CHAPTER

23

Rhythm and Versification

Up and down the City Road,
In and out the Eagle;
That's the way the money goes,
Pop goes the weasel.

Probably very few of the countless children—and adults—who sometimes find themselves singing this ditty have the faintest idea of what it is about. It endures because it is catchy—a strong, easily remembered rhythm. Even if you just read it aloud without singing it, we think you will agree.

If you try to specify exactly what the rhythm is—for instance, by putting an **accent** mark on each syllable that you stress heavily—you may run into difficulties. You may become unsure of whether you stress *up* and *down* equally; maybe you will decide that *up* is hardly stressed more than *and,* at least compared with the heavy stress that you put on *down.* Different readers (really, singers) will recite it differently. Does this mean that anything goes? Of course not. No one will emphasize *and* or *the,* just as no one will emphasize the second syllable in *city* or the second syllable in *money.* There may be some variations from reader to reader, but there will also be a good deal that all readers will agree on. And surely all readers agree that it is memorable.

Does this song have a meaning? Well, historians say that the Eagle was a tavern and music hall in the City Road, in Victorian London. People went there to eat, drink, and sing, with the result that they sometimes spent too much money and then had to pawn (or "pop") the "weasel"—though no one is sure what the weasel is. It doesn't really matter; the song lives by its rhythm.

Now consider this poem by Ezra Pound (1885–1972). Pound's early work is highly rhythmical; later he became sympathetic to Fascism and he grew increasingly anti-Semitic, with the result that for many readers his later work is much less interesting—just a lot of nasty ideas, rather than memorable expressions. Pound ought to have remembered his own definition of literature: "Literature is news that *stays* news." One way of staying is to use unforgettable rhythms.

EZRA POUND

An Immorality

[1912]

Sing we for love and idleness,
Naught else is worth the having.

Though I have been in many a land,
There is naught else in living.

And I would rather have my sweet,
Though rose-leaves die of grieving,

Than do high deeds in Hungary
To pass all men's believing.

A good poem. To begin with, it sings; as Pound said, "Poetry withers and dries out when it leaves music, or at least imagined music, too far behind it. Poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets." Hymns and ballads, it must be remembered, are songs, and other poetry, too, is sung, especially by children. Children reciting a counting-out rhyme, or singing on their way home from school, are enjoying poetry:

Pease-porridge hot,
Pease-porridge cold,
Pease-porridge in the pot
Nine days old.

Nothing very important is being said, but for generations children have enjoyed the music of these lines, and adults, too, have recalled them with pleasure—though few people know what pease-porridge is.

The "music"—the catchiness of certain sounds—should not be underestimated. Here are lines chanted by the witches in *Macbeth*:

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

This is rather far from words that mean approximately the same thing: "Twice, twice, work and care; / Fire ignite, and pot boil." The difference is more in the sounds than in the instructions. What is lost in the paraphrase is the magic, the incantation, which resides in elaborate repetitions of sounds and stresses.

Rhythm (most simply, in English poetry, stresses at regular intervals) has a power of its own. A good march, said John Philip Sousa (the composer of "Stars and Stripes Forever"), "should make even someone with a wooden leg step out." A highly pronounced rhythm is common in such forms of poetry as charms, college yells, and lullabies; all of them (like the witches' speech) are aimed at inducing a special effect magically. It is not surprising that *carmen*, the Latin word for "poem" or "song," is also the Latin word for *charm*, and the word from which "charm" is derived.

Rain, rain, go away;
Come again another day.

Block that kick! Block that kick! Block that kick!

Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.

In much poetry, rhythm is only half-heard, but its omnipresence is suggested by the fact that when poetry is printed it is customary to begin each line with a capital letter. Prose (from Latin *prorsus,* "forward," "straight on") keeps running across the paper until the right-hand margin is reached, and then, merely because the paper has given out, the writer or printer starts again at the left, with a small letter. But verse (Latin *versus,* "a turning") often ends well short of the right-hand margin, and the next line begins at the left—usually with a capital—not because paper has run out but because the rhythmic pattern begins again. Lines of poetry are continually reminding us that they have a pattern.

