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A METER DOCTOR REPORTS FROM THE FIELD: Towards a Metrical Diversity Cure (or, Why Free Verse Isn't Free)

It's happening again. I grip down with my fingertips on the edges of the hard classroom chair. The young poet with the hesitant voice is reading aloud to the class, winding up her free-verse poem about the death of her aunt on a gray day in central Illinois. I try to control my expression. I have been brought to campus at considerable expense, and it seems only right that I act dignified. But it's hard.

I keep wanting to grin, to interrupt her—and then I do, because I want everyone to notice that the same thing is happening in the fifth stanza that happened in the first. The first stanza of this poem broke into a flight of anapests at the happy moment when the speaker remembered her earliest memories of her aunt's hug. In the same way, now, in the fifth stanza, the anapests are reappearing just as the poem shakes itself out of its generalized doldrums and focuses down into a vivid simile of her aunt's love for her like a cardinal against the snow.

When the student finishes and I read the poem back to her, emphasizing the rhythm, she's amazed. She didn't even know that she knew how to write in anapests, let alone that they would correlate with what everyone agrees are the strongest parts of her poem. She is eager to learn more. She wants to try putting the whole poem into anapests. Can I help?

I can. And it's time to go on to the next student. Maybe the next student will have a "free-verse" poem that erupts into a stop-and-start pattern of alternating lines of 4 and 3 beats (ballad-stanza pattern) every time the story becomes detailed and vivid, then falls away from the pattern as the language starts to meander from the narrative and the images lose their immediacy. Maybe the next poem after that will really be in free verse, with no regular metrical passages; sometimes there's one of those per class, particularly if the student is writing experimental verse. Or it may be a prose poem. But the odds are the next ostensibly "free verse" poem may begin with a rash of wistful iambic pentameters; abandon them for a passage of nonmetrical free verse, perhaps describing a sense of homelessness or powerlessness; and wind up with a final, poignant, defiant assertion of five iambs with words embodying homecoming, transcendence, or victory. And that student, too, is likely to be proud and excited to discover that the poem has unconscious iambic lines in it, and to want to learn how to write more of them at will.

I've come to call the condition that affects such poems "Metrical Incipience." This unfortunate and rarely-diagnosed affliction seems to have been around creative writing classrooms for quite a while now; I've been noticing the symptoms for over a decade as I make the rounds of poetry-writing classrooms across the country as a visiting writer. But recently, as the number of poems with this condition in the average creative writing class has swollen, by my estimation, to about fifty percent, it feels that my job of artist role model and creative inspirer has morphed more definitively than ever before into that of "meter doctor."

The symptoms of Metrical Incipience are sad and debilitating. At least one unconscious and ostensibly unwanted metrical pattern—usually iambic pentameter, ballad stanza, anapests, trochees, or dactyls—will erupt like some kind of stubborn rash, just at the moments when the imagery and language are gathering their most focused emotional momentum. Meanwhile, the bulk of the poem is besieged by alienation and abstraction, as if the poem's soul were tangled and distracted among the unrealized rhythmic desires of its body. And, with so much of the creative energy of the poem taken up by this struggle, it seems evident that the mind of the poem has, at least to some extent, become isolated from real subject matter, and the heart of the poem goes lonely, unable to explore its true home in the world.

Of course, as I indicated earlier, not all student poets manifest such a powerful pull towards meter. Metrical patterns in contemporary student free verse do not *always* correlate with more vivid, focused, and expressive writing. But it's remarkable how often they do—and, when you think about it, that makes sense. Students who persist in writing meter in spite of (typically) a total lack of education in the skill must have a powerful desire to do so, and presumably get real pleasure from the recurring rhythms of poetic language (pleasure that can often be detected in the meaning of the metrical words themselves.*) I know, because as a young poet I also suffered from Metrical Incipience; my first book *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* is, no doubt, a full-length case study in the disease.

Just as a clear case of Metrical Incipience will manifest itself in virtually everything the poet writes, the cure is simple as well. Raise consciousness. Increase awareness. Broaden. Educate. As reward, there is the joyful triumph on the faces of students who recognize the meter they have written, and their curiosity. For inevitably, when the young writers of these poems realize what is going on rhythmically in their own poems, they want to try developing one or more of the incipient meters, if for no other reason than to see how that might look.

