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The Metrical Compass

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Just as music has other time signatures besides 4/4 time, and painting has other ranges of color besides greens and yellows, poetry has other meters besides iambic. Yet for hundreds of years, almost all serious poetry in English meter has been written in iambs. One of the most exciting aspects of being a poet today is our access to a fascinating and almost unexplored landscape of metrical possibilities: the “non-iambic” meters. In teaching a variety of meters to my students, I have found that certain poets come alive in trochees, dactyls, or anapests, writing poems that they could never have written in iambic meter. I now teach all four meters to my students simultaneously, and I find that learning to write in one meter automatically sharpens skill in each of the others.

Popular poems, from Poe to Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein, have been the primary home of noniambic meters for over a century. Critics might not think this a very dignified poetic home; (John Crowe Ransom, for example, asserted in the mid-twentieth century that no-one could be a major poet without writing most of their work in blank iambic verse). But in fact, trochees, anapests and dactyls could have done a lot worse. Popular or “low” poetry, not to mention children’s poetry such as Dr. Seuss, kept these rhythms vital and energetic in the bodies of a large number of readers at a time when the audience for serious or “high” poetry was shrinking. It is no accident that popular poems, even now, tend to be read aloud more, keeping alive the pleasure of poetry in the ear (I trace my own delight in noniambic meters in part to my father’s annual reading of “The Night Before Christmas,” with cadences inherited from his own father’s reading of the poem (“his droll little mouth was drawn UP like a bow...”).

In spite of the lively and seemingly irrepressible tradition of noniambic meters in popular poetry, the belief that iambic meter is more “natural” to English than any other meter is very common. Poets sometimes quote phrases like, “I’ll have a shake, a burger and some fries” (Robert Hass) or “a glass of California chardonnay” (Marilyn Hacker) to prove that iambs are inherent in our language in a way that other meters aren’t. And indeed, iambic meter can sometimes feel inevitable if only because of its pervasiveness. But I have learned from conversation with linguists that, since English has a stress every second or third syllable no matter what the syntax is doing, anapests, trochees, and dactyls are just as likely to arise in English as iambs. This thought was confirmed for me years ago, when I was returning from a conference where I had heard a talk asserting the naturalness and centrality of iambic meter. Just as I was thinking that other meters could be natural as well, we hit some choppy skies and my idea was brought to life by some flawless anapests that may be familiar to you as well: “Please return to your seats and make sure that your seatbelts are fastened securely.”

And it's not just rising meters. We also talk in trochees: “Pass the salt and pepper, sweetie.” “Did you see what she was wearing?” “Have I got a story for you!” And in dactyls: “After you buy it, you need to assemble it.” “Do you have time? Take a look at your calendar!” “When did she tell you that I couldn’t be there?” Any regular rhythmic pattern that involves a stress every two or three syllables will turn up routinely in the everyday modulations of English. While writing this chapter, I stepped out to the post office. I was waiting in line looking at the placards on the walls when I found myself idly reading not only a phrase in iambic pentameter (with one anapest, which by now you should be able to find)—“Wherever you see this symbol, you’ll find stamps”—but also a trochaic pentameter followed by a dactylic tetrameter: “Are you shipping something liquid, fragile, perishable or potentially dangerous?”

I was once taught by a poet who had little experience with scansion but felt confident in

solemnly assuring her students that “English falls naturally into iambs” (a sentence which scans as perfect dactyls). Still, I'm convinced by now that the real reason so many poets find iambic the inevitable meter is not ignorance or stubbornness, but simply the force of collective habit. After reading and being taught to venerate so many thousands of cherished iambic lines from so many centuries, and rarely hearing any other meters, naturally our ears have become attuned to recognize and imitate iambic meter. And that is exactly why non-iambic meters have such fresh, exciting expressive riches to offer, not only as patterns used for substitution in iambic meter, but as rhythmic patterns of their own. And just as iambic pentameter can be made to sound numerous different ways through metrical substitutions, changes in syllable length, the interaction of consonant and vowel, and variations in phrasing, any meter can be made to convey virtually any mood.

I now teach all four meters to my students at the same time, This essay will introduce, from the point of view of teaching, the four points of what I call “the metrical compass.”

TROCHAIC METER (/ u)

Double, bubble, toil and trouble,
 Fire, burn, and cauldron bubble. . .
 Eye of newt and toe of frog,
 Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
 Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
 Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
 For a charm of powerful trouble,
 Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

It is no coincidence that Shakespeare chose trochaic meter to help the witches brew up their “charm of powerful trouble” in Act 4 of *MacBeth*. For almost as long as iambic meter has been the meter of logic, reason, power, and civilization, trochaic meter has tended to be associated with the uncanny and subversive. The most well-known lyric poem in trochees evokes a powerful creature of the wilderness in such a way as to make it seem to call into question all the ideas about God that were prevalent in Blake's time:

"Tyger ! Tyger !" William Blake (1794)

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night
 What immortal hand or eye
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
 On what wings dare he aspire?
 What the hand dare sieze thy fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
 And when thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? what dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors grasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
 And water'd heaven with their tears,
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Though several of these lines are iambic, the overwhelming power of the trochaic meter is what lends this poem its compelling vitality and its rare memorability. The trochee's power is not limited to lyric poetry: one of the most popular narrative poems, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," is trochaic. Like the witches' song and "The Tyger," "The Raven" also invokes spooky subject matter. The longstanding association of trochees with the uncanny is the reason that witches' spells in popular culture—in movies or on television shows such as "Buffy and the Vampire Slayer"—are usually written in trochees.