Before turning to some other highly rhythmical pieces, a word of caution: a mechanical, unvarying rhythm may be good to put the baby to sleep, but it can be deadly to readers who wish to keep awake. Poets vary their rhythm according to their purpose; a poet ought not to be so regular that he or she is (in W. H. Auden's words) an "accentual pest." In competent hands, rhythm contributes to meaning; it says something. The rhythm in the lines from *Macbeth,* for example, helps suggest the strong binding power of magic. Again Ezra Pound has a relevant comment: "Rhythm *must* have meaning. It can't be merely a careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tum tumty tum tum ta." Some examples will be useful.

Consider this description of Hell from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (the relatively unstressed syllables are marked by a symbol called *breve*, whereas heavier stresses are marked by ´, an acute accent, thus):

> Rócks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shádes of deáth.

Such a succession of stresses is highly unusual. Elsewhere in the poem Milton chiefly uses iambic feet—alternating unstressed and stressed syllables—but here he immediately follows one heavy stress with another, thereby helping to communicate the "meaning"—the impressive monotony of Hell. As a second example, consider the function of the rhythm in two lines by Alexander Pope:

> Whĕn Ájax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
> The line too lăbors, and the words move slów.

The heavier stresses (again, marked by ´) do not merely alternate with the lighter ones (marked ˘); rather, the great weight of the rock is suggested by three consecutive stressed words, "rock's vast weight," and the great effort involved in moving it is suggested by another three consecutive stresses, "line too labors," and by yet another three, "words move slow." Note, also, the abundant pauses within the lines. In the first line, unless one's speech is slovenly, one must pause at least slightly after "Ajax," "strives," "rock's," "vast," "weight," and "throw." The grating sounds in "Ajax" and "rock's" do their work, too, and so do the explosive *t*'s. When—in the second line, below—Pope wishes to suggest lightness, he reverses his procedure and he groups *un*stressed syllables:

> Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
> Flies o'ĕr th'unbénding córn, and skims ălong the máin.

This last line has twelve syllables and is thus longer than the line about Ajax, but the addition of "along" helps to communicate lightness and swiftness because in this line (it can be argued) neither syllable of "along" is strongly stressed. If "along" is omitted, the line still makes grammatical sense and becomes more "regular," but it also becomes less imitative of lightness.

The very regularity of a line may be meaningful too. Shakespeare begins a sonnet thus:

Whĕn Í dŏ coúnt thĕ cloćk thăt télls thĕ timĕ.

This line about a mechanism runs with appropriate regularity. (It is worth noting, too, that "*c*ount the *c*lock" and "*t*ells the *t*ime" emphasize the regularity by the repetition of sounds and syntax.) But notice what Shakespeare does in the middle of the next line:

Aňd sée thĕ bráve dáy suńk iň hídeŏus níght.

What has he done? And what is the effect?

Here is another poem that refers to a clock. In England, until capital punishment was abolished, executions regularly took place at 8:00 AM.

A. E. HOUSMAN

A. E. Housman (1859–1936) was one of the most distinguished classical scholars of his time. Though he left Oxford without a degree (having failed his examinations), through hard work, discipline, and rigorous study he earned an appointment in 1892 as professor of Latin at University College, London, and in 1911 as professor of Latin at Cambridge and fellow of Trinity College. Only two volumes of Housman's poems appeared during his lifetime: A Shropshire Lad *(1896) and* Last Poems *(1922).*

Eight O'Clock

[1922]

He stood, and heard the steeple
Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.
One, two, three, four, to market-place and people
It tossed them down.

Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,
He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;
And then the clock collected in the tower
Its strength, and struck.

The chief (but not unvarying) pattern is iambic; that is, the odd syllables are less emphatic than the even ones, as in

Hĕ stóod, aňd heárd thĕ stéeplĕ

Try to mark the syllables, stressed and unstressed, in the rest of the poem. Be guided by your ear, not by a mechanical principle, and don't worry too much about difficult or uncertain parts; different readers may reasonably come up with different results.

