THE FORMALITY OF THE FREE:
An Approach to the Craft of Poetry

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The Formality Of The Free: An Approach To The Craft Of Poetry

—for Sharon Bryan, who said
“The poems need to start with the music!”

PROLOGUE: MOTIVATION

“The basic curriculum of the [ancient Irish] Bardic schools . . . consisted as follows:
1st Year: Fifty oghams or alphabets. Elementary grammar. Twenty tales.
2nd Year: Fifty oghams. Six easy lessons in Philosophy. Some specified poems.
Thirty tales.
4th Year: The Bretha Nemed or Law of Privileges. Twenty poems of the species called Eman. Fifty tales.
5th Year: Grammar. Sixty tales.
6th Year: The Secret Language of the Poets. Forty-eight poems of the species called Nuath. Seventy or eighty tales.
7th Year: Brosnacha (Miscellanies). The Laws of Bardism.
8th Year: Prosody. Glosses (the meaning of obscure words). Teinm Laeghdha.
9th Year: A specified number of compositions of the kind called Sennat, Luasca, Nena, Eochraid, Sruith, and Duili Feda. To master 175 tales in this three year period.
10th Year: A further number of the compositions listed above.
11th Year: 100 of the compositions known as Anamuin.
12th Year: 120 Cetals or orations. The Four Arts of Poetry. During the three years to master 175 tales in all, along with the 175 of the Anruth, 350 tales in all.”
(Matthews 121,122)

“In the Iliad . . . in these two lines alone, there are five different kinds of dactyls and five different kinds of spondees; in the first ten lines, there are twelve different kinds of dactyls and nine different kinds of spondees. The requirement that the fifth foot be a dactyl, and the sixth a spondee, limits rhythmical variation to sixteen possible arrangements of dactyls and spondees in the first four feet, but the many possible melodic patterns for each foot so multiply possibilities that virtually every Homeric line has a unique melody!”
(Winn 6)
“It is necessary, I believe, for us to turn at this point to the special features of Bash’s linking technique . . . Bash says that in his case the link is provided by what he calls the aroma (nioi), echo (hibiki), countenance (omokage), colour (utsuri) and rank (kurai) of the preceding poem. Here again the strict definition of the individual terms would only cause confusion . . . .”
(Bash 43)

“The first Kaluli metalinguistic-poetic concept is sa-salan ‘inner speaking’ or ‘meaning inside speaking’. Sa is found in two semantic fields: waterfalls and sound. Used alone, it means ‘waterfall’, and as a prefix to other water terms indicates parts of waterfalls. As a prefix to verbs of sound making, it indicates the addition of text “inside” the sound . . . Metalinguistic terms like to halaido ‘hard words’, bali to ‘turned-over words’, mugu to ‘taboo words’, and malolo to ‘narrated words’ (stories) all refer to the form of the language. Wonole-salan ‘speak in a secretive manner’, tede-salan ‘speak in a deep voice’, gese-salan ‘speak plaintively’, hala-salan ‘speak with mispronunciations or grammatical errors’ refer to the manner in which the speaking is performed.”
(Feld 133)

“A man who is about to transfer his membership in a certain dance calls to his house a song-maker . . . whose profession is musical composition and the leading of singers on ceremonial occasions, and a ‘word-passer’ (tlíkotal_), who sets words to music and on public occasions stands and chants each line in advance of the singers in order to prompt them. These two are requested to make the necessary number of songs, the number depending on the dance in question. For the hamatsa it is sixteen. So the composers go into the woods, sometimes accompanied by a . . . novice in the art of composition. The song-maker draws inspiration chiefly from the sounds of running or dropping water, and from the notes of birds. Sitting beside a rill of falling water, he listens intently, catches the music, and hums it to himself, using not words but the vocables hamamama. This is his theme. Then he carries the theme further, making variations, and at last he adds a finale which he calls the ‘tail.’ After a while he goes to the word-passer, constantly humming the tune, and the word-passer, catching the air, joins in, and then sets a single word to it. This is called ‘tying the song,’ so that it may not ‘drift away’ like an unmoored canoe. Then gradually other words are added, until the song is complete.”
(Guss 137)