But there's no need to restrict trochees to spooky subjects. The mysterious power of this meter can be used for many different moods. When Longfellow chose trochaic meter for *Hiawatha*, his inspiration was not Shakespeare's witches but a completely different source: the meter of ancient Finnish oral poetry, the completely captivating, push-pull rhythm I describe in the introduction to this book. This unique trochaic rhythm, with pulsating stronger and weaker stresses in alternating feet, seems to have developed to accompany the pull of oars through the water in the rivers and fjords of northern Finland, where perhaps the ancient stories collected in the *Kalevala* were recounted for hours on end to entertain the rowers. Even in its English version, the meter can convey the lulling motion of oars. Try reading this excerpt aloud:

From "The Song of Hiawatha," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1860)

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
 By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
 Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
 Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
 Dark behind it rose the forest,
 Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
 Rose the firs with cones upon them;
 Bright before it beat the water.
 Beat the clear and sunny water,
 Beat the shining Big-Set-Water.
 There the wrinkled old Nokomis
 Nursed the little Hiawatha.
 Rocked him in his linden cradle,
 Bedded soft in moss and rushes,
 Safely bound with reindeer sinews;
 Stilled his fretful wail by saying,
 "Hush, the Naked Bear will hear thee!"
 Lulled him into slumber, singing,
 "Ewa-yea! my little owlet!
 Who is this, that lights the wigwam?
 With his great eyes lights the wigwam?
 Ewa-yea! my little owlet!"

As you were reading this passage, did you find yourself unnaturally stressing certain syllables at the beginnings of lines, such as "and" at the beginning of line 8, or "in" at the beginning of line 10?

Readers commonly read noniambic meters in this unnatural way, simply because we are not as used to their variations as we are to the variations in iambic meter. But to do a good passage of noniambic poetry justice, we should read it with the same respect for its variations from the base meter as we read iambic meter. An educated reader of metrical poetry would not pronounce Shakespeare's line: "to BE, or NOT to BE, that IS the QUESTion." Nor should you pronounce Longfellow's line, "AND aROUND him THE sugGEMma." Instead, read the lines with natural word-emphasis, simply pausing for a split second at the end of each line, but otherwise reading them as if each line were prose. The meter will take care of itself; just listen, and appreciate the way Longfellow creates beauty and interest by varying from the basic trochaic meter, just as Shakespeare varies from the basic iambic meter.

Of course, sometimes a poet wants to create a pounding, intense trochaic rhythm, as Sara Josepha Hale does in the middle of this passage:

From "Iron," Sarah Josepha Hale (1823)

. . . Then a voice, from out the mountains,
 As an earthquake shook the ground,
 And like frightened fawns the fountains,
 Leaping, fled before the sound;
 And the Anak oaks bowed lowly,
 Quivering, aspen-like, with fear-
 While the deep response came slowly,
 Or it must have crushed mine ear!
 "Iron! Iron! Iron!" crashing,
 Like the battle-axe and shield;
 Or the sword on helmet clashing,
 Through a bloody battle-field:
 "Iron! Iron! Iron!" rolling,
 Like the far-off cannon's boom;
 Or the death-knell, slowly tolling,
 Through a dungeon's charnel gloom!
 "Iron! Iron! Iron!" swinging,
 Like the summer winds at play;
 Or as bells of Time were ringing
 In the blest Millennial Day!

Hale, who was not only the author of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" but also the person who spearheaded the movement to make Thanksgiving a national holiday, understood the value of public language and rhetoric. She starts this passage by building the trochaic rhythm slowly, interspersing clearly trochaic feet like "earthquake" and "frightened" after pyrrhics ("and the") or even iambs (and like"). Because of this subtle build-up, when the poem reaches its climax with the word "Iron," the release of pent-up energy is dramatic and energetic, a similar movement to that in Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," which will be discussed in the chapter on the sonnet.

A skilled writer of noniambic meter, like a skilled writer of iambic meter, will develop a sense of the "metrical contract" with the reader and be sure not to push the variations too far. One fascinating example of how this works in trochaic meter is William Blake's revision of the beginning of stanza 2 of "The Tyger." An earlier version of the stanza began,

Burnt in distant deeps or skies
 The cruel fire of thine eyes?

But Blake revised it to read,

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

The new version saves the powerful word “Burnt” for later in the sentence, giving the reader a chance to prepare for it and appreciate it. It also moves the trochaic phrase “burnt the” to a place where the grammar strengthens the emphasis on “burnt” even further, reconfirming the trochaic meter. In the first version, the second line starts with a strong iamb, continuing the iambs that began the last lines of the first stanza. In the new version, both lines start with trochees, the second with an extremely strong one. This reconfirmed trochaic meter resounds through the entire poem, making the sound of the meter indisputable at just the point where it might have been about to weaken.

