Rhythm in English Poetry*

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I

HERE IS THE opening stanza of a poem that has been among my favorites for as long as I can remember; its title is "Disobedience":

> James James
> Morrison Morrison
> Weatherby George Dupree
> Took great
> Care of his Mother,
> Though he was only three.
> James James
> Said to his Mother,
> "Mother," he said, said he;
> "You must never go down to the end of the town, if
> you don't go down with me."[1]

The poem, which goes on to tell of the horrible fate of parents who don't pay sufficient heed to their children's warnings, comes from the collection by A. A. Milne entitled *When We Were Very Young*, first published in 1924 and reprinted at regular intervals ever since. (My two-year old copy is the 85th reprint.) I suspect that the reasons why this poem has been a favorite of mine and of many other listeners and readers extend further than its revolutionary sentiments and the wonderfully impossible name of its young hero. The word that most of us would use to characterize its special quality would probably be "rhythm." Thousands, perhaps millions, of parents, children, and others—very few of them literary specialists—have opened the book at this page and begun to read, their voices almost immediately adopting the same slightly singsong contours and heavy stresses as they shape the words into a distinctive temporal pattern.

Neither the traditional terms of academic prosody, based on the foot-scansion of classical verse, nor the more recent linguistic models of meter lend themselves to a description of this rhythmic pattern,

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partly because these approaches have had as their major focus the verse-forms of high culture. Yet without an understanding of rhythm as it operates in popular forms—children's verse, nursery rhymes, rap, ballads, advertising, and so on—we can't hope to achieve a clear appreciation of its working in the more rarefied domain of the poetic tradition. This isn't, incidentally, because rhythm is necessarily a more *simple* presence in these popular forms—it frequently isn't—but because it plays a more dominant role in the complex interplay of linguistic features that constitutes all verse, and because in so doing it reveals more clearly the sources and characteristics of the rhythmic pleasure so central to our experience of poetry. What is needed, then, is an approach that begins not with the abstractions of metrical feet or grids of weak and strong positions, but with the psychological and physiological reality of the sequences of rhythmic energy pulses perceived, and enjoyed, by reader and listener alike.

One immediately striking feature of the example we're considering is the speed with which a forceful rhythm imposes itself upon the reader, and communicates itself to the hearer. Here's the beginning again:

James James
Morrison Morrison
Weatherby George Dupree

Simply a string of names, yet by the time we've reached the end of it both the brain and the muscles of the vocal organs have already been programmed to give a distinctive rhythmic shape to the material that follows, if this proves to be at all possible. As indeed it is:

Took great
Care of his Mother
Though he was only three.

This immediate establishment of a strong expectation suggests that the poem employs a rhythmic organization that is both familiar and instantly recognizable. There's one structure that, above all others, possesses these qualities, and it's one that occurs everywhere in popular verse and song (and not just in English): a pattern of four beats repeated four times.[2] (I'll return to the word "beat" later, but I think in this context its meaning is obvious enough—a rhythmic pulse that we seem naturally to mark by a movement of the hand.) It's a very elementary rhythm, since it consists of a single beat

doubled, doubled again, doubled again, and doubled once more; if rhythmic structures can be said to vary in the degree to which they are "natural" or "cultural," this one is obviously one of the most natural, and has been found in children's verse in several languages on several continents.[3] Here is the stanza set out to make this structure clear:

James James Morrison Morrison
B B B B
Weatherby George Dupree
B B B [B]
Took great care of his Mother
B B B B
Though he was only three.
B B B [B]
James James said to his Mother,
B B B B
"Mother," he said, said he;
B B B [B]
"You must never go down to the end of the town,
B B B B
If you don't go down with me."
B B B [B]

There are two groups of four four-beat units here, and I have indicated the occurrence of beats by means of a "B" under the appropriate syllables. If we read the poem out aloud as we would to a young child, we find that the intonation contour we use produces a familiar melody on these beats that signals very clearly the four separate units in each of these groups, as well as the sense of temporary closure at the midpoint of the group (after two lines) and the cohesion of the whole eight-unit structure, which ends with a falling pitch on the last beat that gives a powerful feeling of finality.

One thing that is immediately noticeable is that not all the beats are actually realized by means of a spoken syllable; I have indicated the points at which there is no verbal substantiation of a beat by [B]. However, the rhythmic pulse at these points can be easily felt in a strongly regular reading, such as the poem clearly invites. If the stanza is read aloud by a group of English speakers in chorus, without anyone taking a leading role, the group rhythm that establishes itself by common consent will show these beats very clearly—that is, there is a tendency to pause at the ends of the second and fourth lines of the four-line span which doesn't occur at the ends

of the first and third lines. And if the members of the group are asked to nod their heads on the beats, there will be many nods in the middle of that pause (as well as a nod *after* the last word of the poem).