“This trope [allegory] consists, as Isidore of Seville describes it, of alieniloquium. One thing is said by the words, but something else is understood. There are, he says, numerous forms which the figure may take, but seven may be singled out as being most important. They are irony, antiphrasis, aenigma, charientismos, paroemia, sarcasm, and astysmos.”
(Robertson 288)
1. PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS

“Hard for the word to travel from blood to poem.”
(Yannis Ritsos, Monochords)

“The beginning of Canto X of the Inferno. Dante urges us into the inner blindness of the compositional clot:”
(Osip Mandelstam, “Conversations about Dante”)

During the past half century, linguists and literary critics have attempted to consolidate and reconfigure traditional English language prosody as a linguistic science, so that we poets—as fully modern, technologically-up-to-date creatures—might confidently avoid having to rely upon our naturally rhythm-loving bodies, especially our ears (our silent-reading ears as well as our voice-hearing ears) to tell us for sure when we are reading or writing a poem. To be considered a science, a body of knowledge must be shaped by some sort of measuring system, and all measuring systems use numbers as their primary medium of exchange. As certain formal aspects of our craft have come to be governed by a scientific framework, poets—particularly student and beginning poets—have ceased to trust body knowledge to be anything more than a secondary validation, a mere personal opinion added to the scientific definition of “poem.” However, since most poets do not regard what they do as a science, the need for such definition seldom arises, as such, among us. Paradoxically, then, as the definition of “poem” has been surgically removed from the craft and spirited off elsewhere, poets continue to function perfectly well without it as they have since the beginning of time. It seems clear to me, though, that the ancient assumption everybody knows what a poem is, has vanished out from under us, leaving something in its place. But what?
Formal poetics, especially the musical aspects of poetry, its metrical structure and sound patterns, has become the bailiwick of scholars as an area of (scientific) study separate from what people actually do when they write poems. Even aspiring poets who take a few classes, attend workshops, or engage in a formal university-level program are thrown back upon raw experimentation if they choose to avoid “formalism” as their style. Like polar bears faced with melting icebergs, today’s poets have seen meter and rhyme dissolve, even the poetic line itself, and are left with a bewilderingly huge array of individual, self-declared “poems” in a variety of shapes and rhythms, to use as their models. The traditional scaffolding of English language poetics has become an object of historical interest rather than a viable method for teaching and grounding the practice of poetry. A transition took place during the twentieth century and has been largely completed, from one poetic tradition to another. Yet what seems to have emerged is not a generally-agreed-upon new tradition, but rather a period of wild experimentation in which the prose/poetry border has been seriously breached.

In terms of teaching the craft of poetry as a separate discipline with rules and regulations, a loosely intuitive or free approach operates in an uneasy nesting position within the larger, scientific information-delivery system that our culture accepts as the only legitimate way of knowing. Teachers and students yearn for a bit of rigor, some training wheels to cast off, and yet there are none firmly established for whatever is now “going down” as poetry. And because a loose, artistic or intuitive approach to poetics has been actually practiced by editors, teachers, readers, and the poets themselves for quite some time, the areas of overlap between what could be called “prosaic” and what could be called “poetic” have become larger than the areas that do not overlap. A body of work
has grown up in the overlap regions that nobody seems to know what to do with, except perhaps to consider them—if they resemble prose in appearance—as prose poems or crossover pieces. No category has been set aside for poem-shaped-objects that are actually prose. Such pieces are included in poetry collections or in the “poetry” section of periodicals for lack of a reason to exclude them. “Nobody knows what a poem is any more!” I have heard instructors and poets say in a variety of ways, and with varying degrees of concern over the past couple of decades.