YOUR TURN

1. Where do you find two or more consecutive stresses? What explanations (related to meaning) can be offered?
2. What do you think is the effect of the short line at the end of each stanza? And what significance can you attach to the fact that these lines (unlike the first and third lines in each stanza) end with a stress?

Following are some poems in which the strongly felt pulsations are highly important.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

A poem by William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), along with a brief biography, appears on page 628. The Breughel (also spelled Brueghel) painting described in "The Dance" is shown below.

The Dance

[1944]

In Breughel's great picture, The Kermess,°
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles
tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
sided glasses whose wash they impound)
their hips and their bellies off balance
to turn them. Kicking and rolling about
the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
shanks must be sound to bear up under such
rollicking measures, prance as they dance
in Breughel's great picture, The Kermess.

1 Kermess in the Netherlands, Belgium, etc., an outdoor fair or carnival, originally the feast day of the local patron saint, hence a fair or carnival held on that day.

Pieter Breughel the Eider. *Peasant Dance*, c 1568, oil on wood, 114 × 164 cm. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.)

YOUR TURN

1. Read Williams's poem aloud several times, and decide where the heavy stresses fall. Mark the heavily stressed syllables ´, the lightly stressed ones ^, and the unstressed ones ˘. Are all the lines identical? What effect is thus gained, especially when the poem is read aloud? What does the parenthetical statement (lines 5–6) do to the rhythm? Does a final syllable often receive a heavy stress here? Are there noticeable pauses at the ends of the lines? What is the consequence? Are the dancers waltzing?
2. What syllables rhyme or are repeated (e.g., "round" in lines 2 and 5, and "–pound" in line 6; "–ing" in lines 5, 8, 9, and 11)? What effect do they have?
3. What do you think the absence at the beginning of each line of the customary capital contributes to the meaning? Why is the last line the same as the first?

Versification: A Glossary for Reference

The technical vocabulary of **prosody** (the study of the principles of verse structure, including meter, rhyme, and other sound effects, and stanzaic patterns) is large. An understanding of these terms will not turn anyone into a poet, but it will enable one to discuss some aspects of poetry more efficiently. A knowledge of them, like a knowledge of most other technical terms (e.g., "misplaced modifier," "woofer," "automatic transmission"), allows for quick and accurate communication. The following are the chief terms of prosody.

Meter

Most English poetry has a pattern of **stressed (accented)** sounds, and this pattern is the **meter** (from the Greek word for "measure"). Although in Old English poetry (poetry written in England before the Norman-French Conquest in 1066) a line may have any number of unstressed syllables in addition to four stressed syllables, most poetry written in England since the Conquest not only has a fixed number of stresses in a line but also has a fixed number of unstressed syllables before or after each stressed one. (One really ought not to talk of "unstressed" or "unaccented" syllables, since to utter a syllable—however lightly—is to give it some stress. It is really a matter of *relative* stress, but the fact is that "unstressed" and "unaccented" are parts of the established terminology of versification.)

In a line of poetry, the **foot** is the basic unit of measurement. On rare occasions it is a single stressed syllable, but generally a foot consists of two or three syllables, one of which is stressed. (Stress is indicated by the acute symbol ´, lack of stress by the breve symbol ˘.) The repetition of feet, then, produces a pattern of stresses throughout the poem.

Two cautions:

1. A poem will seldom contain only one kind of foot throughout; significant variations usually occur, but one kind of foot is dominant.

2. In reading a poem pay attention to the sense as well as to the metrical pattern. By paying attention to the sense, you will often find that the stress falls on a word that according to the metrical pattern would be unstressed. Or a word that according to the pattern would be stressed may be seen to be unstressed. Furthermore, by reading for sense, you will find that not all stresses are equally heavy; some are almost as light as unstressed syllables, and sometimes there is a **hovering stress;** that is, the stress is equally distributed over two adjacent syllables. To repeat: *read for sense,* allowing the meaning to help indicate the stresses.

