Stephen Fry

'At his twinkling best' *Sunday Times*

THE ODE LESS TRAVELLED

A GUIDE TO WRITING POETRY

THE ODE LESS TRAVELLED

Stephen Fry is an award-winning comedian, actor, presenter and director. He rose to fame alongside Hugh Laurie in *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (which he co-wrote with Laurie) and *Jeeves and Wooster*, and was unforgettable as General Melchett in *Blackadder*. He has hosted over 180 episodes of QI, and has narrated all seven of the Harry Potter novels for the audiobook recordings. He is the bestselling author of four novels – *The Stars' Tennis Balls*, *Making History*, *The Hippopotamus* and *The Liar* – as well as three volumes of autobiography – *Moab is My Washpot*, *The Fry Chronicles* and *More Fool Me*. *Mythos* and *Heroes*, his retelling of the Greek myths, are both *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

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FICTION

The Liar
The Hippopotamus
Making History
The Stars' Tennis Balls
Mythos
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NON-FICTION

Paperweight
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The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains.
The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.

William Arthur Ward

For Rory Stuart, a good, superior and great teacher.

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Foreword

I HAVE A DARK AND DREADFUL SECRET. I write poetry.

This is an embarrassing confession for an adult to make. In their idle hours Winston Churchill and Noël Coward painted. For fun and relaxation Albert Einstein played the violin. Hemingway hunted, Agatha Christie gardened, James Joyce sang arias and Nabokov chased butterflies. But *poetry*?

I have a friend who drums in the attic, another who has been building a boat for years. An actor I know is prouder of the reproduction eighteenth-century duelling pistols he makes in a small workshop than he is of his knighthood. Britain is a nation of hobbyists – eccentric amateurs, talented part-timers, Pooterish potterers and dedicated autodidacts in every field of human endeavour. But *poetry*?

An adolescent girl may write poetry, so long as it is securely locked up in her pink leatherette five-year diary. Suburban professionals are permitted to enter jolly pastiche competitions in the *Spectator* and *New Statesman*. At a pinch, a young man may be allowed to write a verse or two of dirty doggerel and leave it on a post-it note stuck to the fridge when he has forgotten to buy a Valentine card. But that's *it*. Any more forays into the world of Poesy and you release the beast that lurks within every British breast – and the name of the beast is Embarrassment.

And yet . . .

I believe poetry is a primal impulse within us all. I believe we are all capable of it and furthermore that a small, often ignored corner of us positively yearns to try it. I believe our poetic impulse

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is blocked by the false belief that poetry might on the one hand be academic and technical and on the other formless and random. It seems to many that while there is a clear road to learning music, gardening or watercolours, poetry lies in inaccessible marshland: no pathways, no signposts, just the skeletons of long-dead poets poking through the bog and the unedifying sight of living ones floundering about in apparent confusion and mutual enmity. Behind it all, the dread memory of classrooms swollen into resentful silence while the English teacher invites us to 'respond' to a poem.

For me the private act of writing poetry is songwriting, confessional, diary-keeping, speculation, problem-solving, storytelling, therapy, anger management, craftsmanship, relaxation, concentration and spiritual adventure all in one inexpensive package.

Suppose I want to paint but seem to have no obvious talent. Never mind: there are artist supply shops selling paints, papers, pastels, charcoals and crayons. There are 'How To' books everywhere. Simple lessons in the rules of proportion and guides to composition and colourmixing can make up for my lack of natural ability and provide painless technical grounding. I am helped by grids and outlines, pantographs and tracing paper; precise instructions guide me in how to prepare a canvas, prime it with paint and wash it into an instant watercolour sky. There are instructional videos available; I can even find channels on cable and satellite television showing gentle hippies painting lakes, carving pine trees with palette knives and dotting them with impasto snow. Mahlsticks, sable, hogs-hair, turpentine and linseed. Viridian, umber, ochre and carmine. Perspective, chiaroscuro, *sfumato*, grisaille, tondo and *morbidezza*. Reserved modes and materials. The tools of the trade. A new jargon to learn. A whole initiation into technique, form and style.

Suppose I want to play music but seem to have no obvious talent. Never mind: there are music shops selling instruments, tuning forks, metronomes and 'How To' books by the score. And scores by the score. Instructional videos abound. I can buy digital

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keyboards linked to programmes that plug into my computer and guide me through the rudiments, monitoring my progress and accuracy. I start with scales and move on to chords and arpeggios. There are horsehair, rosin and catgut, reeds, plectrums and mouthpieces. There are diminished sevenths, augmented fifths, relative minors, trills and accidentals. There are riffs and figures, licks and vamps. Sonata, adagio, crescendo, scherzo and twelve-bar blues. Reserved modes and materials. The tools of the trade. A new jargon to learn. A whole initiation into technique, form and style.