I believe there is a significant and discernible and sustainable/repeatable difference between a prose pattern and a poetry pattern. I believe poetry patterns can be sought out, learned, utilized, and generally patched-in to our contemporary verse making activities, as such. Because when we do write poetry nowadays, poetry we still largely call “free verse” and fail to otherwise fully describe, the metrics of this poetry is based on proportion rather than number. A proportion is a comparison between two or more (but not very many) elements that is immediately perceived as the relationship itself rather than as a calculation of the individual elements comprising it. Or as Robert Lawlor says in *Sacred Geometry*: “A proportion is formed from ratios, and a ratio is a comparison of two different sizes, quantities, qualities or ideas” (44). When I speak of a metrics based on proportion, I am talking about a very basic relationship that occurs between the major rhythmic elements in a line, or in a longer phrase of verse, and making an assumption that the relationship between these elements will make a pleasing, immediately-apprehended pattern that does not depend upon duplicating itself later in the composition in order to be considered musical or poetic. Nor does it depend solely on the stress aspect of rhythm to define its essential parts and qualities. I am making an assumption I cannot prove, that a
huge number of irregular symmetries lurk behind the regular metrics we have so long
used as our standard. I have included a number of examples to illustrate this idea in
Chapter 7.

I believe something like a poetry paradigm shift probably happened during the
twentieth century, during which free-verse became the dominant verse form, and the
whole concept of “poetry” endured a painful but complete metamorphosis. Out the door
with the earlier system went the accentual/syllabic, numerically grounded prosody that
acted as the arbiter of the poem’s rhythmic structure. This left room for earlier patterns to
come to the fore again, if we were able to hear them. I believe these alternative,
proportional rhythmic patterns are latent in poetry going back as far as Shakespeare, and
that they probably echo rhythms of naturally-heightened speech that “the people” have
always used for occasions of formal and informal emotional stress: prayers, curses, jokes,
epithets, rants, hymns, proverbs, riddles, as well as the richly metaphorical ways that
people have caught one another’s attention in daily exchanges of vital conversation. Such
bits of speech are oral in character, and thus neither poetry nor prose in our literate
society. Many “heightened speech” patterns settle out as metrical (“a penny saved is a
penny earned;” “it takes one to know one,” that sort of thing). High states of emotion,
even vetted over centuries, tend to sweep language before them into little sloughs of
regularity, because that is how we elicit vital attention. Politicians know this, preachers
know this, people having arguments know this, and so do people praying and singing.
But stored inside the heads of every normal human language-user are thousands of
phrase-patterns short and long, that we call upon each day to build our sentences with.
We don’t speak word by word, but phrase by phrase. Poets are people who simply build
their comments with a different mandate than those writing prose, or than those who are merely talking. I am making the contention that it is possible and even desirable to build poetry using phrases that fit together in the patterns of proportional rather than metrical/numerical symmetry. Both make poems. For some reason a collective “we” of poets, during the twentieth century, decided to switch from one kind of symmetry to another. A similar switching process from regular/metrical to proportional standard is now going on with the tuning system used on pianos. Music and poetry, as close cousins, regularly gesture in tandem to one another throughout history.

It is my contention here that those practicing the Craft of Poetry (I’m using capital letters to mean “at the highest level” or “at the level of an art”) in this first decade of the twenty first century find themselves guided by, and somewhat torn between, two fundamental and diametrically opposed traditions that I am calling the formal and the free. Both traditions have existed in the arts as long as human history, and generally trade places from time to time like the flipping of Earth’s magnetic poles. We are likely at the end of one of these major flips. Both traditions are equally valid, and equally powerful. That is, neither is prior and therefore more legitimate, because each is fully “natural” or grounded in whatever set of bedrock phenomena lies at the base of being human. Thus, in contemporary English-language poetry’s iteration of a seemingly infinite number of ways to manifest free verse, and no sign yet of a system to contain, describe or direct this unruly hodge-podge, the best poets are, nonetheless, not wallowing in a tar pit of false freedom. Instead, they are, with varying degrees of consciousness of this fact, engaging in a new relationship with very old rules. But many poets and teachers of poetry think the only safe and valid standards for grounding the craft of poetry continue to reside in the
formal rules of traditional English prosody that prevailed for 400-plus years. The work by those poets and critics who have been, over the past roughly 100 years, thoughtfully constructing a new set of rules to describe what poetry is actually doing, has somehow not yet gathered enough momentum to serve as a scaffolding for the School for Poets many of us would like to see. And meanwhile the older scaffolding and its formal rules have been tarted up in the scientific jargon of linguistics, and reinstated as a system of mind-boggling complexity completely useless to most poets and teachers of poetry. For those brave teachers who wade through them and try to formulate them into a practical curriculum for their classes, the result is glassy-eyed students overwhelmed by information they are unable to patch into their store of previous knowledge in the short time allotted. What happens is that this older, essentially obsolete, but beautifully complex system of formal rules is given much lip service as “the basics” all poets should at least make a token visit to, but it is taught in a context that is practically useless for actual application by aspiring poets as they wade into the “unbrokered, teeming commonality of contemporary poetry” (Bryan and Olsen, viii).

