Here is his scansion (in 3/8 time) of Hamlet's soliloquy:

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To be | or not | to be | that is | the question:
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Wheth-er | 'tis no -| bler in | the mind | to suf-fer...
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This is a chimera, as the most generous effort to utter the speech this way will show. Lanier is trying to scan accentual-syllabic verse as quantitative.

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\(^5\) This is what Robert Frost calls "the sound of sense." It is the quality that allows us to understand the emotional content of a conversation heard through a wall even if we cannot understand the words.
THE CASE OF DR. WILLIAMS

Many commentators regard W.C. Williams as the real father of modern American poetry, possibly because he struggled with poetic theory, whereas Whitman can be dismissed as an intellectual naif. Here is Stanley Koehler's summary of Williams' metrical ideas:

But whatever the topic, the poet's mind kept coming back to the technical matters that interested him in his later years. One of these was his concern with “idiom,” the movements of speech that he felt to be especially American, as opposed to English. A rival interest was the “variable foot,” a metrical device that was to resolve the conflict between form and freedom in verse. The question whether one had not to assume a fixed element in the foot as the basis for meter drew only a typical Williams negative, slightly profane, and no effort was made to pursue this much further. As a result, the notion of some mysterious “measure” runs through the interview like an unlaid ghost, promising enough pattern for shapeliness, enough flexibility for all the subtleties of idiom.6

To his credit, Williams realized what had been lost in Whitman's revolution, and sought a replacement that would offer the poet an equivalent set of limitations and challenges he thought appropriate to the modern age. Unfortunately, as the recordings Williams made in his last years show, his innovations are inaudible: in practice he's writing rhythmical prose, or what the world calls free verse. "Idiom" in the end is just speech, and the "variable foot" and "measure" are simply delusional substitutes for the old foot and line.

A SHORT WALK TO THE CURB

In undertaking this essay, I planned a short and simple account of what I have found to be the essence of accentual-syllabic meter. My first version, to my vexation, was larded with parentheses and footnotes. I realized I was trying to itemize the contents of the Augean stables before diverting the rivers. I have since directed them at my own essay. I hope what remains is a clear exposition of this simple thesis:

The iambic line is the cornerstone of the edifice of English poetry. In its tetrameter form it is easily confused with folk meter. But the two systems are essentially different: stress in folk meter is isochronous; in iambic meter stress is temporally flexible within the foot. Folk meter can be notated as music; iambic meter dies if so constrained. Folk verse subordinates language to music or to musical meter. Accentual-syllabic verse finds a "music" in meaningful English speech and stylizes it in the flexible web of iambic meter.

I once heard Wynton Marsalis address a group of college music students. One of them asked him how important it was to a jazz musician to know musical theory. (It is well known that many great improvisors, such as Bix Beiderbecke and Erroll Garner, could hardly read music.) Marsalis said simply that if you can hear it, you know it. Surely this applies equally to metrics: if

6 "William Carlos Williams, The Art of Poetry No. 6," The Paris Review.
you can hear the metrical necessities of the line, you can compose verse and read it with appreciation.

So my purpose has been to suggest what a poet and reader need to hear to write and read metrical verse. This turns out to be a pretty simple set of quite physical patterns and responses.

For the reader, an individual poem is a sort of miniature parcour for the organs of speech. To read a metrical poem aloud is to reenact a series of carefully crafted exercises for tongue and vocal cords and heart and lungs. In speaking a dead poet's words aloud, we revivify the most intimate gestures of an otherwise lost life. For the living poet, the incarnation of his speech in a fully realized poem is his truest legacy.