To help us further there are evening classes, clubs and groups. Pack up your easel and palette and go into the countryside with a party of like-minded enthusiasts. Sit down with a friend and learn a new chord on the guitar. Join a band. Turn your watercolour view of Lake Windermere into a tablemat or T-shirt. Burn your version of 'Stairway to Heaven' onto a CD and alarm your friends.

None of these adventures into technique and proficiency will necessarily turn you into a genius or even a proficient craftsman. Your view of *Snow on York Minster*, whether languishing in the loft or forming the basis of this year's Christmas card doesn't make you Turner, Constable or Monet. Your version of 'Für Elise' on electric piano might not threaten Alfred Brendel, your trumpet blast of 'Basin Street Blues' could be so far from Satchmo that it hurts and your take on 'Lela' may well stand as an eternal reproach to all those with ears to hear. You may not sell a single picture, be invited even once to deputise for the church organist when she goes down with shingles or have any luck at all when you try out for the local Bay City Rollers tribute band. You are neither Great Artist, sessions professional, illustrator or admired amateur.

So what? You are someone who paints a bit, scratches around on the keyboard for fun, gets a kick out of learning a tune or discovering a new way of rendering the face of your beloved in charcoal. You have another life, you have family, work and friends but this is a hobby, a pastime, FUN. Do you give up the Sunday

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kick-around because you'll never be Thierry Henry? Of course not. That would be pathologically vain. We don't stop talking about how the world might be better just because we have no chance of making it to Prime Minister. We are all politicians. We are all artists. In an open society everything the mind and hands can achieve is our birthright. It is up to us to claim it.

And you know, you *might* be the real thing, or someone with the potential to give as much pleasure to others as you derive yourself. But how you will ever know if you don't try?

As the above is true of painting and music, so it is true of cookery and photography and gardening and interior decoration and chess and poker and skiing and sailing and carpentry and bridge and wine and knitting and brass-rubbing and line-dancing and the hundreds of other activities that enrich and enliven the daily toil of getting and spending, mortgages and shopping, school and office. There are rules, conventions, techniques, reserved objects, equipment and paraphernalia, time-honoured modes, forms, jargon and tradition. The average practitioner doesn't expect to win prizes, earn a fortune, become famous or acquire absolute mastery in their art, craft, sport – or as we would say now, their chosen leisure pursuit. *It really is enough to have fun.*

The point remains: it isn't a burden to learn the difference between acid and alkaline soil or understand how f-stops and exposure times affect your photograph. There's no drudgery or humiliation in discovering how to knit, purl and cast off, snowplough your skis, deglaze a pan, carve a dovetail or tot up your bridge hand according to Acol. Only an embarrassed adolescent or deranged coward thinks jargon and reserved languages are pretentious and that detail and structure are boring. Sensible people are above simpering at references to colour in music, structure in wine or rhythm in architecture. When you learn to sail you are literally shown the ropes and taught that they are called sheets or painters and that knots are hitches and forward is aft and right is starboard. That is not pseudery or exclusivity, it is precision, it is part of initiating the

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newcomer into the guild. Learning the lingo is the beginning of our rite of passage.

In music, tempo is not the same as rhythm, which is not the same as pulse. There are metronomic indications and time signatures. At some point along the road between picking out a tune with one finger and really playing *we need to know* these distinctions. For some it comes naturally and seems inborn, for most of us the music is buried deep inside but needs a little coaxing and tuition to be got out. So someone shows us, or we progress by video, evening class or book. *Talent is inborn but technique is learned.*

Talent without technique is like an engine without a steering wheel, gears or brakes. It doesn't matter how thoroughbred and powerful the V12 under the bonnet if it can't be steered and kept under control. Talented people who do nothing with their gifts often crash and burn. A great truth, so obvious that it is almost a secret, is that most people are embarrassed to the point of shame by their talents. Ashamed of their gifts but proud to bursting of their achievements. Do athletes boast of their hand-eye coordination, grace and natural sense of balance? No, they talk of how hard they trained, the sacrifices they made, the effort they put in.

> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp
> Or what's a heaven for?

Robert Browning's cry brings us back, at last, to poetry. While it is perfectly possible that you did not learn music at school, or drawing and painting, it is almost certain that you did learn poetry. Not how to do it, almost never how to write your own, but how, God help us, to *appreciate* it.

We have all of us, *all of us*, sat with brows furrowed feeling incredibly dense and dumb as the teacher asks us to respond to an image or line of verse.

> *What do you think Wordsworth was referring to here?*
> *What does Wilfred Owen achieve by choosing this metaphor?*

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How does Keats respond to the nightingale?
Why do you think Shakespeare uses the word 'gentle' as a verb?
What is Larkin's attitude to the hotel room?

It brings it all back, doesn't it? All the red-faced, blood-pounding humiliation and embarrassment of being singled out for comment.