These lines are a good reminder that the trochaic line is not simply the opposite of an iambic line. You will remember that it is common for a trochee to appear as the first foot of an iambic line; but an iamb in the first foot of a trochaic line is a bit harder to recover from and also reestablish the trochaic rhythm. When writing trochees, it’s a good idea to keep a trochee in the first foot whenever possible.

You may have noticed that many of the lines in these trochaic poems— including all the lines of “The Tyger”—seem to be missing the final unstressed syllable. This “footless” line, the inverse of the “headless” iambic line, is an extremely common variation in trochaic poems. The way to scan such a line is, as with the headless iambic line, to mark the missing unstressed syllables in parentheses:

/ u | / u | / u | / (u)
Tyger, Tyger, burning bright

In “The Tyger,” the missing final unstressed syllables are a key part of the beating rhythm which helps create this poem's physical and emotional impact. The meter is emphasized, rather than justified, by the imagery of the forge, anvil and hammer that builds gradually through the poem and is fully expressed in the fourth stanza.

In addition to varying the meter with dactyls and footless lines, when writing trochees, keep the following two guidelines in mind to help you modulate the meter in subtle ways:

1. Vary the placement of the caesura
2. Not all stresses are equal; contrast light and strong stresses within your lines.

The word “trochee” (/u) comes from the Greek word for “running,” and sometimes trochees, especially when they use the final unstressed syllables consistently, can have a very light, playful quality, as in this peddler's call from Shakespeare’s *A Winter's Tale*:

Gloves as sweet as damask roses;
Masks for faces and for noses;
Bugle bracelet, necklace amber,
Perfume for a lady's chamber . . .

Or even funnier, as in Carolyn Kizer’s parody of *Hiawatha* in Chapter 2.

So it is important to remember that trochees do not always have to be intense or heavy. Like any meter, they can really be used for any mood or subject. Still, awareness of the history and connotations of trochees as a clear alternative to the dominant meter of iambs can help you use them well. It is especially interesting to note that, as mentioned in the sonnet chapter, trochees have developed a tradition among African American poets in the twentieth century, including two important, ambitious, and self-consciously African American poems, Gwendolyn Brooks' epic “The Anniad” and Countee Cullen's lyric “Heritage.” Here is a passage from the opening of “The Anniad” :

From “The Anniad,” Gwendolyn Brooks (19--)

Think of sweet and chocolate,

Left to folly or to fate,
 Whom the higher gods forgot,
 Whom the lower gods berate;
 Physical and underfed
 Fancying on the featherbed
 What was never and is not. . .

As we have seen, trochees have something of a reputation for incantatory simplicity: “double, double toil and trouble,” “by the shores of Gitchee Gumee,” “Tyger, tyger burning bright.” But Brooks infuses great complexity into the meter through variety of diction, from the formal (“berate”) to the idiomatic (“fancying”), and also through a large number of metrical variations. These include the “footless” line (missing a final unstressed syllable, which is true of every line in this brief excerpt) and the substitution of a dactyl for a trochee, either at the end of a line (SWEET and CHOColate,) or in the middle FANCYing ON the). She even substitutes an iamb, “and is” in the last line (WHAT was NEVer and IS NOT), respecting the subtle aural convention that, just like substituting a trochee in an iambic line, this usually happens after a caesura or pause in the grammar, in this case the grammatical pause after “never.” Read the last line aloud. The momentum of the line might tempt you to read the line in an unnaturally accented way and pronounce “and is” as a trochee: “WHAT was NEVer AND is NOT,” but I would urge you to resist this temptation. “And is” is most definitely an iamb, since “is” is a much more important monosyllable than “and” and would get more stress in any context. The correct way to read this line aloud, as with any line of metrical poetry, is to find a balance between the expected stress and the actual stress, so that you simultaneously remind your hearers of the underlying pattern and let them enjoy the pleasure of the variation from it. I would probably read the line with a half-stress on “is,” less of a stress than on “not” but still more perceptible than on “and.”

While Brooks’ trochees are characterized by an arch, near-ironic quality, conveying her skeptical embrace of the epic tradition, Cullen’s manifesto “Heritage” uses the same meter in a more incantatory way, sometimes with lush, innocent sensuality, and sometimes with angry conviction:

All day long and all night through,
 One thing only I must do:
 Quench my pride and cool my blood,
 Lest I perish in the flood,
 Lest a hidden ember set
 Timber that I thought was wet
 Burning like the driest flax,
 Melting like the merest wax . . .

At a time when even iambic meter is mysterious to most poets, noniambic meters have been truly flying under the conscious radar of poetics. For example, I have not seen recent discussion of the common variations in noniambic meter outside of my own writings. Nor have I ever seen any mention in writing of such issues as the importance of trochaic meter in twentieth century African American poetry. Yet for poets whose internal ears are fully attuned to meter, a meter such as trochees speaks a distinct language available to anyone who cares to notice it. Like Poe’s purloined letter, meter is a secret left out in plain sight:

“Lullaby,” W. H. Auden (1940)

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
 Human on my faithless arm;

Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find our mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.