This is a pattern found very commonly in English verse and song, from hymn-tunes (where it's called "common measure") to ballads (it's often referred to simply as the "ballad-stanza") to poems by Jonson and Donne, Blake and Wordsworth, Dickinson and Browning, Auden and Frost, and a host of other writers. I've discussed elsewhere some of the reasons why this particular combination of realized and unrealized beats is so distinctive as a rhythmic form and so widespread in poetry and music;[4] let me just note that the gaps that occur after every seven beats function as highly effective rhythmic articulators. They mark the mid-point and end of the group, and augment whatever structuring is effected by the poem's rhymes and by its syntactic and semantic segmentation. An unrealized beat of this kind gives a strong sense of finality to the previous beat, which is the one on which the rhyme regularly falls; when this pattern occurs in songs, the unrealized beats are usually manifested as held notes, prolonging the previous syllable over the second beat and heightening the feeling of closure.[5] I'm emphasizing the role of unrealized beats because they demonstrate vividly that the rhythms of verse—at least of verse in regular meters—are not simply produced by the configurations of the language; there's a continuous interaction between the rhythmic habits we've learned as speakers of a given language and those which we've acquired through our wider experience of rhythm, much of it prior to and independently of our acquisition of language.

The use of a commonplace underlying form explains why we latch on to the rhythms of "Disobedience" so immediately, but it doesn't explain why its rhythms are so distinctively jaunty, to infant and adult ear alike. To begin to understand this, we need to pay attention to what happens *between* the beats, where the necessary slack phase is either occupied by one or more unstressed syllables or left empty. (A beat is constituted not just by the energy pulse that creates it, but also by the relaxation that occurs before and after it; I call these phases of relaxation "offbeats."[6]) There are three common types of offbeat in English, the commonest being a *single syllable*, which aligns verse rhythm most closely with the rhythmic tendencies of ordinary spoken English. An offbeat made up of *two syllables* inclines the rhythm toward a triple or ternary movement, especially if it occurs frequently in a line. The third possibility is an offbeat which occurs without the aid of a syllable, experienced

only as the weakening of energy between two successive stressed syllables and usually manifested in pronunciation by a prolongation of the first of these; I refer to this as an "unrealized offbeat."[7] In "Disobedience," we find all three types. The first three beats are separated by unrealized offbeats: "James—James—Mor. . . ." This is an unusual beginning, because readers of English verse tend to treat three stressed syllables in a row as a beat, an offbeat, and a beat: "Out, brief candle!" occupies two, not three, beats of its pentameter. But Milne has chosen to start this poem with one of the few situations in which all three syllables must be pronounced with the same degree of stress: a sequence of given names. (Imagine if the stanza began with the words: "Take great care . . .": here we'd be inclined to weaken "great.") And just in case we're still tempted to weaken the second syllable in order to produce the usual alternating rhythm of English, he makes it the *same* as the first and so very difficult to pronounce differently. (Another example of a repeated word enforcing the use of implied beats at the beginning of a poem is Tennyson's "Break, break, break, / On thy cold gray stones, O sea.")

When we turn to the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth beats, we find that they are separated by *two* unstressed syllables: "MORrison MORrison / WEAtherby GEORGE." Two syllables now occupy the same rhythmic slot as none did to begin with, retrospectively confirming our sense of a slow rhythm with marked beats at the start of the poem; and the rhythm is briefly shifted into something approaching a triple meter. This dancing movement is halted by the next offbeat, however, which consists of a single syllable, and which steadies the rhythm at a concluding point: "GEORGE DuPREE." Thus over the first seven words we've already had all three ways of filling the slack between beats. We can show this as follows:

James James Morrison Morrison
B [o] B [o] B o̲o̲ B o̲o̲
Weatherby George Dupree
B o̲o̲ B o B [o B]

Here, "[o]" indicates an unrealized offbeat; "o" a single offbeat; and "o̲o̲"—placed between the two syllables to which it refers—a double offbeat.[8] (Note that both an offbeat and a beat are unrealized at the end of the second line; successive beats are, by definition, separated by an offbeat—if they were not, there would be only one beat.) The result of this variety is not, as one might expect, to create

a weak and disordered rhythm, but to strengthen the salience and periodicity of the beats, and to subdue the weak syllables into compliance with that overriding rhythm. The fact that all we've had so far is a string of proper names increases the prominence of the rhythmic pattern, for the absence of a syntactic or semantic framework means that no subordination of one word to another is possible, except perhaps for an added emphasis when we finally reach the stressed syllable of the last name.

Once this version of the four-beat rhythm is established, the rest of the poem molds itself to its demands. "Took great care" would, as I've said, usually be read as a realization of two beats: "He TOOK great CARE to LOCK the DOOR." But here we allow "great" its own beat so that the rhythm will echo "James James Morrison"—and we thereby, perhaps, emphasize the magnitude of the young boy's sense of filial responsibility, as well as imitating a child's way of talking (or is it an adult's way of talking to a child?). The whole of this four-beat unit, and the next one, follow the first two very closely in rhythm.

Took great care of his Mother,
B [o] B [o] B ⏝ B o
Though he was only three.
B ⏝ B o B [o B]

The second half of the stanza begins identically with the first half and sustains the same rhythmic pattern through the first two four-beat units, verbal repetition encouraging a strong alternation between beats and offbeats (first "he SAID," then "said HE"):

James James said to his Mother,
B [o] B [o] B ⏝ B o
"Mother," he said, said he;
B ⏝ B o B [o B]

Then there occurs the poem's rhythmic surprise: where in the first part of the poem we had "Took great care of his mother," with that exaggerated, marked articulation enforced by implied offbeats, we now have a run of double offbeats, beginning even before the first beat:

"You must never go down to the end of the town,
⏝ B ⏝ B ⏝ B ⏝ B

This is still a highly regular four-beat rhythm, but now with a full-blooded triple movement, and a rapid passage of syllables—twelve of them moving by as the rhythmic equivalent of seven. The triple swing carries on to the beginning of the last four-beat unit (there is of course no unrealized beat to slow the rush from one unit to the next), but then an effect of closure, of determination, perhaps, is achieved by the rhythm's settling down again into the simplest available form: alternation of single beat and single offbeat:

if you don't go down with me."
o B o B o B [o B]

Milne's exploitation of the syllabic freedom allowed by a strong four-beat rhythm is evident in this stanza. It's not merely a matter of sprinkling different kinds of offbeat among the beats, however. The following lines don't have the same strong and catchy rhythm, though they have the same words and can be scanned as four-beat verse in the same way:

James Morrison George Dupree
B B B B
Weatherby James Morrison.
B B B [B]

This is not just a matter of losing the lilting quality encouraged by the repetitions in "James James Morrison Morrison"; the lines now lack the steady pacing and resounding climax produced by the particular disposition of stressed and unstressed syllables in the original. I won't go into the question of why some arrangements work and others don't; the perceptual laws governing what we hear in such patterns have never, to my knowledge, been worked out in detail, but the effect of these laws is something we all readily respond to. A. A. Milne certainly didn't know them as explicit rules, but his ear would have been familiar with them, no doubt primarily from his own nursery days, but also from the verse of W. S. Gilbert, Kipling, Chesterton, and many other poets popular in his time.

One aspect of four-beat verse capitalized on by all these poets in their use of unstressed syllables between the beats is its capacity to fall into larger rhythmic groupings, thus giving the rhythm an even more potent swing. There's a hint of this larger structure in the rhymes of our example: the whole stanza is made up of four segments rhyming in -ee. This larger structure can be achieved in recitation by deliberately emphasizing the dipodic rhythm that underlies the

alternating one—that is to say, the odd beats have the potential to be stronger than the even beats (and not the other way round: for one thing, several of the even beats are unrealized). Such a reading can be shown as follows:

James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree
B b B b B b B [b]
Took great care of his Mother though he was only three.
B b B b B b B [b]
James James said to his Mother, "Mother," he said, said he;
B b B b B b B [b]
"You must never go down to the end of the town, if you don't go
B b B b B
down with me."
b B [b]

Read with some rapidity and with the main emphasis falling only on the syllables marked [B], the stanza becomes a single four-times-four-beat structure, the even beats functioning at this level as off-beats. Although no reader paying attention to the meaning of the words would be likely to adopt this pattern (we've already seen that the opening encourages an even stressing of beats), its latent existence plays a part in the character of the rhythm, and distinguishes it from other four-beat verse from which the dipodic possibility is excluded (and from five-beat verse, which doesn't lend itself to dipody).[9] I believe that an aspect of the complexity of rhythm is that we can respond to a potential organization that isn't in fact activated, and the dipodic underswell of much four-beat verse is one example.

II

What, then, do I mean by "rhythm" when I use the term to talk about this specimen? And is it a natural or a cultural phenomenon? As my use of the term "beat" might suggest, I don't believe it's possible to discuss rhythm without relating it to the movements of the human body. A poem like "Disobedience" actually seems to invite not just a regular reading but a beating of the hand or a nodding of the head—and this phenomenon occurs not because a rhythmic structure, such as a melody, has been *imposed* upon the language, but because the language, read aloud, produces a rhythmic organization that encourages regular muscular movement. The ex-

planation for this lies in the spoken language of English, which, like every spoken language, involves a distinctive use of the body's musculature to produce a sequence of sounds of differing qualities and durations. The muscles controlling the lungs expel air in regulated bursts which are modified by the larynx and the higher speech organs of the mouth to emerge as recognizable syllables. This production of syllables tends, like all repeated muscular activities, toward temporal regularity (it's much easier to do keep-fit exercises if you employ regular movements, which is why it helps to do them to music). What's important for the experience of regular rhythm is not exactly equal durations but the psychological and physiological *experience* of periodicity. Where English differs from many other languages (and here, of course, we have a cultural factor) is in the coexistence, in some degree of tension, of *two* series of energy pulses in speech—those that produce the syllables, and those that augment certain syllables with stress, that is, with an additional peak of muscular energy. Both these series of pulses incline toward rhythmic repetition, but in the random syllabic arrangements of prose, neither can be fully satisfied.

In our example, a combination of factors rapidly establishes the supremacy of the second rhythm—the stress rhythm—over the first—the syllabic rhythm—to produce strongly marked beats falling at regular intervals. These factors include the particular sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables that allows all stresses to function as beats;[10] the arrangement of those beats, through syntactic and rhetorical grouping, into a highly familiar rhythmic structure; and, of course, the cultural association of this type of verse with a chanted recitation. What we have, therefore, is a "natural" basis, both in the rhythmic production of language by the speech musculature and in the psychological preference for certain simple rhythmic structures, overlaid by cultural factors: the particular ways in which the English language harnesses those muscular capabilities and those rhythmic forms, the tradition of English popular verse, the expectations associated with children's poetry.