The way poetry was taught at school reminded W. H. Auden of a *Punch* cartoon composed, legend has it, by the poet A. E. Housman. Two English teachers are walking in the woods in springtime. The first, on hearing birdsong, is moved to quote William Wordsworth:

TEACHER 1: Oh cuckoo, shall I call thee bird
Or but a wandering voice?

TEACHER 2: State the alternative preferred
With reasons for your choice.

Even if some secret part of you might have been privately moved and engaged, you probably went through a stage of loathing those bores Shakespeare, Keats, Owen, Eliot, Larkin and all who came before and after them. You may love them now, you may still hate them or perhaps you feel entirely indifferent to the whole pack of them. But however well or badly we were taught English literature, how many of us have ever been shown how to write our own poems?

Don't worry, it doesn't have to rhyme. Don't bother
with metre and verses. Just express yourself. Pour out
your feelings.

Suppose you had never played the piano in your life.

Don't worry, just lift the lid and *express yourself*. Pour
out your feelings.

We have all heard children do just that and we have all wanted to treat them with great violence as a result. Yet this is the only instruction we are ever likely to get in the art of writing poetry:

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Anything goes.

But that's how modern poetry *works*, isn't it? Free verse, don't they call it? *Vers libre*?

Ye-e-es . . . And in avant-garde music, John Cage famously wrote a piece of silence called '4 Minutes 33 Seconds' and created other works requiring ball-bearings and chains to be dropped on to prepared pianos. Do music teachers suggest that to children? Do we encourage them to ignore all harmony and rhythm and just make noise? It is important to realise that Cage's first pieces were written in the Western compositional tradition, in movements with conventional Italian names like lento, vivace and fugato. Picasso's early paintings are flawless models of figurative accuracy. Listening to music may inspire an extraordinary emotional response, but extraordinary emotions are not enough to make music.

Unlike musical notation, paint or clay, language is inside every one of us. For free. We are all proficient at it. We already have the palette, the paints and the instruments. We don't have to go and buy any reserved materials. Poetry is made of the same stuff you are reading now, the same stuff you use to order pizza over the phone, the same stuff you yell at your parents and children, whisper in your lover's ear and shove into an e-mail, text or birthday card. It is common to us all. Is that why we resent being told that there is a technique to its highest expression, poetry? I cannot ski, so I would like to be shown how to. I cannot paint, so I would value some lessons. But I can speak and write, so do not waste my time telling me that I need lessons in poetry, which is, after all, no more than emotional writing, with or without the odd rhyme. Isn't it?

Jan Schreiber in a review of Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures*, says this of modern verse:

> The writing of poetry has been made laughably easy. There are no technical constraints. Knowledge of the tradition is not necessary, nor is a desire to communicate, this having been supplanted in many practitioners by the more urgent

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desire to express themselves. Even sophistication in the manipulation of syntax is not sought. Poetry, it seems, need no longer be at least as well written as prose.

Personally, I find writing without form, metre or rhyme not 'laughably easy' but fantastically difficult. If you can do it, good luck to you and farewell, this book is not for you: but a word of warning from W. H. Auden before you go.

> The poet who writes 'free' verse is like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island: he must do all his cooking, laundry and darning for himself. In a few exceptional cases, this manly independence produces something original and impressive, but more often the result is squalor – dirty sheets on the unmade bed and empty bottles on the unswept floor.

I cannot teach you how to be a great poet or even a good one. Dammit, I can't teach *myself* that. But I can show you how to have fun with the modes and forms of poetry as they have developed over the years. By the time you have read this book you will be able to write a Petrarchan sonnet, a Sapphic Ode, a ballade, a villanelle and a Spenserian stanza, among many other weird and delightful forms; you will be confident with metre, rhyme and much else besides. Whether you choose to write on the stupidity of advertising, the curve of your true love's buttocks, the folly of war or the irritation of not being able to open a pickle jar is unimportant. I will give you the tools, you can finish the job. And once you have got the hang of the forms, you can devise your own. The Robertsonian Sonnet. The Jonesian Ode. The Millerian Stanza.

This is not an academic book. It is unlikely to become part of the core curriculum. It may help you with your English exams because it will certainly allow you to be a smart-arse in Practical Criticism papers (if such things still exist) and demonstrate that you know a trochee from a dactyl, a terza from an ottava rima and assonance from enjambment, in which case I am happy to be of

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service. It is over a quarter of a century since I did any teaching and I have no idea if such knowledge is considered good or useless these days, for all I know it will count against you.

I have written this book because over the past thirty-five years I have derived enormous private pleasure from writing poetry and like anyone with a passion I am keen to share it. You will be relieved to hear that I will not be burdening you with any of my actual poems (except sample verse specifically designed to help clarify form and metre): I do not write poetry for publication, I write it for the same reason that, according to Wilde, one should write a diary, to have something sensational to read on the train. And as a way of speaking to myself. But most importantly of all *for pleasure*.