We may be moved by this poem simply as a love poem. If we know that Auden was gay, the description of the suffering at the end, from which the speaker wants to protect his lover, takes on a much deeper meaning. And if we know that “Lullaby” is written in trochaic meter and have some awareness of the subversive and revolutionary meanings that have been carried by that metrical tradition, the rhythmic body of the poem can speak to us as eloquently as do its history, its words, and its images.

ANAPESTIC METER (u u /)

Cirilo F. Bautista, “Questions and Answers” (translated by José Edmundo Ocampo)

Reyes)

Don't you know that a mountain is nothing but smoke?
 Don't you know that a thought is nothing but foam?
 Don't you know that sackfuls of rice will go bad
 when they're hidden deep down in the breast of a poem?

Make a dragon swoop down from a mountain of smoke
 that your thoughts made of foam may be put to the test;
 make a throne out of rice that's been kept in a nook
 that a God may be wrought from the poem in your breast.

This poem, originally written in Tagalog by a Filipino poet, has been translated into anapests to approximate the rhythm of the original. An exhortation for the openness of imagination and of courage, it shows that, like trochees, anapests can have chantlike power. But the effect is more expansive than that of a trochaic chant—more of a sweeping rhythm, like the beating of wings, than like a heartbeat.

The origin of the word anapestic is a Greek word meaning “to strike up,” an easy way to remember this pattern which rises at the end of the foot (u u /). When reading or writing anapestic meter, it may be useful to remember that the variations for anapestic meter are similar to those for iambic meter (since both are rising meters).

Sara Teasdale, “I Would Live in Your Love” (1911)

I would live in your love as the sea-grasses live in the sea,
 Borne up by each wave as it passes, drawn down by each wave that recedes;
 I would empty my soul of the dreams that have gathered in me,
 I would beat with your heart as it beats, I would follow your soul as it leads.

In this poem, the variations include headless lines, which leave off the initial syllable of the line (the CHANGEable WORLD, rushed MADly ahead) or even both initial syllables. A spondee can even substitute for an initial anapest (BORNE UP). Occasionally there are extra syllables at the ends of lines, as with the extra-syllable ending in iambic meter.

Like every meter, and every person, anapests have a great range of potential moods. And yet, like every meter, and every person, they have a distinctive flavor all their own as well. There is something deeply familiar about anapests, a quality that can feel gentle and familiar, reassuring and even lulling. This is, after all, the meter of *The Cat in the Hat* and “The Night Before Christmas” and of some well-known favorites by “the Fireside poets,” a group of five New England poets in the nineteenth century (Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Bryant) whose poetry was considered especially good for reading aloud around a fire. Anapestic meter lends itself to reading aloud at length, particularly to narrative poetry. It engages the forward-stepping pace of the other rising meter, iambic, while also allowing extra space for details. The three syllables in each foot provide the potential for extra relaxation or the opposite, pounding momentum. Read these passages, including passages by three of the Fireside poets ALOUD, either physically or inside your mind, since that is how all metrical poetry is intended to be read, and notice how it feels. Note that in order not to lose pace with the meter, you will have to pause in places like after “and” in the third line from the end of the first stanza, and after “on” in the second line from the end.

From Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1860)

. . . Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
 By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
 To the belfry chamber overhead,

And startled the pigeons from their perch
On the sombre rafters, that round him made
Masses and moving shapes of shade,—
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,
Where he paused to listen and look down
A moment on the roofs of the town
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
In their night encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,
And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread
Of the lonely belfry and the dead . . .

A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night.

The last passage quoted, the climax of the poem, demonstrates total command of pacing. Longfellow uses repeated caesurae to break up the lines and create a momentum that is forced to gather the tension to override the pauses. When the first real pause happens, with the exclamation point, the person reading aloud experiences a tangible combination of relief and exhilaration. In the ensuing pause, like a hush, the next line and a half build a sense of extreme seriousness, sobered further by a counterpointing dactylic rhythm: "fate of a nation was."

Anapestic meter is still be used for serious contemporary subjects, as shown by this excerpt from a recent narrative poem:

Alfred Nicol, From "Mother's Side"

But again follows close behind once for some men.
The hope that his sisters invested in him—
like the little warm flame of a whiskey—grew dim,

but was never snuffed out like the promise he made
which he broke every day for as long as he stayed. . .

With all its potential for narrative and dramatic action, the anapestic meter can be extremely conversational and natural, especially if there are strong caesurae in some of the lines. This stanza occurs near the end of a passionate poem about religious tolerance; it is a moment of lull in the poem's energy. Read the stanza aloud and notice how many natural opportunities the "light measure" of anapests provides for your voice to choose to pause, expressing your individual interpretation while fully respecting the meter.

from John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Quaker Alumni" (1860)

Forgive me, dear friends, if my vagrant thoughts seem
Like a school-boy's who idles and plays with his theme.
Forgive the light measure whose changes display
The sunshine and rain of our brief April day.