Metrical Feet

The most common feet in English poetry are the following six:

1. **Iamb** (adjective: **iambic**): one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. The iamb, said to be the most common pattern in English speech, is surely the most common in English poetry. The following example has four iambic feet:

   Mў héart ĭs líke ă sińgiňg bírd.

   —Christina Rossetti

2. **Trochee (trochaic)**: one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed.

   Wé weře véřy tíréd, wé wěre véřy méřry

   —Edna St. Vincent Millay

3. **Anapest (anapestic)**: two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed.

   Thĕre aře máný whŏ sáy thăt ă dóg hăs hĭs dáy

   —Dylan Thomas

4. **Dactyl (dactylic)**: one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed. This trisyllabic foot, like the anapest, is common in light verse or verse suggesting joy, but its use is not limited to such material, as Longfellow's *Evangeline* shows. Thomas Hood's sentimental "The Bridge of Sighs" begins:

   Take hĕr uṗ ténd̆erl̆y.

5. **Spondee (spondaic)**: two stressed syllables; most often used as a substitute for an iamb or trochee.

   Smárt lád, tŏ slíp bĕtímes ăwáy.

   —A. E. Housman

6. **Pyrrhic**: two unstressed syllables; it is often not considered a legitimate foot in English.

Metrical Lines

A metrical line consists of one or more feet and is named for the number of feet in it. The following names are used:

monometer: one foot
dimeter: two feet
trimeter: three feet
tetrameter: four feet
pentameter: five feet
hexameter: six feet
heptameter: seven feet
octameter: eight feet

A line is scanned for the kind and number of feet in it, and the **scansion** tells you if it is, say, anapestic trimeter (three anapests):

Ăs Ĭ cáme tŏ thĕ édge ŏf thĕ wóods.

—Robert Frost

Or, in another example, iambic pentameter:

Thĕ súmmĕr thúndĕr, lĭke ă wóodĕn béll

—Louise Bogan

A line ending with a stress has a **masculine ending;** a line ending with an extra unstressed syllable has a **feminine ending.** The **caesura** (usually indicated by the symbol //) is a slight pause within the line. It need not be indicated by punctuation (notice the fourth and fifth lines in the following quotation), and it does not affect the metrical count:

Awake, my St. John! // leave all meaner things
To low ambition, // and the pride of kings.
Let us // (since life can little more supply
Than just to look about us // and to die)
Expatiate free // o'er all this scene of Man;
A mighty maze! // but not without a plan;
A wild, // where weeds and flowers promiscuous shoot;
Or garden, // tempting with forbidden fruit.

—Alexander Pope

The varying position of the caesura helps to give Pope's lines an informality that plays against the formality of the pairs of rhyming lines.

An **end-stopped line** concludes with a distinct syntactical pause, but a **run-on line** has its sense carried over into the next line without syntactical pause. (The running on of a line is called **enjambment.**) In the following passage, only the first is a run-on line:

Yet if we look more closely we shall find
Most have the seeds of judgment in their mind:
Nature affords at least a glimmering light;
The lines, though touched but faintly, are drawn right.

—Alexander Pope

Meter produces **rhythm,** recurrences at equal intervals; but rhythm (from a Greek word meaning "flow") is usually applied to larger units than feet. Often it depends most obviously on pauses. Thus, a poem with run-on lines will have a different rhythm from a poem with end-stopped lines, even though both are in the same meter. And prose, though it is unmetrical, can have rhythm, too.

In addition to being affected by syntactical pauses, rhythm is affected by pauses attributable to consonant clusters and to the length of words. Words of several syllables establish a different rhythm from words of one syllable, even in metrically identical lines. One can say, then, that rhythm is altered by shifts in meter, syntax, and the length and ease of pronunciation. But even with no such shift, even if a line is repeated word for word, a reader may sense a change in rhythm. The rhythm of the final line of a poem, for example, may well differ from that of the line before, even though in all other respects the lines are identical, as in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (page 755), which concludes by

repeating "And miles to go before I sleep." One may simply sense that the final line ought to be spoken, say, more slowly and with more stress on "miles."