This is not the only work on prosody (the art of versification) ever published in English, but it is the one that I should like to have been available to me many years ago. It is technical, yes, inasmuch as it investigates technique, but I hope that does not make it dry, obscure or difficult – after all, 'technique' is just the Greek for 'art'. I have tried to make everything approachable without being loopily matey or absurdly simplistic.

I certainly do not attempt in this book to pick up where those poor teachers left off and instruct you in poetry appreciation. I suspect, however, that once you have started writing a poem of any real shape you will find yourself admiring and appreciating other poets' work a great deal more. If you have never picked up a golf club you will never really know just how remarkable Ernie Els is (substitute tennis racket for Roger Federer, frying pan for Gordon Ramsay, piano for Jools Holland and so on).

But maybe you are too old a dog to learn new tricks? Maybe you have missed the bus? That's hooey. Thomas Hardy (a finer poet than he was a novelist in my view) did not start publishing verse till he was nearly sixty.

> Every child is musical. Unfortunately this natural gift is
> squelched before it has time to develop. From all my life

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> experience I remember being laughed at because my voice and the words I sang didn't please someone. My second grade teacher, Miss Stone would not let me sing with the rest of the class because she judged my voice as not musical and she said I threw the class off key. I believed her which led to the blockage of my appreciation of music and blocked my ability to write poetry. Fortunately at the age of 57 I had a significant emotional event which unblocked my ability to compose poetry which many people believe has lyrical qualities.

So writes one Sidney Madwed. Mr Madwed may not be Thomas Campion or Cole Porter, but he believes that an understanding of prosody has set him free and now clearly has a whale of a time writing his lyrics and verses. I hope reading this book will take the place for you of a 'significant emotional event' and awaken the poet that has always lain dormant within.

It is never too late. We are all opsimaths.

Opsimath, noun: one who learns late in life.

Let us go forward together now, both opsimathically and optimistically. Nothing can hold us back. The ode beckons.

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How to Read this Book

There is no getting away from it: in about five minutes' time, if you keep reading at a steady rate, you will start to find yourself, slowly at first and then with gathering speed and violence, under bombardment from technical words, many of them Greek in origin and many of them perhaps unfamiliar to you. I cannot predict how you will react to this. You might rub your hands in glee, you might throw them up in whatever is the opposite of glee, you might bunch them into an angry fist or use them to hurl the book as far away from you as possible.

It is important for you to realise now, at this initial stage, that – as I mentioned earlier – most activities worth pursuing come with their own jargon, their private language and technical vocabulary. In music you would be learning about fifths and relative majors, in yachting it would be boom-spankers, tacking into the wind and spinnakers. I could attempt to 'translate' words like *iamb* and *caesura* into everyday English, but frankly that would be patronising and silly. It would also be very confusing when, as may well happen, you turn to other books on poetry for further elucidation.

So please, DO NOT BE AFRAID. I have taken every effort to try to make your initiation into the world of prosody as straight-forward, logical and enjoyable as possible. No art worth the striving after is without its complexities, but if you find yourself confused, if words and concepts start to swim meaninglessly in front of you, do not panic. So long as you obey the three golden rules below, nothing can go wrong. You will grow in poetic power and confidence at a splendid rate. You are not expected to remember

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every metrical device or every rhyme scheme: I have included a glossary at the back. Just about every unusual and technical word I use is there, so if in doubt flip to the back where you should find an explanation given by definition and/or example.

If you already know, or believe you know, a fair amount about *prosody* (usually pronounced prósser-di, but sometimes prose-a-di), that is to say the art of versification, then you may feel an urge to hurry through the early sections of the book. That is up to you, naturally, but I would urge against it. The course is designed for all comers and it is better followed in the order laid out. Now, I am afraid you are not allowed to read any further without attending to the three golden rules below.

The Golden Rules

Rule One

In our age one of the glories of poetry is that it remains an art that demonstrates the virtues and pleasures of TAKING YOUR TIME. You can never read a poem too slowly, but you can certainly read one too fast.

Please, and I am on my knees here, *please* read all the sample excerpts and fragments of poetry that I include in this book (usually in indented paragraphs) *as slowly as you possibly can*, constantly rereading them and feeling their rhythm and balance and shape. I'm referring to single lines here as much as to larger selections.

Poems are not read like novels. There is much pleasure to be had in taking the same fourteen-line sonnet to bed with you and reading it many times over for a week. Savour, taste, enjoy. Poetry is not made to be sucked up like a child's milkshake, it is much better sipped like a precious malt whisky. Verse is one of our last

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stands against the instant and the infantile. Even when it is simple and childlike it is be savoured.