To read such a skillfully written metrical passage is almost like performing pre-written music on the instrument of your own voice. The last line, in particular, allows your voice to pause expressively for nearly as long as you like after “rain” and after “brief” while still remaining completely within the meter.

The conversational tone of anapestic poetry can extend to pathos or to humor as well:

From Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Boys”

Yes, we're boys, --always playing with tongue or with pen,--
And I sometimes have asked,-- Shall we ever be men?
Shall we always be youthful, and laughing, and gay,
Till the last dear companion drops smiling away?

From James Russell Lowell, “A Fable for Critics”

"There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge,
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters,
In a way to make people of common-sense damn metres . . .

In the fourth line quoted, Lowell is taking advantage, for humorous purposes, of one of the great potentials of metrical verse: its ability to goad people to stress syllables they wouldn't ordinarily stress.

Anapests' leisurely pace are wonderful for creating a romantic, sensual tone as well, whether in long lines, as in the poem By Sara Teasdale, or short lines:

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, From “Maud”

She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead,
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red.

Because of the short lines, the iambic substitutions feel even more significant in the poem. But whether this passage is considered iambic with anapestic substitutions, or anapestic with iambic substitutions, the anapests are contributing a delicious sense of pausing, of slowness, of space, of readiness for physical and emotional intensity.

The intensely descriptive potential of anapests is demonstrated by two passages of very different moods :

From "The Destruction of Sennacherib," Lord Byron (1815)

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

The repetition of the “un” prefix makes the meter feel completely necessary, and the anapestic pace is solemn, as if a camera were panning slowly over the smallest details of the battlefield. The details have a more chaotic, ruffled feeling in this excerpt describing a follower of the wine-god Bacchus:

Algernon Charles Swinburne, from “Chorus from 'Atalanta in Calydon' (18--)

The ivy falls with the Bacchanal's hair
Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;
The wild vine slipping down leaves bare
Her bright breast shortening into sighs;
The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,
But the berried ivy catches and cleaves
To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare
The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies.

In addition to the iambic substitutions, the variations include a trochee in the second line and spondees in the fourth and fifth lines. Swinburne manipulates the combination of iambs and anapests to vary the pace and create sensual suspense, at the same time that the imagery and word-music weave their own texture.

But for all of the anapest’s dreamy and lulling potential, there is no meter more suited to the excitement of a gallop. That is one reason for the popular success of “Paul Revere’s Ride,” above. Here is a passage from perhaps the most galloping of all riding poems, followed by a parody of it:

From Robert Browning, “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” (1845)

I SPRANG to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I gallop’d, Dirck gallop’d, we gallop’d all three;
“Good speed !” cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
“Speed!” echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we gallop’d abreast.
Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;
I turn’d in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shorten’d each stirrup, and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chain’d slacker the bit . . .

R. J. Yeatman and W.C. Sellar, “How I brought the good news from Aix to Ghent (or Vice Versa)” (1895)

I sprang to the rollocks and Jorrocks and me,
And I galloped, you galloped, he galloped, we galloped all three . . .
Not a word to each other; we kept changing place,
Neck to neck, back to front, ear to ear, face to face;

And we yelled once or twice, as we heard a clock chime,
Would you kindly oblige us, *Is that the right time?*

Perhaps because of the energy that rising meter gives to the end of a line, the rising meters— iambs and anapests—lend themselves more easily than trochees or dactyls to the alternation of 3 and 4 foot lines, called ballad or folk meter (which is in turn, very uncommon in dactyls or trochees):

From "The Hunting of the Snark" Lewis Carroll (1876)

And the Banker, inspired with courage so new
It was matter for general remark,
Rushed madly ahead and was lost to their view
In his zeal to discover the snark.

But while he was seeking with thimbles and care,
A Bandersnatch swiftly drew nigh
And grabbed at the Banker, who shrieked in despair,
For he knew it was useless to fly.

Iambs can slow the tempo of anapestic lines, just as anapests speed up the tempo of an iambic line. The alternation of line-length also adds texture to a poem. "The Hunting of the Snark" alternates lines that end in anapests with lines that end in iambs. Since the poem adheres to the syllable count so exactly (there are no other iambs in the poem), those single syllables make a difference: the lines with iambic endings feel considerably shorter, even though the whole poem is in anapestic tetrameter. The most famous poem in anapestic ballad stanza, indeed one of the most famous poems in English, also uses occasional iambs in an anapestic base:

Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee" (1849)

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

Here Poe takes full advantage of the light, dreamy potential of anapestic meter, evoking its kinship to the old oral ballads with the "once upon a time" opening, but adding another two lines to the stanzas, perhaps to make us realize we are in the grip of unreality.

For many of the poets quoted in this section, anapestic meter was mostly used as a diversion from other meters. Here is a passage of political outrage, from the poet who used anapestic meter most consistently, and therefore had the most opportunity to learn to vary it:

From Algernon Charles Swinburne, "A Song in Time of Revolution" (1860)

The wind has the sound of a laugh in the clamour of days and of deeds:
The priests are scattered like chaff, and the rulers broken like reeds.