Patterns of Sound

Though rhythm is basic to poetry, **rhyme**—the repetition of the identical or similar stressed sound or sounds—is not. Rhyme is, presumably, pleasant in itself; it suggests order; and it may also be related to meaning, for it brings two words sharply together, often implying a relationship, as in the now trite *dove* and *love*, or in the more imaginative *throne* and *alone*.

Perfect, or exact, rhyme: Differing consonant sounds are followed by identical stressed vowel sounds, and the following sounds, if any, are identical *(foe—toe; meet—fleet; buffer—rougher)*. Notice that perfect rhyme involves identity of sound, not of spelling. *Fix* and *sticks*, like *buffer* and *rougher*, are perfect rhymes.

Half-rhyme (or **off-rhyme**): Only the final consonant sounds of the words are identical; the stressed vowel sounds as well as the initial consonant sounds, if any, differ *(soul—oil; mirth—forth; trolley—bully)*.

Eye-rhyme: The sounds do not in fact rhyme, but the words look as though they would rhyme *(cough—bough)*.

Masculine rhyme: The final syllables are stressed and, after their differing initial consonant sounds, are identical in sound *(stark—mark; support—retort)*.

Feminine rhyme (or **double rhyme**): Stressed rhyming syllables are followed by identical unstressed syllables *(revival—arrival; flatter—batter)*.

Triple rhyme is a kind of feminine rhyme in which identical stressed vowel sounds are followed by two identical unstressed syllables *(machinery—scenery; tenderly—slenderly)*.

End rhyme (or **terminal rhyme**): The rhyming words occur at the ends of the lines.

Internal rhyme: At least one of the rhyming words occurs within the line (Oscar Wilde's "Each narrow *cell* in which we *dwell*").

Other patterns of sound are:

Alliteration: Sometimes defined as the repetition of initial sounds ("*A*ll the *a*wful *a*uguries," or "*B*ring me my *b*ow of *b*urning gold"), and sometimes as the prominent repetition of a consonant ("after life's *f*itful *f*ever").

Assonance: The repetition, in words of proximity, of identical vowel sounds preceded and followed by differing consonant sounds. Whereas *tide* and *hide* are rhymes, *tide* and *mine* are assonantal.

Consonance: The repetition of identical consonant sounds and differing vowel sounds in words in proximity *(fail—feel; rough—roof; pitter—patter)*. Sometimes consonance is more loosely defined merely as the repetition of a consonant *(fail—peel)*.

Onomatopoeia: The use of words that imitate sounds, such as *hiss* and *buzz*. There is a mistaken tendency to see onomatopoeia everywhere—for example in *thunder* and *horror*. Many words sometimes thought to be onomatopoeic are not clearly imitative of the thing they refer to; they

merely contain some sounds that, when we know what the word means, seem to have some resemblance to the thing they denote. Tennyson's lines from "Come down, O maid" are usually cited as an example of onomatopoeia:

> The moan of doves in immemorial elms
> And murmuring of innumerable bees.

If you have read the preceding—and, admittedly, not entirely engaging—paragraphs, you may have found yourself mentally repeating some catchy sounds, let's say our example of internal rhyme ("Each narrow cell in which we dwell") or our example of alliteration ("Bring me my bow of burning gold"). As the creators of advertising slogans know, all of us—not just poets—can be hooked by the sounds of words, but probably poets are especially fond of savoring words. Consider the following poem.