Always try to read verse *out loud*: if you are in a place where such a practice would embarrass you, read out loud inside yourself (if possible, moving your lips). Among the pleasures of poetry is the sheer physical, sensual, textural, tactile pleasure of feeling the words on your lips, tongue, teeth and vocal cords.

It can take weeks to assemble and polish a single line of poetry. Sometimes, it is true, a lightning sketch may produce a wonderful effect too, but as a general rule, poems take time. As with a good painting, they are not there to be greedily taken in at once, they are to be lived with and endlessly revisited: the eye can go back and back and back, investigating new corners, new incidents and the new shapes that seem to emerge. We are perhaps too used to the kind of writing that contains a single message. We absorb the message and move on to the next sentence. Poetry is an entirely different way of using words and I cannot emphasise enough how much more pleasure is to be derived from a slow, luxurious engagement with its language and rhythms.

Rule Two

Never worry about 'meaning' when you are reading poems, either those I include in the book, or those you choose to read for yourself. Poems are not crossword puzzles: however elusive and 'difficult' the story or argument of a poem may seem to be and however resistant to simple interpretation, it is not a test of your intelligence and learning (or if it is, it is not worth persevering with). Of course some poems are complex and highly wrought and others may contain references that mystify you. Much poetry in the past assumed a familiarity with classical literature, the Christian liturgy and Greek mythology, for example. Some modernist poetry can seem bloody-minded in its dense and forbidding allusion to

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other poets, to science and to philosophy. It can contain foreign phrases and hieroglyphs. There are literary and critical guides if you wish to acquaint yourself with such works; for the most part we will not concern ourselves with the avant-garde, the experimental and the arcane; their very real pleasures would be for another book.

It is easy to be *shy* when confronting a poem. Poems can be the frightening older children at a party who make us want to cling to our mothers. But remember that poets are people and they have taken the courageous step of sharing their fears, loves, hopes and narratives with us in a rare and crafted form. They have chosen a mode of expression that is concentrated and often intense, they are offering us a music that has taken them a long time to create – many hours in the making, a lifetime in the preparation. They don't mean to frighten or put us off, they long for us to read their works and to enjoy them.

Do not be cross with poetry for failing to deliver meaning and communication in the way that an assemblage of words usually does. Be confident that when encountering a poem you do not have to articulate a response, venture an opinion or make a judgement. Just as the reading of each poem takes time, so a relationship with the whole art of poetry itself takes time. Observation of Rule One will allow meaning to emerge at its own pace.

Rule Three

Buy a notebook, exercise book or jotter pad and lots of pencils (any writing instrument will do but I find pencils more physically pleasing). This is the only equipment you will need: no cameras, paintbrushes, tuning forks or chopping boards. Poets enjoy their handwriting ('like smelling your own farts,' W. H. Auden claimed) and while computers may have their place, for the time being *write*, don't type.

You may as well invest in a good pocket-sized notebook: the

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Moleskin range is becoming very fashionable again and bookshops and stationers have started to produce their own equivalents. Take yours with you *everywhere*. When you are waiting for someone, stuck in an airport, travelling by train, just doodle with words. As you learn new techniques and methods for producing lines of verse, practise them all the time.

Imagine the above-mentioned are the End User Licence Agreement to a piece of computer software. You cannot get any further without clicking 'OK' when the installation wizard asks you if you agree to the terms and conditions. Well, the three rules are *my* terms and conditions, let me restate them in brief:

1. Take your time
2. Don't be afraid
3. Always have a notebook with you

I agree to abide by the terms and conditions of this book

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Now you may begin.

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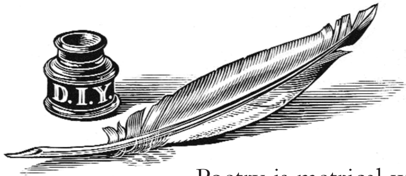
CHAPTER ONE



Metre

Poetry is metrical writing.
If it isn't that I don't know what it is.

J.V. Cunningham

I

Some very obvious but nonetheless interesting observations about how English is spoken – meet metre – the iamb – the iambic pentameter – Poetry Exercises 1 & 2

You have already achieved the English-language poet's most important goal: you can read, write and speak English well enough to understand this sentence. If this were a book about painting or music there would be a lot more initial spadework to be got through.

Automatic and inborn as language might seem to be, there are still things we need to know about it, elements that are so obvious very few of us ever consider them. Since language for us, as poets in the making, is our paint, our *medium*, we should probably take a little time to consider certain aspects of spoken English, a language whose oral properties are actually very different from those of its more distant ancestors, Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek and even from those of its nearer relations, French and German.

Some of what follows may seem so obvious that it will put you in danger of sustaining a nosebleed. Bear with me, nonetheless. We are beginning from first principles.

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How We Speak

Each English word is given its own weight or push as we speak it within a sentence. That is to say:

> **Each Eng**lish **word** is **giv**en its own **weight** and **push** as we **speak** it with**in** a **sent**ence.