III

Here is another poem; by John Ashbery, it's entitled "Crazy Weather":

It's this crazy weather we've been having:
Falling forward one minute, lying down the next

Among the loose grasses and soft, white, nameless flowers.
People have been making a garment out of it,
Stitching the white of lilacs together with lightning
At some anonymous crossroads. The sky calls
To the deaf earth. The proverbial disarray
Of morning corrects itself as you stand up.
You are wearing a text. The lines
Droop to your shoelaces and I shall never want or need
Any other literature than this poetry of mud
And ambitious reminiscences of times when it came easily
Through the then woods and ploughed fields and had
A simple unconscious dignity we can never hope to
Approximate now except in narrow ravines nobody
Will inspect where some late sample of the rare,
Uninteresting specimen might still be putting out shoots,
for all we know.[11]

When we speak of the rhythm of a poem like this, we clearly mean something rather different from the rhythm of "Disobedience": here the movement of stressed and unstressed syllables promotes no familiar pattern that has the power to organize the words of the poem and to simplify their accentual and temporal relations. It would not be appropriate to use the terms "beat" and "offbeat" in talking about this poem, since that particular psycho-physical phenomenon doesn't occur. Instead, the syllables retain all the variety of weight and duration that they have in ordinary speech, and all the freedom to fall into any kind of sequence that may occur. There's much more freedom for the reader, too, in choosing how to read the poem, and there would be no such agreement about the placing of strong stresses and the pacing of the language as there is in the case of "Disobedience." If there's a principle at work in the rhythm, it's a principle of avoidance: the regular patterns of metrical verse are kept at bay by the constant changes in the configuration of stresses and the refusal of the syntactic units to match familiar metrical structures. Thus the occasional regular sequence, such as

You are wearing a text. The lines . . .
o B o B o B

(which matches a run of syllables in "Disobedience"), is followed by a less regular sequence, "Droop to your shoelaces and I shall never want. . ." If we desire a somewhat narrower term than "free verse," which is used of a wide range of rhythmic styles, including some

that play much more in and out of traditional meters, we can call this "nonmetrical verse."

To attempt to characterize the rhythm of this poem, then, is not to specify the traditional rhythmic structure which it evokes, and to detail its distinctive use of that structure, but to note the general features of syllabic movement that it displays, and to point to particular examples of rhythmic allusion or expressiveness. It's still in part a matter of the reader's experience of the movement of language through time, articulated by stresses of different strengths (no longer basically two), but it's not an experience of a sequence of beats and offbeats. The poem's rhythmic distinctiveness (which it shares with much of Ashbery's writing) lies in its changeable, unpredictable movement, seldom seeming to dominate the language or to pursue its own semantic or emotional course. Such rhythmic periodicity as it possesses is for the most part that of the English language, enhanced by the cultural associations of "poetry"—a rather deliberate reading, with careful attention to the sounds and movements of language. And the rhythm of Ashbery's poem, therefore, is more the product of a specific culture than that of Milne's; one can't imagine non-English speakers obtaining much sense of its rhythmic character merely from hearing it read, and its status as poetry is acknowledged only within a narrow circle.

In an example like this, it's clearly not possible to get very far without including a discussion of the other aspects of language with which rhythm interrelates, and which a wider definition of rhythm must include. The most obvious of these is syntax, which plays an important part in all verbal rhythm: I've already noted that one reason for the exceptionally regular pulse of the opening of "Disobedience" is the syntactically unsubordinated relationship of the first seven words. In verse like Ashbery's, syntax tends to have a more dominant role, since there are few rhythmic expectations influencing our sense of movement. The unhurried pace of "Crazy Weather," the lingering over each moment as it occurs, is in part due to the loose sentences, which show very little tendency toward the suspense-and-resolution model of periodic organization: a statement is made by means of a complete syntactic unit, and then is followed by qualifications or additions which extend it further and further.[12] The most striking example in this poem is the extremely long last sentence which keeps seeming to be ready to stop, but keeps revealing that it has more in reserve. It is in fact grammatically complete after three words, but it continues for another seventy-three: "The lines droop—to your shoelaces—and I shall never want or need any other literature than this poetry of mud—and ambitious

reminiscences of times when it came easily—through the then woods and ploughed fields—and had a simple unconscious dignity—we can never hope to approximate now—except in narrow ravines—nobody will inspect—where some late sample of the rare, uninteresting specimen might still be putting out shoots—for all we know." Compare this with the relentless drive of the second part of the opening stanza of "Disobedience" toward its final word—"me." Meaning and tone are fully involved in Ashbery's rhythms, too: the uncertainty about the status of the objects, individuals, and actions in the poem, and about the attitude of the speaker (if there is a speaker) toward them, limits the opportunities for moments of semantic emphasis which would function as rhythmic nodal points. The rhythm of Ashbery's poem, like Milne's, is a psychological and physiological experience: not, in this case, of a coming together in energetic pulses but of a dispersal of energy—energy remembered, glimpsed, hoped for, abandoned.

IV

I have been discussing the subject of rhythm so far as if it were a purely aural phenomenon (insofar as such a discussion is possible in a printed essay), and this coincides with the traditional understanding of rhythm: we tend to think of the use of the term to refer to visual experience as merely a metaphorical extension. Yet for a late twentieth-century reader, the typical encounter with a poem—in spite of the relative popularity of poetry-readings as public events—is reading it from a page, an experience that is simultaneously visual, oral, and aural.[13] In reading a poem to ourselves, that is, we see it, say it, and listen to ourselves saying it. If the reader proceeds silently with only a mental semirealization of the poem's oral qualities, the role of sight is of course even more important.

