

Meter and Meaning

An Introduction to Rhythm
in Poetry

**Thomas Carper and
Derek Attridge**



METER AND MEANING

In *Meter and Meaning*, poet Thomas Carper and scholar Derek Attridge join forces to present an illuminating user-friendly way to explore the rhythms of poetry in English.

The authors begin by showing the value of performing any poem aloud, so that we can sense its unique use of rhythm. From this starting point they suggest an entirely fresh, jargon-free approach to reading poetry. Illustrating their “beat-offbeat” method with a series of revealing exercises, they help us to appreciate the use of rhythm in poems of all periods and to understand the vital relationship between meter and meaning. Beginning with the very basics, this book enables a smooth progression to an advanced knowledge of poetic rhythms.

This is the essential guide to meter for anyone who wants to study, write, better appreciate or simply enjoy poetry. Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge make studying meter a pleasure and reading poetry a revelation.

Thomas Carper is the author of three volumes of metrical poetry: *Fiddle Lane*, *From Nature*, and *Distant Blue*, the recipient of the 2003 Richard Wilbur Award. He is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Southern Maine. **Derek Attridge** is Professor of English at the University of York, England. He is the author of the highly influential texts on beat prosody, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* and *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*, and has also published books on literary theory, sixteenth-century poetry and twentieth-century fiction.

“This is a splendidly useful and elegantly thought-out introduction to the understanding of the rhythmic fabric of poetry in English, and to the way in which rhythmic patterns and effects become part of the very substance of what poetry says, rather than some kind of accompaniment to it. The authors have deployed sophisticated linguistic knowledge, literary sensitivity and poetic insight in the most clear and simple language possible, and their sample analyses are immediately comprehensible and enlightening. Anyone interested in poetry should acquire the knowledge so beautifully imparted here.”

John Hollander, Yale University

“This is far and away the most accessible, effective and enjoyable introduction to meter I have ever come across. I have nothing but admiration for what the authors have done.”

Rob Pope, Oxford Brookes University

“Many handbook approaches to scansion are Procrustean, beginning with metrical patterns and imposing them, like cookie-cutters, on lines of verse. Carper and Attridge start instead with the particular poem, sensitively read and spoken, and describe its wished rhythms in a vocabulary of ‘three kinds of beat and five kinds of offbeat.’ That vocabulary, which is not hard to learn, can well express all degrees of emphasis and pause, and by the time this fine book arrives at a discussion of our traditional measures, the reader has been prepared to see the infinite suppleness and subtlety which meter can have in the right hands.”

Richard Wilbur, U.S. Poet Laureate, 1987–8

“A lively and engaging but also absolutely authoritative introduction to meter in English poetry. The book presents its concepts and method with conviction and panache.”

Hans Bertens, University of Utrecht

“My students used this book and read it thoroughly and carefully. We then applied the ‘beat-offbeat’ approach to other pieces of poetry. And the result was phenomenal. A new light shone on the experience of reading poetry.”

Warren Neal, Sacopee Valley High School

“This is the best introduction to poetic metre that I have seen.”

Vicki Bertram, Nottingham Trent University

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1 Basic rhythms	1
2 Beats: B, b, [B]	18
3 Offbeats: o, O, -o-, [o], ô	34
4 Scanning poems	46
5 Rhythmic figures	76
6 Names and labels	87
7 Meter and meaning	104
8 Identifying meters and stanza-forms	124
<i>Where to go from here</i>	145
<i>Scansion symbols</i>	147
<i>Afterword</i>	151
<i>Index of poets and poems</i>	153



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T. C., D. A.

Cornish, Maine, U.S.A
York, England

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to increase your enjoyment and understanding of English poetry written in regular meters. You may be a writer of poetry who would like to improve your grasp of metrical forms in English so that you may use them effectively in your poems. Perhaps you are studying literature in a high school or secondary school, or in a college or university, and would like to deepen your appreciation of the poetry you are reading. You may be a teacher who would like to provide your students with useful tools to help them discuss the rhythms of poems, and how they relate to other aspects of poetry. Or you may be one of the many people who are not specialists in literature or poetry but who love the sounds and rhythms of metrical poems and want to become even more aware of their pleasures and powers. This book is addressed to you.

Increased understanding, we believe, leads to increased enjoyment, but in the case of poetry, understanding is not only an intellectual matter. To experience a poem fully is to hear and feel it at the same time as responding to the meanings of its words and sentences, and to do this one has to be able to appreciate its rhythms. An invaluable tool in doing so, and in communicating one's experience to others, is a way of marking the lines of verse to indicate how the rhythm is working – in the case of metrical poetry, both how it uses familiar rhythms and how it creates particular effects by departing from these rhythms. We have attempted to make this process – scansion – as simple as possible by linking it directly to the way poems are experienced, and by using a straightforward set of symbols to mark the lines. We want to demystify meter, which for too long has been the preserve of the specialist, and we hope to add further

dimensions to your appreciation of the art of the poets who, now as in the past, find heightened powers of communication and fresh possibilities for the expression of emotion through the use of regular, yet varied, rhythms.