Only a very badly primitive computer speech programme would give equal stress to all the words in that example. Throughout this chapter I use **bold** type to indicate this weight or push, this 'accent', and I use *italics* for imparting special emphasis and SMALL CAPITALS to introduce new words or concepts for the first time and for drawing attention to an exercise or instruction.

A real English speaker would speak the indented paragraph above much, but certainly not *exactly*, as I (with only the binary choice of **heavy**/light available to me) have tried to indicate. Some words or syllables will be slid over with hardly a breath or a pause accorded to them (light), others will be given more weight (**heavy**).

Surely that's how the whole world speaks?

Well, in the Chinese languages and in Thai, for example, all words are of one syllable (*monosyllabic*) and speech is given colour and meaning by variations in *pitch*, the speaker's voice will go up or down. In English we colour our speech not so much with alterations in pitch as with variations in stress: this is technically known as ACCENTUATION.[1] English, and we shall think about this later – is what is known as a STRESS-TIMED language.

Of course, English does contain a great many monosyllables (many more than most European languages as it happens): some of these are what grammarians call PARTICLES, inoffensive little words like prepositions (*by*, *from*, *to*, *with*), pronouns (*his*, *my*, *your*, *they*),

1 Pitch *matters*, of course it does. It matters in speech and in poetry, but for the moment we will concentrate on stress.

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articles (*the*, *an*, *a*) and conjunctions (*or*, *and*, *but*). In an average sentence these are *unaccented* in English.

From **time** to **time** and for as **long** as it **takes**.

I must repeat, these are not *special emphases*, these are the **nat**ural **ac**cents im**part**ed. We glide over the particles ('from', 'to', 'and', 'for', 'as', 'it') and give a little push to the important words ('**time**', '**long**', '**takes**').

Also, we tend to accent the *operative* part of monosyllabic words when they are extended, only lightly tripping over the -ing and -ly, of such words as **hop**ing and **quick**ly. This light tripping, this gliding is sometimes called *scudding*.

We always say **Brit**ish, we never say Brit**ish** or **Brit-ish**, always mach**ine**, never **mach**ine or **mach-ine**. The weight we give to the first syllable of **Brit**ish or the second syllable of ma**chine** is called by linguists the TONIC ACCENT. Accent here shouldn't be confused either with the written signs (DIACRITICAL MARKS) that are sometimes put over letters, as in café and Führer, or with regional accents – brogues and dialects like Cockney or Glaswegian. Accent for our purposes means the natural push or stress we give to a word or part of a word as we speak. This accent, push or stress is also called *ictus*, but we will stick to the more common English words where possible.

In many-syllabled or POLYSYLLABIC words there will always be *at least one* accent.

Credit. Dis**pose**. Con**tin**ue. De**spair**. **Des**perate.

Sometimes the stress will change according to the meaning or nature of the word. READ THE FOLLOWING PAIRS OUT LOUD:

He in**clines** to pro**ject** bad vibes
A **pro**ject to study the **in**clines.

He pro**ceeds** to re**bel**.
The **re**bel steals the **pro**ceeds.

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Some words may have two stresses but *one* (marked here with an ´) will always be a little heavier:

ábdi**cate** con**sid**er**á**tion.

Sometimes it is a matter of nationality or preference. READ OUT THESE WORDS:

Chicken-**soup**. **Arm-chair**. **Sponge-cake**. Cigar**ette**. Maga**zine**.

Those are the more usual accents in *British* English. NOW TRY THE SAME WORDS WITH THESE DIFFERENT STRESSES . . .

Chicken-soup. **Arm**-chair. **Sponge**-cake. **Cig**arette. **Mag**azine.

That is how they are said in America (and increasingly these days in the UK and Australia too). What about the following?

Lámentable. **Mánd**atory. **Prím**arily. **Yés**terday. In**cómp**arable.

La**mént**able. Man**dát**ory. Pri**már**ily. **Yes**ter**dáy**. Incom**pár**able.

Whether the tonic should land as those in the first line or the second is a vexed issue and subject to much **cón**tro**vers**y or con**tró**versy. The pronunciations vary according to **cir**cumstances or **cir**cum**stánces** or indeed **cir**cum-**stahnces** too English, class-bound and ticklish to go into here.

You may think, 'Well, now, hang on, surely this is how everyone (the Chinese and Thais aside) talks, pushing one part of the word but not another?' Not so.