And why shouldn't they? Through training and awareness, they will come to understand their own physical poetic desires in a more conscious way. They may discover joy and challenge in metrical writing. If and when they write in free verse, they will be better off as well. They will have the skill to avoid meter, so that their free verse can actually be free, as most contemporary free verse is not.

Metrical incipience is in itself just one part of a much larger movement in contemporary poetry. Increasingly in recent years, young poets are excited to learn about poetic form. This is evident from talking with aware young poets of all schools, from slam to experimental to anecdotal free verse. Even when the poets themselves haven't been taught enough about meter yet to consider wanting to learn more, their poems, through metrical incipience, can make the same eagerness clear.

The eagerness to engage more consciously with poetry's rhythms has found support in recent aesthetic and theoretical movements. Multicultural perspectives have widened the repertoires of form and freed formalism from the narrow Eurocentric filters that had numbed its connection to reality for so many decades. In the wake of Language poetry with its insistence on language as a substance, an opaque reality that is not just about representation, there is now a new appreciation of poetic language as a sculptable material. Finally, postmodern consciousness-raising about the socially and

historically determined nature of art and the conditioned reality of the self have also created an environment ripe for increased attention to form, with less fear of contamination by the “unnatural” than before.

But what shape will this formal impulse take? What will post-modernist metrical work look like? After decades of free verse have loosened the hegemony of iambic pentameter, will those young poets who are now interested in getting into a rhythmical groove find themselves equipped to explore a wide vocabulary of ways to do so? Or, in the absence of deep education in the rich possible variety of meters, is it possible they could fall back on the only meter that is readily and widely available as a model?

By far the most common form of Metrical Incipience in the general poet population, across the whole aesthetic spectrum, is Iambic Pentameteritis. This is true not only for the new formalists (one of whom, Timothy Murphy, actually has referred in an online forum to the need to “bow down” before “master iambic pentameter”) but for the mainstream poets and even the post-avant, young, edgy poets such as Karen Volkman and Dan Beachy-Quick, who write almost entirely in unadulterated iambic pentameter.

Poetry workshops are rife with Iambic Pentameteritis, but any literary magazine is also likely to reveal many examples (or any contest, as I can confirm, having just finished judging a large one). Not to mention award-winning books. Here is a passage from a poem by a runner up for the National Book Critics Circle Award, a young poet named Mary Szybist. You will see that most of the end of the poem scans as iambic pentameter:

“Heaven in Miniature” by Mary Szybist

for Tina Wang (1984-2001)

After the crash, I tried imagining:
 After they lift you out of the car—(I begin)
 you wake beneath a cypress-flooded sky,
 etcetera. Or, in a field, sunlit
 immense, where a white-haired, white-robed shepherd
 calls out to you, unbuckles your sandaled feet.
 Etcetera, etcetera, I try.

After the oarsmen lift Odysseus
 out of the hollow hull, after they set
 him down asleep on the sand and leave him there,
 he wakes beneath an olive tree spreading
 its leaves in a mist. It's not what he was promised.
 The land looks strange, unearthly strange
 and unforgivable. He's sick for home
 and doesn't recognize the way the thick
 low mist sticks to the sea-raged, ragged shore.
 Hardly recognizes the treasure that sits
 around him like spilled confetti. He begins,
 therefore, to count. It's all he can think to do:
 to count up what is there; to stack gold coin
 on coin. Everything he remembers is there,
 but then, he can't remember. So he counts;

he counts and does not see the shepherd boy
 approaching, disguised Athena—his Athena,
 ready to give him a new body; doesn't
 see he's about to recognize the skyline,
 about to find all who are dear to him
 unharmed. He's weeping, kneeling on the shore
 of his own country, trying to figure
 what's lost. Along the sand he lays out each
 bright piece of woven clothing, polished bronze,
 each surpassingly beautiful ornament
 and counts and counts and finds that he lacks nothing.

It is no coincidence that the counting that Odysseus finds so reassuring and redemptive, starting with the passage when he “begins /, therefore, to count,” is described almost entirely in lines of iambic pentameter. This self-conscious metrical “counting” adds a whole level of metrical meaning to the images of the new body, the oddly familiar skyline, and Odysseus’ realization that “he lacks nothing.” The free-verse versus meter subtext certainly adds to the evocativeness and texture of Szybist’s poem, as it does to the many other contemporary poems that reach towards iambic pentameter as if in search of some kind of triumph, acceptance, or other form of closure.