GALWAY KINNELL

Born in 1927 in Providence, Rhode Island, Galway Kinnell was educated at Princeton and the University of Rochester. He is the author of many books of poems, a novel, and translations of French and German literature. Among Kinnell's many awards are the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award for Selected Poems *(1980).*

Blackberry Eating [1980]

I love to go out in late September
among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries
to eat blackberries for breakfast,
the stalks very prickly, a penalty
they earn for knowing the black art
of blackberry-making: and as I stand among them
lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries
fall almost unbidden to my tongue,
as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words
like *strengths* or *squinched,*
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well
in the silent, startled, icy, black language
of blackberry-eating in late September.

Kinnell does not use rhyme, but he uses other kinds of aural repetition. For instance, in the first line we get "*l*ove" and "*l*ate," and the *l* sound (already present in the title of the poem) is picked up in the second line, in "black blackberries." The *k* sound is then continued in the next line, in "stalks" and the *l* and *k* in "prickly," and "prickly" contains not only the *k* and the *l* of "blackberry" but also the *r*.

In lines 7–9 Kinnell compares eating blackberries—an action involving the tongue and the lips, and the mind also, if one is savoring the berries—to speaking "certain peculiar words." There is no need for us to point out additional

connections between words in the poem, but we do want to mention that the last line ends with the same three words as the first, providing closure, which is one of the things rhyme normally does.

YOUR TURN

1. Specify three words that you like to "squinch," and explain why.
2. Specify one poem, other than a poem in this chapter (the poem need not be in this book), in which you think the repetitions of sounds are especially important, and explain why you hold this view.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

For a biographical note, see page 628.

[1954]

The Artist

Mr. T.
bareheaded
in a soiled undershirt
his hair standing out
on all sides
stood on his toes
heels together
arms gracefully
for the moment
curled above his head.
Then he whirled about
bounded
into the air
and with an *entrechat*°
perfectly achieved
completed the figure.
My mother
taken by surprise
where she sat
in her invalid's chair
was left speechless.
Bravo! she cried at last
and clapped her hands.
The man's wife
came from the kitchen:
What goes on here? she said.
But the show was over.

14 **entrechat** a leap, in ballet.

YOUR TURN

1. Why does Williams tell us that Mr. T.'s hair was untidy and that he wore "a soiled undershirt"?
2. Suppose the poem ended with line 23, '"and clapped her hands." Would it be just as good, better, or less good? Why?

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919) has been much concerned with bringing poetry to the people. To this end he has not only written poetry but has also been the editor and publisher of City Lights Books in San Francisco and (since 1953) has operated a bookstore, the City Lights Bookshop, the first all-paperback bookstore in the United States. In 1956 Ferlinghetti achieved national fame when, as the publisher of Allen Ginsberg's Howl, *he was arrested (and later acquitted) on an obscenity charge.*

Constantly Risking Absurdity

[1958]

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams
above a sea of faces
paces his way
to the other side of day
performing entrechats°
and sleight-of-foot tricks
and other high theatrics
and all without mistaking
any thing
for what it may not be

For he's the super realist
who must perforce perceive
taut truth
before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance
toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits
with gravity
to start her death-defying leap

13 entrechats a leap in ballet.

And he
a little charleychaplin man
who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form
spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence

30

YOUR TURN

1. In this poem, which compares a poet to an acrobat, is Ferlinghetti "constantly risking absurdity"?
2. What examples of wordplay do you find, in addition to "above the heads / of his audience"?

A Note About Poetic Forms

"Art is nothing without form," the French author Gustave Flaubert maintained, and it is true that works of art have a carefully designed shape. Most obviously, for instance, a good story has an ending that satisfies the reader or hearer. In real life, things keep going, but when a good story ends, the audience feels that there is nothing more to say, at least nothing more of interest to say.

With poems that rhyme, the rhyme-scheme provides a pattern, a shape, a structure that seems inseparable from the content. If you recite a limerick, you will immediately see how the shape is inseparable from the content:

There was a young fellow from Lynn
Who was so exceedingly thin
That when he essayed
To drink lemonade
He slipped through the straw and fell in.

If you put the words in a different order, and you ignore meter and rhyme—that is, if you destroy the form and turn the passage into something like "A young man, so thin that he fell through a straw into a glass of lemonade, lived in Lynn"—you can instantly see the importance of form.