The high-priest sick from qualms, with his raiment bloodily dashed;
The thief with branded palms, and the liar with cheeks abashed.

They are smitten, they tremble greatly, they are pained for their pleasant things:
For the house of the priests made stately, and the might in the mouth of the kings.

They are grieved and greatly afraid; they are taken, they shall not flee:
For the heart of the nations is made as the strength of the springs of the sea. . .

For the breaking of gold in their hair they halt as a man made lame:
They are utterly naked and bare; their mouths are bitter with shame.

Wilt thou judge thy people now, O king that wast found most wise?
Wilt thou lie any more, O thou whose mouth is emptied of lies?

Swinburne uses a number of different devices to change the mood of the meter at various points in the poem. There is the unexpected skipped syllable in the line, "For the breaking of gold in their hair they halt as a man made lame." There is the alliteration and assonance in the line, "They are grieved and greatly afraid; they are taken, they shall not flee." In the last couplet, there is the staggering of two parallel phrases so they occur at different places in the line.

In "A Song in Time of Revolution," almost all the feet are anapests or iambs. But other triple feet are an excellent way to add texture, variety, and expressiveness to anapestic rhythm. Such modulations are very skillfully done in these varied lines from "The Night Before Christmas":

As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle mount to the sky..

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the luster of midday to objects below

"as DRY LEAVES" and the WILD HUR" are bacchics. "with an ob" is called a tribrach, the three-syllable equivalent to a pyrrhic. "FALLen-SNOW" and "GAVE the LUST" are cretics. These kinds of variations can be as subtly as the common variations in iambic meter. If you read the passage aloud, or aloud to yourself, slowly, you will have a chance to notice how well they work by feeling the difference in your mouth between these syllables and the regular anapestic rhythm.

This poem uses an even more irregular combination of iambs and anapests:

From Thomas Hardy, "Under The Waterfall" (1914)

. . . And when we had drunk from the glass together,
Arched by the oak-copse from the weather,
I held the vessel to rinse in the fall,
Where it slipped, and it sank, and was past recall,
Though we stooped and plumbed the little abyss
With long bared arms. There the glass still is.
And, as said, if I thrust my arm below
Cold water in a basin or bowl, a throe
From the past awakens a sense of that time,
And the glass we used, and the cascade's rhyme.
The basin seems the pool, and its edge
The hard smooth face of the brook-side ledge,
And the leafy pattern of china-ware
The hanging plants that were bathing there. . .

The spondee of "bared arms" and the first paean of "er in a bas" are skillfully expressive variations, both seeming to convey the feeling of cold water on a bare arm. But perhaps the most surprising variation here is the three iambs in a row: "The basin seems the pool." If you are reading quickly, it's easy to think that the second foot is an anapest, "seems the pool." This reading swallows up the

word “seems” entirely, just as the reality of the basin is swallowed up by the overpowering memory of the two lovers’ meeting by the pool. But because the poem is tetrameter and that would give the line only three feet, we know that the line really scans as three iambs followed by an anapest. So we need to go back and read the word “seems” excruciatingly slowly to balance “in seems” with the other feet in the poem, enacting in a different way the power of the approaching memory.

An anapestic rhythm infuses this more recent poem in free verse:

James Dickey, From “The Lifeguard”

In a stable of boats I lie still,
 From all sleeping children hidden.
 The leap of a fish from its shadow
 Makes the whole lake instantly tremble.
 With my foot on the water, I feel
 The moon outside . . .

I wash the black mud from my hands.
 On a light given off by the grave
 I kneel in the quick of the moon
 At the heart of a distant forest
 And hold in my arms a child
 Of water, water, water.

The particular dreamy earnestness of this tone is convincing and hard to imagine without anapestic meter. This free verse, so regular as to feel almost perfectly anapestic in many passages, gives an indication of the wonderful potential of anapests for a contemporary poetry.

Anapests, perhaps because they are more similar to iambs than trochees or dactyls, have been used somewhat more often in English language poetry. Because of this, poets have had a little more time to develop a range of anapestic moods and voices than with the other noniambic meters. But still, it was only the late nineteenth century that extra syllables were fully accepted into poetry in English. And it was only a few decades later that metrical poetry began to be largely displaced by free verse. So if anyone tells you that iambic pentameter is subtler or easier to vary than other meters, just remember that poets have had about 400 years more practice learning how to vary it than the others. Now that we have all meters available to us, to experiment with anapests and find your own vocabulary for the versatile anapestic meter will add greatly to your options as a poet.

DACTYLIC METER (/ u u)

The word dactyl derives from the Greek word for “finger,” and a finger provides an easy way to remember this foot whose pattern in the classical system of prosody was a long syllable followed by two short syllables: hold up your index finger and start counting the phalanges from the bottom up. Though your bottom phalange may not really be longer than the top two, you will probably get the analogy. Dactylic meter is my own favorite noniambic meter, the meter that first inspired my interest in noniambic meters when, immersing myself in iambic pentameter passages for my PhD dissertation, I began to find passages of this magnificently sensuous meter lurking in iambic or free verse poetry. I found the dactylic meter so gorgeous, and the emotions it seemed to unlock so powerful, that I felt compelled to begin to use it in my own poems.