I would like to talk about “the formality of the free” in contemporary poetry. Free verse poets as far back as William Carlos Williams have continued to point out that there is nothing essentially “free” in what they are doing. For many years (and I would hesitate to be more precise than that) free verse poets could locate themselves largely by the rigorous tradition they were diverging from: a kind of negative mirror image that kept them from doubting that, at least, they had not violated the borderline between poetry and
–what? Whatever other kinds of writing “out there” were definitely not poetry. I think we need to check if that boundary still exists, how do we tell, and does it matter? This paper is only a very small foray into that huge country.
2. POETRY AND ORDINARY SPEECH

“Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem. . . .”
(Martin Heidegger, “Language”)

“The mazzera was not difficult to understand because her accent was exceptionally pure. Moreover, her speech was a kind of chanting, a mode that is sometimes affected in southern Corsica when serious matters are under discussion. . . . she spoke in magic intonations, like a great actress, or as the sybils must have uttered their oracles. . . . She had been speaking almost without pause, in melodious, rhythmic phrases, verging on music; now she passed naturally into song. In that high thin poignant voice in which Corsican women mourn the dead, she began to chant, her hands clutched together, her eyes turned to the evening sky, repeating: ‘May the Blessed Mercy hold me as witness, I spoke only what was written, what was written!’ “
(Dorothy Carrington, The Dream Hunters of Corsica)

Let’s begin by allowing ourselves a huge assumption about the origin of human language: All early humans were poets. That is, when members of our species Homo sapiens finally (after much hissing, grunting, pointing, keening) burst into full-bore “talk,” we were speaking (maybe singing) what we would call poetry. By this I mean poetry was the language of everyday speech. This assumption—poetry is pristine as both a reason for breaking into language at all, and as the way for humans to speak—places “poetry” in a special and specific, you might say strategic, position in the evolution of human speaking habits: right up against the wall of the silence that precedes words. Poetry becomes a gatekeeper.

The opposite assumption about the origins and nature of human speaking, and the one most commonly in use, I believe, is that human language emerged from and continues to rest upon the bedrock necessity for practical communication (“Quick! gimmee spear, Bubba, lion coming!”). This allows us to trace what we do now with human language backwards through tens of thousands of years, and allows us to take comfort in a unifying practice that is analogous to a law of physics, that peoples of all
cultures have always engaged in (at least) two levels of discourse, the primary one being “the ordinary language of everyday speech.” Poetry would thus be seen as a divergence from, a refinement of, a specialized form of daily-spontaneously-generated, plain old loose talk. Strategically, then, it would be a player out in left field trying vainly and constantly to keep up the standards so the family doesn’t disgrace itself.

These two contradictory ideas about the origin and fundamental nature of human speech are carried forward in the dichotomy between “formal” and “free” in the practice of poetry and in poetry criticism. [Aha! I insert here: which word is attached to which assumption?] Yet it seems to me this split is like the whine of a persistent mosquito that badly wants a good swat, so that we can listen to the deeper question “What is poetry actually doing in the world?” And this question leads to a much more interesting, paradoxical set of answers: 1) Poetry (out in left field) can do nothing but evoke, it is always at least one degree removed from the primary, physical world; or 2) Poetry (over by the wall) partakes of the most fundamental, sacred form of cosmic motion, breathing, and as such is a natural force in itself with power to create new realities. Another way of framing this situation would be to speak of “Poetry as a specialized form of prose,” or “Poetry as a specialized form of conversation.” One of the “specializations” in either case, is music.
3. INTERLUDE

*Question: How do you know something is a poem?*

*Answer: If you send it off to a literary magazine and it gets published under the section called “Poetry.”*  
(William Stafford at a typical poetry reading)