Let's briefly look again at a more serious example—Housman's "Eight O'Clock" (page 663), a poem whose title corresponds to the hour at which executions used to take place in England.

He stood, and heard the steeple
Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.
One, two, three, four, to market-place and people
It tossed them down.

Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,
He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;
And then the clock collected in the tower
Its strength, and struck.

The rhyme of "struck" with "luck" (in this instance, bad-luck) is conclusive. We don't ask if the body was removed from the gallows and buried, or if the condemned man's wife (if he had one) grieved, or if his children (if he had any) turned out well or badly. None of these things is of any relevance. There is nothing more to say. The form and the content perfectly go together. In this example, the lines,

ach of which rhymes with another line—we might say that each line is tied to an-ther line—seem especially appropriate for a man who is "strapped" and "noosed."

But why do poets use forms established by rhyme? In an essay called "The onstant Symbol," Robert Frost says that a poet regards rhymes as "stepping :ones. . . . The way will be zigzag, but it will be a straight crookedness like the ralking stick he cuts in the bushes for an emblem." Housman's stepping stones ı the second stanza took Housman (and take the reader) from *hour* to *luck*, ıen to *tower* and then with great finality to the end of the walk, *struck*. We think ıis stanza is inspired, and we imagine that Housman's inspiration was mightily elped by his need for rhymes—his need to get "stepping stones" that would llow him to continue the "straight crookedness" of his walk with this condemned ıan. His walk-with-words, or rather his walk with words-that-set-forth-ideas, pro-uced "luck" and "struck," and enabled him to give to his readers the memorable nage of the clock as a machine that executes the man.

When you read Housman's or Frost's actual lines—or better, when you read hem aloud and hear and feel the effect of these rhymes—you can understand vhy Frost more than once said he would as soon write unrhymed poetry as he vould "play tennis with the net down." The rules governing the game of tennis ır the game of writing do not interfere with the game; rather, the rules allow the ılayers to play the game. The rules allow poets to write poems; the rules—the estraints—provide the structure that allows poets to accomplish something.

Poets are somewhat like Houdini, who accepted shackles so that he could riumph over them. Without the handcuffs and other restraints, he could accom-ılish nothing. Or consider the string on a kite; far from impeding the kite's flight, he string allows the kite to fly. Speaking in less high-flying terms, we can quote rom a talk that Frost gave to college students in 1937, "The Poet's Next of Kin in College." He told them—and he was speaking not only to young poets but to all tudents—that in their endeavors, of whatever sort, they "must have form—ıerformance. The thing itself is indescribable, but it is felt like athletic form. To ıave form, feel form in sports—and by analogy feel form in verse."

Poets have testified that they use rhyme partly because, far from impeding hem, it helps them to say interesting things in a memorable way. True, some rhymes have been used so often that although they were once rich in meaning—or instance—"love" and "dove" or "moon" and "June"—they have become :lichés, their use indicating not an imaginative leap but a reliance on what has ıeen said too often. But other rhymes—let's say "earth" and "birth" or "law" and "flaw"—can lead poets to say interesting things that they might otherwise not ıave thought of.

In his "Letter of Advice to a Young Poet," Jonathan Swift (whom you may know as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726), said: "Verse without rhyme is a body without a soul." A striking, and indeed surprising, comment: Swift dares to propose that the soul of a poem depends not on the content but, rather, on a crucial element of its form, the presence of rhyme. In part he is reminding us here of the importance of craft in the writing of a poem, of the sheer skill and deliberation that make the literary work feel exactly right, as though it *had* to be this way.