The obvious limitations of my discussion of the rhythms in "Crazy Weather" spring at least in part from this temporary willed phonocentrism. Much of the rhythmic work of Ashbery's poem—the attention drawn to movements of words, the pacing of the language, the emergence of regularities within the free variations—is achieved by the lineation. The immediate visual appearance of the poem has an effect in itself: the solid block of lines of roughly similar length, starting with initial capitals and going most of the way across the page, establishes a connection with a long tradition of English poetry: although there's just sufficient raggedness at the right-hand margin

to signal that we're not in the domain of regular meter, the look of the poem invites the same full attention to sound and sense demanded by blank verse. The spoken voice, that is to say, and not song, is the model evoked by this first glimpse.

The visual segmentation of the poem into lines is impossible to convey with complete accuracy in a purely spoken rendition (unless one were to use some arbitrary convention—different from the pauses and intonation contours that mark syntactic features—to indicate line-ends); but it is this segmentation that does much of the work of heightening attention to the movement of language, whether it crystallizes a single syntactic unit into a visual unit as in the first line, or cuts across a syntactic unit to create a moment of drama, as in "The sky calls / To the deaf earth." The final sentence presented as prose would be a scarcely intelligible block of verbiage; the line divisions, although they correspond to no divisions of grammar or sense, allow the reader to move sequentially in measured phases, concentrating on the words at hand while the words to come remain a mystery. We may even have in the poem as it appears on the page in *Houseboat Days* an accidental feature that contributes to the poem's closure: the final phrase, part of the last, unusually long line, appears visually on its own, as a short coda, qualifying the already qualified statement that precedes it, summing up the poem's atmosphere of half-glimpsed but immediately ironized revelation:

> . . . some late sample of the rare,
> Uninteresting specimen might still be putting out shoots,
> for all we know.

In this case, then, rhythm isn't entirely an oral/aural matter; Ashbery's poem, like most of what we call free verse, belongs to a print culture, and the changing pace of the language, the expectations and fulfillments or disappointments that draw us through the poem, are the product of the interaction between sight and sound. The common association of free verse with "nature" or "spontaneity" and regular verse-forms with "artifice" is itself a wholly cultural phenomenon, reflecting our post-Romantic situation; it could be argued on the contrary that free verse, with its reliance on the properties of print, is more artificial than verse derived from the rhythms of spoken English and the common rhythmic forms that verse shares with music. But that would be to presuppose a greater artificiality in the printed language than in the oral, which would itself be another cultural assumption. Moreover, it's not only free verse that relies on the page for its rhythmic identity; as soon as

blank verse was introduced into English there existed a form of poetry which did not signal line-endings with a simple aural device.[14] True, the use of syntactic and semantic units that coincide with rhythmic groupings made it possible to retain strongly marked subdivisions; but the growing freedom in the use of run-on lines, beginning in the drama of the Renaissance and entering the tradition of printed poetry with Milton, together with less strict adherence to regular metrical alternations, meant a growing role for the visual aspect of rhythm in the seventeenth century. Nursery rhymes, by contrast, remain primarily oral. There's no "authentic" way of presenting, say, "Little Jack Horner" on the page, and it preserves its strong rhythm through a number of visual permutations. Its words are transmitted orally, and lodged in the brain on the basis of its memorable rhythmic form, in much the same way that a tune is lodged.

It might seem that "Disobedience" is a similarly oral artifact. However, we must remember that it's a poem written by a single author and published in a printed book in 1924, and while it—or at least its opening stanza—may exist in many memories as a verbal sequence without a specific visual organization, its appearance on the page is not without importance to its rhythm. In discussing its rhythmic structure earlier I quickly abandoned the layout which Milne chose, and it should be reinstated again:

James James
Morrison Morrison
Weatherby George Dupree
Took great
Care of his Mother,
Though he was only three.
James James
Said to his Mother,
"Mother," he said, said he;
"You must never go down to the end of the town, if
you don't go down with me."

One's immediate response to this visual image is likely to be very different from one's response to the Ashbery example: here is an odd, wayward poem with both exceptionally short and exceptionally long lines. Humor, a lightness of tone, not colloquial speech but a heightened delivery of some kind, are signaled. Looking at the difference between the way the poem is set out here and my version set out in four-beat rhythmic units, we may observe that the first

and third four-beat units are presented by Milne as two two-beat lines, giving the second and fourth units—the ones with unrealized fourth beats—a stronger quality of resolution, since they now appear not as *shorter* lines but as *longer* ones: "James James / Morrison Morrison / Weatherby George Dupree." This pattern is repeated in "James James / Said to his mother, / 'Mother,' he said, said he"; but then the last two four-beat units, with their additional syllables, are all run together as one extraordinarily long line. Reading from this printed text, the rhythmic saliencies of the stanza are all the more marked: the strong beats, one per syllable, with which the poem opens, the exaggerated carefulness of "Took great / care . . . ," and the climax of the rapidly-moving syllable-thronged utterance in which the crucial injunction is uttered. (We might note the nice reversal whereby there is *no* rhyming between the two-beat lines, creating a little fragment of poetic modernity, while the only section of the poem that *is* rhymed in two-beat units is presented as a single line—"You must never go *down* to the end of the *town* if you don't go *down* . . . .") Another result of the short lines is the further blocking of the dipodic potential I mentioned earlier: we're likely to award as many full beats as possible to such a minuscule unit.