Lewis Turco’s *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics* lists eight pages of poetic forms, many of them from non-English-language poetry traditions. The opening words of the fourth chapter are: “In order to identify the form of a poem you have been reading, do the following . . . ” (32). But the problem is, how do you know if you’ve been reading a poem at all? The shape on the page is not going to tell you the answer, it’s only going to give you a hint. You can take a paragraph from a newspaper article and put it into a poem-like shape, but it does not thereby become “a real poem.” In the dry words of the literary linguist Richard Bradford:

“Clearly with free verse the relation between the metrical and syntactic structure of the text is infinitely flexible, and as a consequence it becomes the duty of the reader to impose an accepted framework of interpretive conventions—such as the possibility that typographic spacing is a signal to the reader to foreground elements of the syntactic structure—that in the interpretive context of prose would not be invoked” (14).

If it looks like a poem, it might be a poem. But it might not. And if it doesn’t look like a poem, it might be one anyhow.

Words like “form,” “framework,” “structure,” “genre,” and even “technique” have been interchanged for decades by serious poets and critics (and dictionaries, I might
add) so that it’s practically as hopeless to sort them out as it would be to separate “soul” from “spirit,” or “rock” from “stone.”

Excellent free verse poems are obviously being written without any reference to traditional rules of English prosody, but extracting standards of structure or form from such fine work has proven difficult. New poets need to trust that they can know what a poem is, not simply what it is not.

W.S. Merwin says “What are here called open forms are in some concerns the strictest. Here only the poem itself can be seen as its form” (Twentieth Century American Poetics, 295).

What if we assume that Poem is a form? Not necessarily a form of anything (except of course speech or language, whatever that is); not a term jostling for position and power in a hierarchy of genres, structures, and compositions; but a distinct language phenomenon that we can learn to recognize before we begin to identify. Developing an instinct for proportion might be one of the recognition tools.
4. BREATHING AND BEATING

“If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep calling in, the breath, the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse which has not (due, I think, to the smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept of foot) has not been sufficiently observed or practiced. . . .”

(Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”)

“Every metrical poem announces a relationship to the idea of order at the outset. . . . Free-verse poems do not commit themselves so soon to a particular order, but they are poems, so they commit themselves to the idea of its possibility, and, as soon as recurrences begin to develop, an order begins to emerge. The difference is, in some ways, huge.”

(Robert Hass, Twentieth Century Pleasures)

Like the early Ionic Greek philosophers, many modern and contemporary poet-critics have passionately advocated a single element as a candidate for the defining essence that allows a group of words to be regarded as a poem. Since the jumping-off place for this paper is the statement “the poems must start with the music,” I must stay with elements of poetry that have to do with music, and more specifically with the rhythmic elements of music. This means separating blood from flesh in the usual artificial way that happens when a “part” is isolated from a complex body and treated as a whole in itself.

At times throughout the twentieth century, as free verse gained a foothold in the canon, articles would appear in journals that attempted to articulate what was happening, and to set up some guidelines for incorporating free verse into the old system. Many of these articles, if they had been papers on physics, astronomy, chemistry, archaeology, would have been pioneer works that later became the founding documents of the new system. We don’t really have a new system of free verse prosody (at least, that’s my contention and understanding), but there are many of these potential founding documents
Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse,” and Robert Hass’s chapter “Listening and Making” in his book *Twentieth Century Pleasures* are two such model essays upon which a system could be constructed. Olson talks about the syllable and the “breath” in a way that makes him seem like a reincarnation of an early Ionic or Vedic philosopher. Apparently the practice of ancient Sanskrit poetry assumed the sound of a single syllable (the famous “OM”) as the hinge upon which the continued existence of the universe depended. Poets, therefore, as sound-mongers at the most serious and primary level, were charged with the task of regulating the universe by their craft. Olson, in this essay, is passionately notating a way in which the poetry of his time (1950) has obviously broken away from one particular metrical model on which to base rhythm and is making or seeking another. Olson’s candidate for the new metrics was the human breath, and by extension, the voice that is sometimes projected from it. He coins the term “projective verse,” which never caught on, and was eventually subsumed by the less poetic term “free verse.”