The French, for instance, tend towards *equal* stress in a word. They pronounce Canada, **Can-a-da** as opposed to our **Can**ada. We say **Ber**nard, the French say **Ber-nard**. You may have noticed that when Americans pronounce French they tend to go overboard and hurl the emphasis on to the *final* syllable, thinking it sounds more authentic, Ber-**nard** and so on. They are so used to speaking

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English with its characteristic *downward* inflection that to American ears French *seems* to go up at the end. With trademark arrogance, we British keep the English inflection. Hence the American pronunciation cli**chÉ**, the English **cli**ché and the authentic French **cli-ché**. Take also the two words 'journal' and 'machine', which English has inherited from French. We pronounce them **jour**nal and ma**chine**. The French give them their characteristic equal stress: **jour-nal** and **ma-chine**. Even words with many syllables are equally stressed in French: we say repe**ti**tion, they say **répétition** (**ray-pay-tee-see-on**).

As you might imagine, this has influenced greatly the different paths that French and English poetry have taken. The rhythms of English poetry are ordered by SYLLABIC ACCENTUATION, those of French more by QUANTITATIVE MEASURE. We won't worry about those terms or what they portend just yet: it should already be clear that if you're planning to write French verse then this is not the book for you.

In a paragraph of written *prose* we pay little attention to how those English accents fall unless, that is, we wish to make an *extra* emphasis, which is usually rendered by *italics*, underscoring or CAPITALISATION. In German an emphasised word is s t r e t c h e d. With prose the *eye* is doing much more than the *ear*. The inner ear *is* at work, however, and we can all recognise the rhythms in any piece of writing. It can be spoken out loud, after all, for recitation or for rhetoric, and if it is designed for that purpose, those rhythms will be all the more important.

But prose, rhythmic as it can be, is not poetry. The rhythm is not *organised*.

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Meet Metre

Poetry's rhythm *is* organised.

THE LIFE OF A POEM IS MEASURED IN REGULAR HEARTBEATS.
THE NAME FOR THOSE HEARTBEATS IS *METRE*.

When we want to describe anything technical in English we tend to use Greek. Logic, grammar, physics, mechanics, gynaecology, dynamics, economics, philosophy, therapy, astronomy, politics – Greek gave us all those words. The reservation of Greek for the technical allows us to use those other parts of English, the Latin and especially the Anglo-Saxon, to describe more personal and immediate aspects of life and the world around us. Thus to be *anaesthetised by trauma* has a more technical, medical connotation than to be *numb with shock*, although the two phrases mean much the same. In the same way, *metre* can be reserved precisely to refer to the poetic technique of organising rhythm, while words like 'beat' and 'flow' and 'pulse' can be freed up for less technical, more subjective and personal uses.

Please do not be put off by the fact that throughout this section on metre I shall tend to use the conventional Greek names for nearly all the metrical units, devices and techniques that poets employ. In many respects, as I shall explain elsewhere, they are inappropriate to English verse,[2] but English-language poets and prosodists have used them for the last thousand years. It is useful and pleasurable to have a special vocabulary for a special activity.[3] Convention, tradition and precision suggest this in most fields of human endeavour, from music and painting to snooker and snowboarding. It does not make those activities any less rich, individual and varied. So let it be with poetry.

2 Unless otherwise stated, I use 'English' here and throughout the book to refer to the English *language*, not the country.

3 'Convenient and innocuous nomenclatorial handles,' as Vladimir Nabokov calls them in his *Notes on Prosody*.

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Poetry is a word derived from Greek, as is Ode (from *poein*, to make and *odein*, to sing). The majority of words we use to describe the *anatomy* of a poem are Greek in origin too. Metre (from *metron*) is simply the Greek for measure, as in metronome, kilometre, biometric and so on. The Americans use the older spelling *meter* which I prefer, but which my UK English spellcheck refuses to like.

In the beginning, my old cello teacher used to say, was *rhythm*. Rhythm is simply the Greek for 'flow' (we get our word diarrhoea from the same source as it happens). We know what rhythm is in music, we can clap our hands or tap our feet to its beat. In poetry it is much the same:

ti-**tum**, ti-**tum**, ti-**tum**, ti-**tum**, ti-**tum**

Say that out loud. Tap your feet, drum your fingers or clap your hands as you say it. It is a meaningless chant, certainly. But it is a meaningless *regular* and *rhythmic* chant.

Ten sounds, alternating in beat or accent. Actually, it is not very helpful to say that the line is made up of *ten* sounds; we'll soon discover that for our prosodic purposes it is more useful to look at it as *five* repeating sets of that ti-**tum** heartbeat. My old cello teacher liked to do it this way, clapping her hands as she did so:

and **one** and **two** and **three** and **four** and **five**

In music that would be five bars (or five measures if you're American). In poetry such a bar or measure is called a *foot*.

Five *feet* marching in rhythm. If the foot is the heartbeat, the metre can best be described as the readout or cardiogram trace.

1	2	3	4	5
ti **tum**	ti **tum**	ti **tum**	ti **tum**	ti **tum**

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Let's give the metre meaning by substituting words.