The importance of the visual aspect continues, and indeed increases, to the end of the poem. (And I'm not referring to the deft E. H. Shepard illustrations which, by punctuating the sequence of stanzas, further heighten the poem's visual interest.) After the mother predictably disobeys her son's edict in stanza two, the third stanza presents in large capitals and some boldface type the notice put up by King John announcing her disappearance. The next two stanzas make use of italics for emphatic stresses that give a slightly different balance to the rhythm, and the final stanza—after all hope for the mother is given up—allows print to take command. (We might recall that this poem was published two years after *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*.) Here we have words on the page reveling in their status as visual image, yet claiming to be nothing but instructions for an oral performance ("[*Now then, very softly*]"). That performance is obliged to reduce the rhythmic pattern to an even more basic skeleton, allowing the names of single letters in many cases to carry a beat, before expanding to the last, long, and now even more rapid, filial instruction:

(*Now then, very softly*)
J. J.
M. M.
W. G. Du P.

Took great
C/o his M*****
Though he was only 3.
J. J.
Said to his M*****
"M*****," he said, said he:
"You-must-never-go-down-to-the-end-of-the-town-if-
you-don't-go-down-with ME!"

In some places, this is less different from the other stanzas when read aloud than when seen on the page. Notice, for example, how the skeleton of the third line retains the essential rhythmic qualities of the full versions: "Doubleyou gee Du pee" has the same stress pattern as "Weatherby George Dupree." But at several points the reciter has to improvise: how, for instance, do we pronounce the asterisks of "M*****"? As for the word "three" that becomes the figure 3, I can think of no way in which that change could be vocalized, just as the occurrence of figures instead of words in Molly Bloom's chapter of *Ulysses* exists only on the printed page we read, not in the internalized speech they are supposed to represent.

V

You'll have noticed that I've used the term "meter" only rarely, preferring in most cases the term "rhythm." This is not just in deference to the title of this seminar, or in order to identify myself with the currently fashionable mood of antiformalism, but because I believe that the word "meter" is more appropriately used in connection with a body of verse that is different from either of the examples I have used. I don't, however, wish to make too rigid a distinction between the two terms. In the mass of writing on this subject, "rhythm" and "meter" have been used in such different ways, and with such different relationships to one another, that it's probably unwise to try to make the distinction do too much work. Henri Meschonnic has, it's true, used it fruitfully in parallel with a whole set of other oppositions, between language (or more strictly, *langue*) and discourse, between structure and system, space and time, individual and subject, and so on; but in this case the meaning and function of the distinction is built up by virtue of all the other associated oppositions, not by an appeal to the history of the two terms or to a current consensus about their use.[15] Meschonnic still runs the risk of reinforcing a common prejudice in literary circles

against generalization and in favor of concrete particulars, a prejudice which at its worst can issue in sub-Romantic sloganizing, impressionistic description, and a refusal of careful analytical work.

When it comes to examining poems, the danger of laying too much emphasis on the opposition of rhythm and meter, it seems to me, is that a dualistic model of poetic movement is produced, in which the actual contours of the poem are regarded as being in constant tension with a Platonic (or Pythagorean) ideal. The reading of regular verse becomes a process of relating the concrete example to an abstract universal, rather than an activity that occurs wholly in the real world of time and space, of mental and physical experience. I should make it clear that my indication of the beats in "Disobedience" is not meant to imply an abstract schema from which the actual words are felt to depart. The "B"s mark syllables which actually take on a particular physical and psychological quality by being perceived as rhythmic beats, and this in turn generates an expectation for further beats and therefore modifies the production and perception of the words that follow. Where the expectation is defeated or its realization delayed, we can legitimately speak of "tension" or "irregularity"—but this is not felt as a metronome ticking away in the brain while the poem itself performs an intricate dance around it.

Rhythm, then, can refer to any movement through time which possesses some tendency toward perceptible periodicity, whether this be the insistent regularity of the four-beat structure that dominates A. A. Milne's poem, or the heightened version of the typical patterns of English speech that characterizes Ashbery's. It can refer to the quality of a particular verse tradition, or a particular poem, or a particular performance of a poem. Instead of imposing its own definition on the term "rhythm," as so many theories of versification do, this strategy allows it all the laxity it has in common usage. We can justifiably talk about the rhythm of spoken English, or any other language, because all living languages—produced as they are by the muscles of the body—have some tendency toward periodicity. (Dead languages tend to be spoken with the rhythmic features of the speaker's native language.) This is not, I should emphasize, to suggest that rhythm is a matter of actual durations in time, measurable by instruments: it's the *perception* of periodicity that is crucial, and this involves muscular empathy more than the ear's calculation of temporal equivalences.

"Meter," on the other hand, has a narrower range: it suggests those kinds of poetic rhythm that can be specified in terms of numbers, and it carries the connotation of a particular cultural

convention whereby certain forms gain recognition and are perpetuated within the literary domain. Thus "iambic pentameter" is a meter with a concrete history in English, whose major characteristics and historical transformations can be specified in terms of syllables and realization rules. If I were to attempt to specify the *meter* of "Disobedience," however, my task would not be so clear cut. I would have a number of options, depending on how large a category I wanted to delimit. To identify it as "tetrameter" would be to include it in too large a constituency to be of much use, and as it doesn't observe the niceties of Greek prosodic feet the field can't be narrowed by the use of terms like "iambic," "trochaic," or "anapaestic." To call it "common measure" or "ballad stanza" would be to associate it with particular traditions to which it doesn't belong, though it would offer a fuller specification of its metrical pattern (which must in this case be a description of more than one line). To specify precisely its use of stressed and unstressed syllables, together with its lineation, would be to describe a metrical category of which it would be the only member. Perhaps the level of generality at which the word "meter" might be most appropriate would be one which indicated the pattern of beats and offbeats over sixteen beats, while showing the options available in all the offbeat positions; such a description would align the poem with a number of other poems in English with which it shares genuine affinities. (A "metrical description" of this kind would still omit the idiosyncratic lineation of the poem, however.) The term "rhythm," on the other hand, seems appropriate both for the most general descriptions—"the poem's four-beat rhythm"—and the most specific—"the rapid triple rhythm of the last line." In both cases the word refers to an interaction between different rhythmic domains registered in psycho-physical performance.