In music, the split between meter and rhythm is sometimes articulated as the difference between pulse-based, dance music and breath-based, vocal music. Pulse vs. breath: the pulse being regular, the breath being also somewhat regular, but less so, and subject to controlled variation. These two bodily functions are often cited as the natural foundation on which the tradition of poetry rests. Yet these functions are different in the perceived quality of their regularity, and I believe this is a significant point. The pulse is generally measured by numbers, beats per second; the breath is more obviously variable; it fits into a proportional framework, a symmetry of similarity rather than duplication. The language of proportion is not numbers, yet there is no other language for it either, so
we translate it into numbers (and the words for numbers). Often a proportional phenomenon—such as increasing a recipe for two people to serve five, and therefore increasing all the ingredients the right amount, so the proportions between ingredients remain the same—will use the same terminology as a simple comparison such as a fraction; and we forget that we are speaking of two different processes with the same words.

Robert Hass, in his essay on prosody “Listening and Making,” came close to articulating the pulse/breath split, especially when he griped about using the heartbeat as the origin and foundation for poetic rhythm: “But if you think about it for a minute, it seems obvious that it [the heartbeat] is a little monotonous to account for much” (108). He goes on in this essay to ease away from the traditional, although very complex, metrical system of prosody that has as its core the iamb, and its duple stress or pulse variation. He doesn’t talk about the breath versus the pulse, but instead he complicates the pulse idea by noting that stresses in poems of all sorts, even contemporary free verse poems, tend to clump themselves into various patterns other than simply the usual hierarchy of “trimeter,” “tetrameter,” “pentameter” groupings used in traditional prosody. By default, he includes the breath in his system simply by drawing upon the natural pausing place, or “caesura” that occurs within many lines of poems. On either side of the breathing space may occur a number of accents. Because he describes these groupings numerically as 3/2, 2/2, 4/3, and so on, his system gives the impression that he is speaking of proportions rather than numbers as governing the rhythm of the poems.

However, to my ear and mind, he is actually still talking about metrics, that is the pulse rather than the breath. In his examples he emphasizes stress to the exclusion of
almost every other element of musical/poetic rhythm. His stressed syllables are capitalized, and thus distinct from the lower-case, unstressed syllables, with no allowance for variations between. This implies a reliance on a duple symmetry, a digital rather than an analog concept. It felt to me as if Hass were trying to break out of a convention that assumes variations in stress to be the only notable indicator of rhythm in poetry, but not quite pulling off the breakaway. A discussion of the distinction between rhythm and meter (metre) in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* includes a list with a number of characteristics for each that might well apply to poetry. I include several here.

“*Metre:* A series of articulations or time-points which form measures; usually regular; measures are contiguous: no gaps between successive measures; metric accent stems from the listener’s active engagement with the music, the fall-out from counting/foot-tapping behaviour. . .

*Rhythm:* A series of durations or time-spans which form groups; usually not regular, as groups typically are comprised of varying durations within a group; rhythmic groups are continuous: no gaps within a group; rhythmic accent stems from phenomenal aspects of the musical surface such as differences in loudness, duration, contour, etc.” (278).

I believe what comes through here by way of analogy is that you can scan a poem for a recognizable accent/syllable pattern, and if the pattern turns out to be complex (i.e. somewhat irregular) as it will inevitably be if the poem is any good, the irregularity either belongs to the meter as part of its official description, or it belongs to a different element altogether. The question here is whether that different element is also structured in some fashion, or is something of a wild card.
It seems to me that if we’re trying to set up or at least recognize a set of patterns to describe contemporary poetic practice (and whatever we’re doing, we still call it “poetry”) we must allow all traits onto the table. That would include “loudness, contour, duration” as part of the rhythmic aspect of the work. But before moving to other rhythmic traits that I am lumping under the word “proportional,” I want to look at the kingpin of traditional English metrics, the iamb, “the one who has the gold and makes the rules.”
5. THE IAMB RULES

(Even though it’s a trochee)

“SLAVE: When you were up there in the clouds, did you see anyone else flying around there?
TRYGAEUS: No --- except there were two or three lyric poets I noticed.
SLAVE: What were they doing?
TRYGAEUS: Flitting about collecting dithyrambs. You know the sort of stuff, ‘O-the-fair-air-and-the-breeze-floating-free’ and so on and so on.”