The very words “scansion” and “prosody” – the metrical analysis of verse – cause anxiety for many lovers of poetry, and particularly for students young and old, from the early years of study to graduate schools. Examining the technical features of an attractive line seems to many like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel, to borrow a phrase from Alexander Pope, or, in the words of William Wordsworth, like murdering to dissect. Many feel that little is gained by dividing up lines of beautiful and moving language and then giving the little units, called “feet,” names like iamb, trochee, anapest, dactyl, spondee, pyrrhic, amphibrach, ionic; the list of Greek-based labels goes on. If you are emotionally touched by the thoughts and rhythms of metrical poetry, this activity may seem no more than an intellectual game – and, often, a guessing game at that.

But if the perception of rhythms and meters is a physical as well as an intellectual act, why have such emphasis on *naming feet* when we sense the presence of meter by *feeling* it when we perform poems, either aloud or silently?

Before trying to answer these questions in the chapters that follow, we think it’s important to say a little about who we are and why we believe this subject to be one that repays the expenditure of time and effort – both yours and ours. The “we” in this book usually means Tom Carper and Derek Attridge, not the “we” encountered in statements like “we know that, on this round planet, somewhere the sun is shining” or “here we sense the poet’s melancholy.” You, as reader and performer, will discover that we invite your own opinions and responses – agreeing or disagreeing – when we ask you to try out and evaluate our ways of performing certain metrical lines and identifying their rhythmic features, along with the meanings these rhythmic features help create.

We have both lived with poetry all our lives, teaching many hundreds of poems to large numbers of students, in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. One of us has published several collections of metrical poetry, the other has published three books on the subject of rhythm and meter. We have also read a mountain of books and articles trying to introduce students to the way rhythm and meter

work in poetry, and have always been disappointed – too many lists of terms, too much attention to norms and exceptions, too little examination of the basic assumptions about the experience of poetry underlying the discussion. We have always found this way of talking about meter left at least half of the students puzzled about what was going on, and this seemed a shame. The students were all thoughtful and dedicated, but the system of feet and their stress markings seemed to bear no relation to the expertise they demonstrated when reading poetry aloud. They could *perform* lines and entire poems beautifully, bringing out the beat of complex rhythms in just the way we would or, even better, with different emphases that exposed new meanings – often deeper meanings than we had noticed, or felt.

So we have for a long time been using a different approach in teaching metrical poetry, one for which there has been no classroom text. It is based on a simple principle: **Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats**. We continued to use some of the traditional labels like “iambic pentameter” in talking about the way we performed poetry by reading it aloud, and our experience of its rhythms as we did so. The difference was that we did this not in a world of intellectual manipulations but in a world of felt perceptions. We helped our students *feel* metrical verse as poets would wish, in whole lines, not fragments of lines.

By developing a simple method of scansion based on beats and offbeats we enabled our students to discuss clearly with us and with each other the experience of rhythm that is integral to the perception of meanings and emotions in the metered poems that make up the largest part of British, American, and other poetries written in the English language. Some students went on to study the rhythms of poetry more extensively, and to gain familiarity with the traditional foot-based approach to meter; but the ability to feel the beats remained crucial to their use of older types of scansion. The best way to grasp the working of the various feet with Greek names that you will encounter in many studies of poetry is by first getting a clear sense of the rhythmic patterns of beats and offbeats that are fundamental to the way regular verse is heard. Our way of talking about metrical verse has also proved useful in understanding and discussing much poetry that is not in regular meters (generally known as “free verse”) since the familiar rhythms upon which meter is built often play a significant part in these more freely organized poems.

The way of talking about poems that we developed in our classrooms – beat prosody – is being used more and more widely in education and in literary criticism; this short introduction to the rhythms of English metrical poetry presents it in an easy-to-grasp form. Although there is no rhythm without at least some suggestion of meaning, and in a successful poem the two always work inseparably together, we will simplify matters by concentrating at the beginning on the most basic rhythms, and using made-up verse that has no pretensions at being richly meaningful poetry. (You will see, however, that questions of meaning enter very quickly into the discussion.) Later, when we have introduced the most important elements of meter, we shall broaden our discussion to real poems – some famous, some little known – and invite you to use what you have learned about rhythm to perform them, to perceive and enjoy rhythm and meaning working together, and to articulate your experience in the simple terms of beat prosody. Our focus is not on methods of analysis but on poems: on the many ways they stir, move, delight, soothe, or excite us, and on the part that regular but always varied rhythms play in creating their powerful appeal.