Stanzaic Patterns

Lines of poetry are commonly arranged in a rhythmical unit called a **stanza** (from an Italian word meaning "room" or "stopping-place"). Usually all the stanzas in a

poem have the same rhyme pattern. A stanza is sometimes called a **verse,** though *verse* may also mean a single line of poetry. (In discussing stanzas, rhymes are indicated by identical letters. Thus, *abab* indicates that the first and third lines rhyme with each other, while the second and fourth lines are linked by a different rhyme. An unrhymed line is denoted by *x*.) Common stanzaic forms in English poetry are the following:

1. **Couplet**: a stanza of two lines, usually but not necessarily with end rhymes. *Couplet* is also used for a pair of rhyming lines. The **octosyllabic couplet** is iambic or trochaic tetrameter:

> Had we but world enough and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime.
>
> —Andrew Marvell

2. **Heroic couplet**: a rhyming couplet of iambic pentameter, often "closed—" that is, containing a complete thought, with a fairly heavy pause at the end of the first line and a still heavier one at the end of the second. Commonly, there is a parallel or an *antithesis* (contrast) within a line or between the two lines. It is called heroic because in England, especially in the eighteenth century, it was much used for heroic (epic) poems.

> Some foreign writers, some our own despise;
> The ancients only, or the moderns, prize.
>
> —Alexander Pope

3. **Triplet** (or **tercet**): a three-line stanza, usually with one rhyme.

> Whenas in silks my Julia goes
> Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
> That liquefaction of her clothes.
>
> —Robert Herrick

4. **Quatrain**: a four-line stanza, rhymed or unrhymed. The **heroic** (or **elegiac**) **quatrain** is iambic pentameter, rhyming *abab*. That is, the first and third lines rhyme (so they are designated *a*), and the second and fourth lines rhyme (so they are designated *b*).

Three Complex Forms: The Sonnet, the Villanelle, and the Sestina

The Sonnet

A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem, predominantly in iambic pentameter. The rhyme is usually according to one of two schemes. The **Italian** or **Petrarchan sonnet,** named for the Italian poet Petrarch (1304–1374), has two divisions: The first eight lines (rhyming *abba abba*) are the octave, and the last six (rhyming *cd cd cd*, or a variant) are the **sestet.** Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" (page 807) is an Italian sonnet. The second kind of sonnet, the **English** or **Shakespearean sonnet,** is usually arranged into three quatrains and a couplet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*. (For examples see the next two poems.)

In many sonnets there is a marked correspondence between the rhyme scheme and the development of the thought. Thus an Italian sonnet may state a generalization in the octave and a specific example in the sestet. Or an English sonnet may give three examples—one in each quatrain—and draw a conclusion in the couplet.

Why poets choose to imprison themselves in fourteen tightly rhymed lines is something of a mystery. Tradition has a great deal to do with it: the form, having been handled successfully by major poets, stands as a challenge. In writing a sonnet a poet gains a little of the authority of Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and other masters who showed that the sonnet is not merely a trick. A second reason perhaps resides in the very tightness of the rhymes, which can help as well as hinder. Many poets have felt, along with Richard Wilbur (in *Mid-Century American Poets,* ed. John Ciardi), that the need for a rhyme has suggested

> . . . arbitrary connections of which the mind may take advantage if it likes. For example, if one has to rhyme with *tide,* a great number of rhyme-words at once come to mind (ride, bide, shied, confide, Akenside, etc.). Most of these, in combination with *tide,* will probably suggest nothing apropos, but one of them may reveal precisely what one wanted to say. If none of them does, *tide* must be dispensed with. Rhyme, austerely used, may be a stimulus to discovery and a stretcher of the attention.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), born in Stratford-upon-Avon in England, is chiefly known as a dramatic poet, but he also wrote nondramatic poetry. In 1609 a volume of 154 of his sonnets was published, apparently without his permission. Probably he chose to keep his sonnets unpublished not because he thought that they were of little value, but because it was more prestigious to be an amateur (unpublished) poet than a professional (published) one. Although the sonnets were published in 1609, they were probably written in the mid-1590s, when there was a vogue for sonneteering. A contemporary writer in 1598 said that Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets [circulate] among his private friends."

Other sonnets by Shakespeare are on pages 822–23.

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs° where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,

4 **choir** the part of the church where services were sung.