(Aristophanes, Peace)

The iamb is to traditional English verse prosody what the atom is to physics. I say that with tongue in cheek, because for years the atom was thought of as a “fundamental building block” of the entire material universe. Then, physicists gained the capacity and the psychic distance to look more closely. They found that the atom was neither adamantine nor indivisible, even though “atom” had held place for many centuries as default term for “something than which nothing is smaller.” Eventually, the smaller and smaller atomic sub-particles stopped being “particles”; they stopped being nouns even, and became terms with a welter of competing functions. These functions would wink into and out of existence according to a principle called Uncertainty. The atom has become a poetic concept as much as a physical one.

Thus with the iamb. It is the word traditionally used to describe the most common and thus most basic rhythmic unit of English speech, the sound of which is characterized by its tendency to organize the syllables of its words into stronger and weaker accents to extend the possibilities of meaning. The assumption of these strong and weak accent patterns into metrical prosody, with the simple weak/strong iamb as the core indicator, is complicated because many words have more than two syllables; because the way a given word is spoken inside a sentence or a poem differs from how it is spoken alone, out of
context; and because the grid of metrical prosody is laid upon verse irrespective of the number of syllables, meanings, pitch and duration variations and accentual nuances of the individual words. To reduce these complications, a pre-existing structure is wheeled in to impose order: music.

In Europe, from the classical Latin and Greek period through the Renaissance, various musical notation systems were used for vocal compositions. Such notations were largely based upon and subservient to perceived speech rhythms, but these were the formal speech rhythms of Greek and Latin still being used for sacred and public occasions. In fact, “ordinary speech” was likely not thought of as having rhythm at all, since it was generally an entirely different language in any case. When Greek and Latin pronunciation (likely dragged along by the various vernaculars) made a shift away from quantitative and towards accented rhythms, vocal music had to shift too, as well as its notation. This led, very roughly speaking, to a huge change over a period of hundreds of years, from a supple, breath-based, proportional notation system to a symmetrical one based on accents, or numbers. As more instrumental music became included in notation systems, the close alignment between music and words became looser. Eventually poetry (a spouse reluctant to give up the relationship?) began to model itself upon musical notation, rather than the other way around. And when poets of the 16th century, like Skelton and Wyatt, brought English poetry to the top of the ramp down which it glided for over 400 years, governed and characterized by a formal and elegant system of accent-based metrical patterns, these poets were intuitively drawn to the iamb as the most orally obvious, thus most musically rhythmical English speech marker, so that all other patterns
then and since are often seen to be simply variations or extensions of it. How many beginning poets have sat in prosody classes analyzing lines of verse and wondering to themselves: “How can she tell us ‘To be or not to be, that is the question’ is iambic pentameter, when it so obviously is not!” One person’s trochee is another person’s inverted iamb, and that’s only the beginning of the problem.

The degree to which the aspiring poet is expected to abide by a set of rules has, I would imagine, varied immensely through time and across cultures. I included a set of examples as a prologue to this paper, just to indicate how rigorously the poetic craft has been regulated by many societies in the near and distant past. I believe Robert Pinsky’s remarks on prosody in his 1998 handbook *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* is pretty typical of the cautious, soft-pedaled approach being taken in English-language poetry nowadays. He tries hard to avoid the terminology, while still getting across the concepts. He begins his prosody chapter by saying “The material in this chapter is not as important as that in the first two chapters” (52). A little later on he repeats the standard caveat about the rhythm of each poem being unique, then lays out his own version of what has come to be the doctrinal approach of teachers when faced with students who have difficulty “hearing” the metrical patterns. He insists, as others have done before him, that the accentual/syllabic system of analyzing and prescribing poetry is always approximate. Every poem has many variations; and if we call something ‘iambic pentameter’ we mean only that this is the *prevailing* pattern. We have names for many of the most commonly recurring exceptions, generally lumped under the term “substitutions”; but mostly if you pay attention to the strong beats in each line—ignoring the words themselves and their meanings—you’ll find that some variation of the iamb, linked with some number of feet,
persists as an underlying, a signature metric of the poetry, very difficult to avoid if you’re talking poem and not prose. Pinsky says that trying to analyze poetry by what he called “The ‘thunketta’ approach,” which means trying to isolate every rhythmic pattern as if it were a template in itself, is hopelessly complicated, and that “the most information about the unique, varying vocal reality is given by the simplest, most modest set of terms: something minimal and therefore approaching the universal, like the lines on a ruler or the grid of rectangles an artist might use to copy an image” (56).