VI

The two examples I have considered obviously represent extremes within the realm of English poetry, in terms of cultural function as well as rhythmic organization. Rhythmically, of course, I might have chosen even more extreme examples: such as a simple nursery rhyme with a primarily oral-aural existence, and a prose poem, where there is even less contact with the tradition of rhythmically regular verse (though the rhythms of prose poems are, of course, not as dependent on visual appearance as those of free verse). The range in between these extremes is enormous, and different types

of verse draw in different ways on both the "natural" origins of rhythm—in the repetitions of muscular activity—and the "cultural" tradition of metrical form. The major tradition of regular English verse—the accentual-syllabic tradition—derives its unique character from its use of the two sources of rhythmic regularity in spoken English that I have already mentioned, the sequence of syllables and the sequence of stresses. By controlling both the number of syllables *and* the number of stresses in a metrical unit, it brings the two rhythmic resources into harmony; but it's an unstable accord, and the strength and variety of accentual-syllabic meter springs from its exploitation of that instability. Within the realm of accentual-syllabic meter, any given metrical form will have a certain relation both to speech rhythms and to the regularities of rhythm understood as a psychological phenomenon. A falling rhythm, for example (one that tends to group into units beginning with a beat) will have a stronger rhythmic beat and will impose more upon the spoken rhythms of the language than a rising rhythm. Because spoken English has a tendency toward an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables—noticeable, for instance, in the stress patterns of polysyllabic words—a duple rhythm will dominate the language less than a triple rhythm. A five-beat line is a much weaker rhythmic Gestalt than a four-beat line, and is the simplest way of avoiding the much stronger rhythmic drive of four-beat verse (which is manifested in lines of two, three, four, six, seven, and eight beats). Adding all these features together, we would predict that four-beat falling and triple meters would be farthest from spoken English (and nearest to song), and that the line which would most closely emulate the rhythms of speech, while retaining a distinctively regular movement, would be five-beat rising duple verse—otherwise known as iambic pentameter.

There are, of course, forms of verse in English which don't draw upon the rhythms of spoken English: verse which is purely visual, for instance, scattering letters across the page, or purely oral/aural, uttered in a way that parts company with the norms of English pronunciation. Anything can become a poetic device, if a culture deems it so; there's no inherent "poetic" property that renders some phenomena available for poetry and rules others out of court. To say the same thing in a different way, there's no guarantee that a cultural category like "poetry" will retain its identity over time. But in the history of versification in English, and in all the languages that I'm familiar with, the dominant practice of poetry has involved building upon the particular use made by the language of the speech apparatus. Recent work in phonology has shown a much closer link

than had hitherto been suspected between the traditional forms of English verse and the complex rules that govern English pronunciation; it's appropriate that this work goes under the name "metrical phonology." To the extent that verse rhythm has a natural or biological origin, it is in the ways I have sketched; there's no need for the misty speculation about biology that mars some discussions of meter, such as the introduction to a recent anthology of contemporary American verse in traditional forms, *Strong Measures*, where we are told once more than the iamb is the rhythm of the heartbeat, and that the pentameter is favored because the heart beats, on average, five times to a breath.[16]

The rhythms of English poetry are perhaps more alive today than they have been for a long time. Anyone who has listened to the handling of language by a rap artist will know that it involves a complex and original harnessing of those rhythmic properties of English that I've been discussing, particularly remarkable in that rhythm takes center stage to the virtual exclusion of melody and harmony; while other areas of popular music show a similar sophistication in dealing with the relationship between the irregularities of speech and the regularities of musical meters. The video explosion has accustomed viewers to a complex interaction of visual and aural rhythms. Children still learn the characteristic rhythms of their language at an early stage, and can respond to patterns of beats and offbeats as sensitively as the most advanced student of prosody. But there's a huge divide between, on the one hand, the skillful development and subtle appreciation of rhythm to be found in many areas of popular music and home-grown linguistic play, and, on the other, the feeble attention now given to rhythmic matters in the academic study of literature. One cause of this enfeeblement has been the rise of nonmetrical verse in the twentieth century, with its associated rhetoric of freedom from ancient bondage—it's typical that no less a work than the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* in its 1985 revision should end its article on "meter" with this single sentence paragraph: "Verse in the 20th Cent. has largely escaped the straitjacket of traditional metrics."[17] We're also in the middle of a phase in the history of literary studies dominated by *content*: literature is valued for its political efficacy, its ethical significance, its historical illumination. A critical stance which attempts to do justice to the distinctiveness of the "literary" in our culture (a highly complex question which can hardly be said to be resolved) is regarded by many as irresponsible, even if, like deconstruction, it's capable of posing the most difficult historical and political ques-