But when I read a poem that seems to derive so much of its underlying intensity—its vital “plot”— from a conflicted relationship with iambic pentameter, I wish that those apparent conflicts over choosing a metrical framework could be worked through, allowing the poem’s deeper levels more flexibility to address other themes. When reading a poem that derives much of its rhythmic drive from an ambivalent relationship with iambic pentameter, I can’t help wondering what deeper depths and subjects the poet could explore, what wider human concerns she could address, if ambivalence and confusion about meter itself, and the resultant excitement when a poem that starts out in free verse finally makes peace with meter, were simply not an issue.

Even more to the point, I can’t help but wish young poets with good ears for meter like Szybist had not been left by their teachers to pick up metrical crumbs dropped from the tables of the aesthetically conservative formalist poets dominant in the 1950’s, but had instead been educated in a more encompassing idea of rhythm, a more varied palette of meters, than the same iambic pentameter that Ezra Pound spent so much energy trying to break.

As Timothy Steele points out in *Missing Measures*, the original Modernist idea was not to throw all meter out permanently, but to move towards new metrical possibilities. Our current choice between writing free verse or returning to the hegemonic meter of Milton was clearly *not* what the Modernists had in mind. I believe the loss of awareness of metrical diversity, even in the most purportedly adventurous poets, to be the biggest tragedy of the free verse “revolution.”

The early Modernists worked extremely hard to “break” the pentameter, in Pound’s term, in order to enlarge serious poetry’s rhythmic vocabulary beyond the hegemony of the iambic meter. They accomplished this at significant poetic pain and cost to the generation after them. (I, a poet who needs meter to write and live, have long suspected that the tragic epidemic of suicidal poets in the 1950s bears a direct correlation with the sudden and complete loss of meter as a viable option for that generation). It would represent not

only a tragic aesthetic loss to us but a dishonoring of our poetic predecessors if a century of free verse, and neglect of metrical education, were now to throw our young poets back unwittingly again into the gigantic monopolizing hands of iambic pentameter.

It is not that anything is wrong with iambic pentameter as one of a palette of meters a poet can work in; it can be a truly wonderful meter to write and to read. But just as painting would be duller if only one pigment were acknowledged, just as music would be duller if composers only wrote in one time signature or for one instrument, metrical poetry is the duller for being restricted, to all intents and purposes, to iambic meter only.

And doesn't much of the distaste for meter among young poets arise from this very situation? Rather than seeing metrical poetry as an astounding rich aesthetic environment of almost infinite variations on rhythm and form, many of the better-educated young poets still regard metrical verse as some kind of fascistic iambic regime. When even a formally daring young poet like Volkman writes in iambic pentameter as regular as Timothy Steele's, you can't blame them for feeling that way.

But I do find hope for poetry's rhythmic future in the meter-hungry ears of poets like Szybist and Volkman, and even more, in the gropings toward other kinds of meter besides iambic in Jenna Cardinale and the occasional exultant anapestic riffs of Lisa Jarnot, I found hope at a reading in chapel in New Orleans during a recent AWP, when John Lowther taught the audience a success of phrases in cretic meter (give it back, wag the tail, sing the song, open now) and asked the enthusiastic audience to chant them back to him. I find hope in Rachel Loden's skillful dactyls, in the metrical imaginativeness of Joshua Mehigan's sonnet using Sapphic lines, and in many more kinds of metrical diversity that are slowly but surely finding their way back into poetry. I need this hope for my future pleasure in contemporary poetry, because I am blessed and cursed with one of those hypertrophied ears that, though it prefers good free verse to stale meter, also needs to feed regularly on living meter— or else it will devour the perceptions of its own brain. In these signs, I also find hope for a cure for the disease of Metrical Incipience, because when meter is revealed to be so rich and complex and fascinating a subject, why wouldn't people once again consider it something worth teaching to young poets, and learning as young poets? And I find hope for the future of the human imagination, because I know that each rhythmic pattern brings a whole new attitude, a whole new way of existing among the field of rhythmic energies that makes up our beautiful planet.

* This and related ideas about "the metrical code" are explored at length in my book *The Ghost of Meter*.)

—Based on a paper presented originally at the ALA (American Literary Association) conference on meter, San Diego, CA, 2005, and in an expanded form at the AWP (Associated Writing Programs) Annual Conference, Austin, TX, 2006.