It is actually surprising that so little dactylic poetry has been published in English, given the importance of this meter to the entire Western tradition of poetry. The dactylic hexameter, or line of six dactyls, was the standard epic meter of classical poetry, including Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and, following them, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Another central meter was the elegaic couplet, consisting of a dactylic hexameter followed by a dactylic pentameter, with spondees allowed to be substituted for the dactyls in certain places. This was a standard mnemonic used by British students studying

classical poetry to help them remember the pattern:

Down in a deep, dark dell sat an old cow munching a beanstalk.
Out of its mouth came forth yesterday's dinner and tea.

Or, as Ovid put it more succinctly in his *Amores* (1.1.27): "Sex mihi surgat opus numeris, in quinque residat: "Let my work surge in six feet, subside again in five."

Longfellow chose dactylic hexameter for his epic poem of the United States, *Evangeline*, because of the line's epic history, and the dactylic meter gives a strong, rolling quality to Longfellow's story of the exiled woman searching America for her lover.

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.

This is the forest primeval; but where are the hearts that beneath it
Leaped like the roe, when he hears in the woodland the voice of the huntsman?
Where is the thatch-roofed village, the home of Acadian farmers? . . .

Even the most regular dactylic poetry, of which *Evangeline* is an example, makes frequent use of trochees, often at line-endings but throughout the line as well. The trochees add contrast and texture without disrupting the falling rhythm, just as anapests do in an iambic line without disrupting the rising rhythm. The last line of the passage above plays with the expectation of frequent trochees by using the trochaic word "village" directly before a caesura, as part of a dactylic foot. Though the rhythm of the word "village" parallels the final trochee, "farmers," the syllable "the" after it adds an almost melancholy fall, reestablishing the dactylic pattern.

Dactyls have a magnificent pull to them, a sway; they come in waves. This passage from Plath's "Mushrooms" uses their mystery well. Though each line ends with a trochee, trochaic substitutions are so common in dactylic lines that the passage still feels dactylic to me. Dactyls sound so distinctive that a relatively small but consistent percentage of them can create a dactylic effect:

"Mushrooms," Sylvia Plath (1957)

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water

While the trochee is by far the most common variation in dactylic meter, another fairly common variation is that dactylic lines sometimes begin with a kind of running start, an "extra-syllable beginning" (structurally analogous to the "extra-syllable ending" that occurs in iambic lines, and, like them, marked in parentheses). The extra-syllable beginning occurs in lines 2, 5, 7, and 10 in this poem about Arachne, a weaver who was turned into a spider by Athena because she boasted that her weaving was better than the goddess's:

"Arachne Gives Thanks to Athena," A.E. Stallings

It is no punishment. They are mistaken—
The brothers, the father. My prayers were answered.

I was all fingertips. Nothing was perfect:
 What I have woven, the moths will have eaten;
 At the end of my rope was a noose's knot.

Now it's no longer the thing, but the pattern,
 And that will endure, even though webs be broken.
 I, if not beautiful, am beauty's maker.
 Old age cannot rob me, nor cowardly lovers.
 The moon once pulled blood from me. Now I pull silver.
 Here are the lines I pulled from my own belly—
 Hang them with rainbows, ice, dewdrops, darkness.

The MOON once pulled BLOOD from me. NOW i PULL SILver.

Some dactylic lines, as does line 5 above, actually begin with two extra unstressed syllables. Some might prefer to scan "At the end of my rope was a noose's knot" as an anapestic line, but since that would make it the only anapestic line in a dactylic poem, the principle of prosodic consistency makes it preferable to scan it with two-syllable running start and a final foot missing two unstressed syllables:

(u u) | / u u | / u u | / u | / (u u)
 At the end of my rope was a noose's knot

Other variations in dactylic lines include the antibacchic (//u) (as in the first foot of line 9 in Stallings' poem), cretic (/u/) (as in the first foot of line 8 in Stallings' poem), first paeon (/uuu), and molossus (///) (as in the third foot of the last line of Stallings' poem). As we have seen, a frequent type of "footless" dactylic line, like the footless trochaic line, skips either one or both final unstressed syllables, as in the following passage:

From "Goblin Market," Christina Rossetti (1859)

Apples and quinces,
 Lemons and oranges,
 Plump unpecked cherries,
 Melons and raspberries,
 Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
 Swart-headed mulberries,
 Wild free-born cranberries,
 Crab-apples, dewberries,
 Pine-apples, blackberries,
 Apricots, strawberries;--

There are three footless lines, including those ending with QUINces" and "CHERries." Can you find the third?