tions about literature without losing sight of the fact that a literary text is never simply a historical document or a political tract. Another reason for the dwindling attention to rhythm is the decline in memorization as an exercise and an art; to know poems by heart now smacks of a discredited pedagogy, but even if it emphasizes the mechanical learning of form at the expense of deep familiarity with content, it's an unrivaled way of becoming intimate with the variety of rhythms and meters into which one's language can be molded. Even reading aloud is, I would guess, much less common now than fifty years ago, and poetry may be gradually becoming a largely visual art. If this does occur, the irony will be that this has come about at a time when the easy availability of recordings and recording devices has given the human voice a cultural centrality it hasn't had since printing became the dominant representation of language.[18] Whether English poetry as an art of the voice, and, through the voice, the body, is rejuvenated by influences from other cultural forms, and from other cultures, or dwindles to a diversion or scholarly pastime of the very few while newer cultural practices thrive, there can be little doubt that rhythm will continue to play a vital part in that realm of social and cultural experience in which human beings exploit the inseparability of formal urgings from their most insistent concerns and durable pleasures.

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NOTES

1 A. A. Milne, *When We Were Very Young* (London, 1924; 1987), pp. 30–33.

2 "Structure" is not a very satisfactory term for a recognizable rhythmic entity, suggesting as it does something spatial and fixed, but the alternatives—"form," "pattern," "arrangement"—are just as misleading in this respect, and don't convey the sense of potential multileveled complexity in the way that "structure" does. The language lacks a term for a repeatable organization created out of energy fluctuations through time (other than "rhythm").

3 See Robbins Burling, "The Metrics of Children's Verse: A Cross-Linguistic Study," *American Anthropologist*, 68 (1966), 1418–41.

4 See Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London, 1982), pp. 88–96; hereafter referred to as *REP*.

5 Some writers on prosody advance the idea of a "silent stress" in various positions (for instance, at the end of a pentameter as well as at the end of three-beat lines). Such a notion is very different from that of unrealized beats, since stress is a feature of language, not rhythm. My contention is that unrealized beats occur only in regular verse (and, of course, music) once a strong rhythmic pattern has been established, and that the conditions under which they occur are highly circumscribed.

6 In music, these terms are used somewhat differently, since "beat" refers to all rhythmic pulses, not just to the strongest ones in the pattern. But musical analysis

does make a distinction between strong beats and offbeats (or weak beats) which is similar to that between beats and offbeats in verse. Unrealized beats, strong or weak, are common in music, where they are produced by syncopations and held notes; they can also, of course, occur on rests. Because of the essentially hierarchical nature of regular rhythm, these terms are all relative; what are perceived as measures (that is, groups of beats) in a piece of music played at one speed will become beats when the piece is played much faster, or phrases (groups of measures) when played much slower. Four-beat verse often possesses similar characteristics, as we shall see.

7 In *REP* I called such offbeats "implied offbeats," but this name has given rise to some misunderstanding. To call them "unrealized offbeats" is to make it clearer that there is no oral manifestation of the offbeat, though I should emphasize that the phenomenon is physiologically and psychologically very different from "unrealized beats," in spite of the obvious parallel that can be drawn between them.

8 These symbols are somewhat different from those I used in *REP*, and have the advantage of being found on a standard keyboard.

9 As a way of demonstrating the hierarchical nature of four-beat rhythms, it is possible to read the stanza even faster, with primary stresses spaced out over the double span of the dipodic beats, yielding two four-beat structures. It's also possible, with some effort, to slow down the reading to create twice as many beats (many of them unrealized):

James James
B [o B o] B [o B o]
Morrison Morrison
B o B [o] B o B [o]
Weatherby George Du-
B o B [o] B [o] B[o]
pree
B [o B o B o B o] etc.

10 It is common in English verse to find stressed syllables functioning as offbeats (as in my earlier example, "He TOOK great CARE to LOCK the DOOR," where "great" can be stressed in the reading but will be perceived as an offbeat), as it is to find unstressed syllables functioning as beats ("JIMmy MORriSON is YOUNG," where the last syllable of "Morrison" can be given very little stress while functioning as a beat). These variations, "demotion" and "promotion," occur only under very determined conditions, however (see *REP*, pp. 164–72).

11 John Ashbery, "Crazy Weather," in *Houseboat Days* (New York, 1977), p. 21.

12 Richard Cureton is developing an analytical method which makes it possible to represent more accurately than hitherto the part played by syntactic and semantic considerations in the experience of rhythm, prominence, and anticipation (see, for example, his review of Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure*, *William Carlos Williams Review*, 12 [1986], 34–52); what such an approach reveals about this poem is the extraordinary difficulty of deciding which are the dominant and which the subordinate elements at every level of analysis.

13 In print, I shall have to use the somewhat awkward combination "aural/oral" to bring out the simultaneously vocalized and heard character of rhythm in this typical mode of reading.

14 I have discussed this at greater length in "Poetry Unbound? Observations on Free Verse," The 1987 Warton Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1987), 353–74.

15 Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme: anthropologie historique du langage* (Paris, 1982). See also the interview with Meschonnic in *Diacritics*, 18, No. 3 (1988), 93–111.

16 *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, ed. Philip Dacey and David Jauss (New York, 1986), p. 5.
17 *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed., ed. Margaret Drabble (Oxford, 1985), p. 644.
18 See Alan Durant, "The Concept of Secondary Orality," *Dalhousie Review*, 64 (1984), 332–53.