BASIC RHYTHMS

1

We all live with rhythms. In fact, we live in and through rhythms – rhythms of walking, talking, breathing, swimming, writing. When our muscles are engaged in any continuous activity, they prefer to tense and relax rhythmically, in time to a regular beat. The songs we sing and the music we listen or dance to can move our bodies and linger in our minds because they use rhythms that arise from these elementary pulses. Rhythms in poetry work similarly, from the nursery rhymes we chanted as young children to the subtle language we hear in performances of Shakespeare. In this opening chapter, you will see (and more importantly hear and feel) how these basic rhythms, at the heart of all metrical poetry, do their work.

We'll start with four lines written in simple rhythms.

First poem

We won't talk of stress,
We won't talk of feet.
We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.

There are more profound poems. But this one reveals in an uncomplicated way a principal point of our Introduction, that **Rhythm in English poetry is realized by the alternation of beats and offbeats**, so it will be useful as we begin looking into (and listening to) the way metrical poetry creates its rhythm, and the ways we hear those rhythms. Sometimes a person will say, “There is only one way to hear the rhythm in such-and-such a line.” But another person may disagree. How can this happen?

Pretty easily, *in some circumstances* – but not in all circumstances. Our first example will demonstrate this. In “First Poem” you will discover that there are two lines which have alternative meters. To perform the lines in the alternative ways is to take a big step toward understanding how to *hear* and *feel* meters, and then recognize metrical norms.

We can tell you that when the lines were written, it didn’t occur to the writer that there could be differing metrical ways of reading them; he wrote with a single rhythm in mind, or, more precisely, with a single rhythm playing on his pulses. But applying the principles we will be studying, you will see how he was wrong.

First, though, an important point: with every example in this book, you must speak the lines aloud. If we are to understand rhythm in poetry, we have to get physical with it, and the only way to do this is to mouth it and hear it.

So, say the following lines aloud:

We won’t talk of stress,
We won’t talk of feet.

Notice that you’ve emphasized certain words more than others. Which were they?

While writing the lines, our not-particularly-inspired poet was emphasizing “won’t” in both lines, the word “stress” in the first line, and the word “feet” in the second line. For him, the lines went like this (we show emphasis by means of bold type):

We **won’t** talk of **stress**,
We **won’t** talk of **feet**.

This means the lines had two beats. Maybe your performance of the lines was just the same as his. But maybe it wasn’t – in which case you had one of the following pairs of *three-beat* lines:

We won’t talk of **stress**,
We **won’t** talk of **feet**.

or

**We won't talk of stress,
We won't talk of feet.**

This is a significant moment: we see (or hear) plainly that certain lines can have three valid, natural-sounding, *different* performances. And we also notice that the differing performances influence meanings: the first performance emphasizes the things that we *won't* be doing; the second emphasizes that *we* won't be doing certain things – but maybe others will; the third is very emphatic, with the lines almost shouting to express opposition even to bringing up the matter of “stress” and “feet.” (One hears such energetic expression at football games: “Block that kick!”)

Let's now perform aloud the second pair of lines:

**We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.**

Are there three possibilities for this pair, as there were for the first pair of lines? Try them out, continuing with the patterns we've just established, one with two beats in each line, two with three beats. Do they all work?

**We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.**

and

**We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.**

and

**We'll talk about rhythm –
We'll talk about beat.**

What about the first of the three-beat versions of these lines? Why doesn't “We'll talk about rhythm” work?

The answer is obvious. Nobody who speaks the English language with average fluency pronounces the word “about” as about. It's

always about. So for this pair of lines, the only possibilities are the first and third versions.

But just how likely is it that our poet, while writing his brief verse, had the third version in mind? Try the four lines yourself with this rhythm:

We **won't** talk of **stress**,
We **won't** talk of **feet**.
We'll talk about **rhythm** –
We'll talk about **beat**.

Does it seem to you that it's necessary, when presenting this fairly tame message to a reader, to use this degree of energy? Or do you feel, as we do, that these words, when emphasized so much, become more rhythmical than meaningful? That they turn, in effect, toward jazz rhythms and music?

A question still remains, though. If the first two lines of our small example may be performed in three different ways, and if lines three and four may be performed in only two different ways – because the “about” way won’t work – and if the over-emphatic, jazzy way of performing all four lines together seems unnatural, what can we suppose the writer wanted us to experience? Will we say that our poet has written a poem using two rhythms, or meters – that is, two three-beat lines followed by two two-beat lines? Or will we say that the poem is one which the writer expects to be performed with two beats in every line?

As we begin our study of rhythm, you may be inclined to insist, “It’s a free country. I hear threes and twos, so my answer is number one.” But we trust, with good reason, that after going through this brief book and performing the examples and listening to the differences you yourself are making, you will choose answer two.

Why? As will be demonstrated in the course of our discussion, poets who bother to write in regular rhythms – in meters – prefer to stick to the patterns they’ve established. It’s part of the art. They work to avoid ambiguities of rhythm. They depend on regularity. And they do this so that when, from time to time, they do change the rhythm a little, or even a lot, the change will be noticed by the reader, or listener. And in this way a meaningful emotional effect can be created.