He **bangs** the **drum** and **makes** a **dread**ful **noise**

That line consists of FIVE ti-**tum** feet:

1	2	3	4	5
He **bangs**	the **drum**	and **makes**	a **dread**	ful **noise**
ti **tum**	ti **tum**	ti **tum**	ti **tum**	ti **tum**

It is a line of TEN syllables (*decasyllabic*):

1	**2**	3	**4**	5	**6**	7	**8**	9	**10**
He	**bangs**	the	**drum**	and	**makes**	a	**dread**	ful	**noise**

Ten syllables where in this metre the accent always falls on the *even-numbered beat*. Notice, though, that there aren't ten *words* in this example, there are only nine. That's because 'dreadful' has two syllables.

Bangs, **drum**, **makes**, **dread** and **noise** are those even-numbered accented words (and syllable) here. You could show the rhythm of the line like this:

bangs **drum** **makes** **dread** **noise**
/ \ / \ / \ / \ /
He the and a ful

Some metrists would call 'he', 'the', 'and', 'a' and '-ful' DEPRESSIONS. Other words to describe a non-stressed syllable are SLACK, SCUD and WEAK. The line has a rising rhythm, that is the point: from weak to strong, terminating in its fifth stressed beat.

The most usual way to SCAN the line, in other words to demonstrate its metric structure and show the cardiogram trace as it were, is to divide the five feet with this mark | (known as a VIRGULE, the same as the French word for 'comma' or 'slash' that you might remember from school) and use symbols to indicate the accented and the weak syllables. Here I have chosen ○ to represent

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the off-beat, the depressed, unaccented syllable, and ● for the beat, stress or accented syllable.

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●
He bangs | the drum | and makes | a dread | ful noise.

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●
If Win | ter comes, | can Spring | be far | behind?

SHELLEY: 'Ode to the West Wind'

There are other accepted ways of marking SCANSION: using – or u or x for an *un*accented beat and / for an *accented* one. If you were taught scansion at school or have a book on the subject you will often see one of the following:

– / – / – / – / – /
He bangs | the drum | and makes | a dread | ful noise.

x / x / x / x / x /
If Win | ter comes, | can Spring | be far | behind?

u / u / u / u / u /
The cur | few tolls | the knell | of part | ing day

GRAY: 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'

For the most part I shall be sticking to ○ and ● however, as I find they represent the ti and the **tum** more naturally. Besides, the other scansion marks derive from classical metre, which was concerned with vowel *length* rather than stress.

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The Great Iamb
(and other binary feet)

The word for a rising-rhythm foot with a ti-**tum**, ○●, beat like those above is an iambus, more usually called an IAMB.

I remember this by thinking of Popeye, whose trademark rusty croak went:

I *yam* what I *yam* . . .
○● ○● ○●
Iámb, iámb, iámb

We will concentrate on this foot for the rest of this section, but you should know that there are three other feet in the same BINARY (two unit) family.

The TROCHEE is a backwards iamb, a *falling* rhythm, **tum**-ti:

● ○
trochee

The trochee obeys its own definition and is pronounced to rhyme with **po**ky or **cho**ky.

● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○
Trochee, **tro**chee, **tro**chee, **tro**chee

Thus was **born** my **Hi**a**wath**a,
Thus was **born** the **child** of **wond**er;

LONGFELLOW: *The Song of Hiawatha*

As a *falling* rhythm, a **tick**-tock, **tick**-tock, **tick**-tock, it finishes on an unaccented syllable – an 'and' if you're counting and clapping musically:

one and **two** and **three** and **four** and
● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○

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The SPONDEE is of equal stressed units: ●● This also obeys its own definition and is pronounced to rhyme with the name *John Dee*. You may feel that it is almost impossible to give *absolutely equal* stress to two successive words or syllables in English and that there will always be some slight difference in weight. Many metrists (Edgar Allan Poe among them) would argue that the spondee doesn't functionally exist in English verse. Again, we'll think about the ramifications later, for the time being you might as well know it.

● ● ● ● ● ●
Spondee, **spondee**, **spondee**

The fourth and final permutation is of *unstressed* units ○○ and is called the PYRRHIC foot. Don't bother to think about the pyrrhic either for the moment, we'll be looking at it later. All the feet possible in English are gathered in a table at the end of the chapter, with examples to demonstrate their stresses.

The *iamb* is the hero of this chapter, so let us take a closer look at it:

Iámb | iámb | iámb | iámb | iámb.
○● ○● ○● ○● ○●

Ten syllables, yes, but a count, or measure, of five feet, five *iambic* feet, culminating (the opposite of the trochaic line) in a *strong* or accented ending. SAY IT OUT LOUD AGAIN:

and **one** and **two** and **three** and **four** and **five**

He **bangs** the **drum** and **makes** a **dread**ful **noise**

It is a measure of five and the prosodic word, from the Greek again, for 'measure of five' is PENTAMETER. That simple line is an example therefore of IAMBIC PENTAMETER.

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