The following poem, a paeon to marchers for workers' rights, begins in dactylic hexameter, then switches after two stanzas to dactylic pentameter:

"At Last the Women Are Moving," Genevieve Taggard (1935)

Last, walking with stiff legs as if they carried bundles
 Came mothers, housewives, old women who knew why they abhorred war.
 Their clothes bunched about them, they hobbled with anxious steps
 To keep with the stride of the marchers, erect bearing wide banners.

Such women looked odd, marching on American asphalt.
Kitchens they knew, sinks, suds, stew-pots and pennies...
Dull hurry and worry, clatter, wet hands and backache.
Here they were out in the glare on the militant march.

How did these timid, the slaves of breakfast and supper
Get out in the line, drop for once dish-rag and broom?
Here they are as work-worn as stitchers and fitters.
Mama have you got some grub, now none of their business.

Oh, but those who know in their growing sons and their husbands
How the exhausted body needs sleep, how often needs food,
These, whose business is keeping the body alive,
These are ready, if you talk their language, to strike.

Kitchen is small, the family story is sad.
Out of the musty flats the women come thinking:
Not for me and mine only. For my class I have come
To walk city miles with many, my will in our work.

Like Longfellow, Taggard chose the dactylic hexameter, meter of the great classical epics, to lend heroic dignity to her story. Taggard's dactylic meter is rougher and more awkward than Longfellow's, perhaps in solidarity with the "stiff legs" of the women she writes about. She intersperses many trochees with the dactyls, and she uses running starts ("came," "there," "Oh but,") antibacchics ("clothes bunched a," "stiff legs as," "line drop for"), cretics ("housewives, old," "bearing wide"), one-syllable feet followed by a rest ("Last," "(e)rect," "once," "odd," "sinks," "suds"), and first paeans ("Mama have you," "ready if you"). The dactylic rhythm is powerful, running over these obstacles and rough places, and uniting the poem with great energy. A more measured and metaphysical use of the meter shapes the following poem:

"The Slip," Rachel Hadas

Empty and trembling, haloed by absences,
whooshings, invisible leave-takings, finishes,
images, closure: departures so gracefully
practice their gestures that when they do happen,
dazzled with sunlight, distracted by darkness,
mercifully often we miss the event.
So many hours, days, weeks, years, and decades
spent - no, slathered and lavished and squandered
ardently, avidly gazing at nothing,
pacing the pavement or peering round corners,
setting the table and sniffing the twilight,
sitting and gazing at edges, horizons,
preparing occasions that leave us exhausted,
recovering, staggering back to a climax.
Dramas of use, inanition, repletion!
And there all along, except not there forever,
was the beloved. The foreground? The background?
Thoughtful, impatient, affectionate, angry,
tired, distracted, preoccupied, human,
part of our lives past quotidian limits,
there all the while and yet not there forever.

As with most dactylic poems, the most common substitutions here are trochees. But Hadas uses many different variations to keep this rhythm from being monotonous. She actually substitutes an anapest for a dactyl (when they DO HAPPen); this is a daring move, but she uses performative utterance to get away with it: since the sense demands extreme stress on DO for rhetorical effect anyway, the extreme stress on DO needed to make the reader notice that this really is an anapest in a dactylic context makes total sense. She also uses a spondee (HOURS, DAYS), a bacchus (WEEKS, YEARS and), an antispast (PEERing ROUND), two amphibrachs in a row (prePARing ocCASions) followed by an entire line of amphibrachs (reCOVERing, STAGger ing BACK to a CLIMax). And the metrical climax fully expresses the climax in the poem's meaning; immediately afterwards, the poem regains its balance and the last seven lines are completely regular, reminding us that not only the beloved but also the meter were "there all along."

By contrast, the poem below uses completely regular dactylic trimeter without relying on any metrical substitutions except for trochees and footless lines to keep the reader's interest. Instead, the question and answer format provides a dramatic structure of repetition and variation that builds suspense, and the short lines create a sense of movement:

"The Denouement," R.S. Gwynn

Who were those persons who chased us?
They were the last of the others.

Why must we always be running?
We are the last of our own.

Where is the shelter you spoke of?
Between us. All around us.

Shall we be safe until morning?
There is no doorway to enter.

How shall we live in this desert?
Just as we did in the farmlands.

How was it done in the farmlands?
Just as it shall be here.

What is the word for this place?
No one has ever used it.

When shall I hear the word?
Never, until it is spoken.

Who were my father and mother?
Trust me to keep your secret.

What is the mark on your forehead?
What is the mark on your cheek?

Dactylic meter, as a triple, falling meter, is metrically the furthest a poet can move from the double, rising meter of iambic. Perhaps that explains why dactyls seem to carry such surprising and powerful energies. When I began to write in dactyls, I was rewarded immediately by finding a different voice for my poems. That is why I encourage students to explore all the metrical possibilities they can find in their own poems: so they will know how to write all the voices hidden

within.

The association of meter with meaning does not mean that the meaning of any particular meter is fixed; the examples in this essay make clear that various meters can express all kinds of feelings. But it does mean that a good poem is always aware of the effect rhythm is having and works with rhythm rather than trying to ignore it. Like a horse, sometimes meter knows where you want to go better than you do, and it is a good idea to listen to it as much as you can.