Thus, to get back to Hamlet, if you notice that “To be, or not to be, that is the question” has eleven syllables, this is irrelevant; if you hear only four strong accents in the line instead of five, then you have heard wrong. The fact that for the statement to make sense in any possible dramatic interpretation the actor might choose, the iambic pentameter rhythm has to be totally quashed out of recognition, does not change the fact that the meter owes its fundamental loyalty to this ghostly, constant presence. And all the other potentially musical qualities of this small piece of poetry—dynamics, pitch, tempo, duration, silence—all are considered peripheral to the invariant archetype.

My question is this: if there are so many exceptions to the rule, if it is indeed the exceptions that distinguish poetry from doggerel (as all the metrical prosody theorists insist), and if these many exceptions are illustrated with examples ready at hand to be memorized (which they are, if you look them up in a literary linguistics manual of prosody), how is this more simple or universal than a “thunketta” system which might require the poet to spend 12 years memorizing reams of poetry and learning to internalize poetic patterns directly by examples? As Homer did, and thousands of others before and after him. As many of us have unconsciously done through years of reading
and speaking poems. If iambic pentameter is so flexible that it can function as a universal touchstone for rhythm in poetry, then it seems to me we’re back at a kind of square one: the question “What is a poem?” becomes the same as “What is iambic pentameter?”

And a much smaller matter such as “Why are we instructed to call a strong/weak foot ‘inverted iamb’ instead of ‘trochee’?” is treated as the annoying prattle of the naïve beginning poet, when in fact it seems to me to be the very kind of issue we should be discussing. After all, if we need “inverted iambs” (and their running dogs!) in order to make our lines statistically legitimate, this may a sign that the iambic pentameter itself has stopped resounding in the collective ear as the core rhythm of English poetry. Yet beginning poets are expected to launch their craft from what remains an essentially reductionist and arithmetically-based prosody. The accent/syllabic system, no matter how flexibly it is interpreted, is conceptually bound by its tie to the numerically-conceived aspects of musical meter. The vocabulary of such a system will only stretch so far before it becomes too thin to cover its flock.

Nonetheless, those seeking to go deeper into the art, are taught a simplified version of what is skimmed from the scientific disciplines of linguistics and literary prosody, whose cognoscenti themselves cannot agree even on a definition of what “accent” is most likely to mean. What combination of volume, length, and intensity? Do length and accent actually fundamentally differ, or are they aspects of something larger? How do we account for the degrees of stress? Should we scan a word or phrase the same way inside a poem as when it’s just part of an ordinary sentence? Why or why not?

These questions, articulated and debated by literary linguists themselves, cause many
poets to feel puzzled and confused, because even in a university program such formal elements are not examined carefully enough to let us relish the full weight of what we have gotten ourselves into.
6. NEW PATTERNS FROM OLD PATTERNS

“Our concern is with the roots of rhythm in language, and from this point of view meter is a late and artistically sophisticated concept --- ‘an exercise in abstraction’ by both the poet and the listener. . . . Whether meter is itself an abstraction of song-melos or of speech-melos (I believe both versions to be true, as well as a few others), its presence in poetry is the result not of any direct imperatives for magical or social action but of the conscious imposition of a conceptual pattern upon language. Its effects in poetry have been rich and subtle, but what might be forgotten is that the roots themselves are still present in language --- rhythmical forces which are themselves capable of rich and varied combinations. Every poet, however skillful his use of meter, still seems to feel these forces actively working beneath his metrical pattern, directing his rhythms into different and often unexpected kinds of syncopations.”

(Andrew Welsh, Roots of Lyric)

“It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world. . . .”

(Elizabeth Bishop, “At the Fishouses”)

Andrew Welsh, in his 1978 study of the origins of lyric poetry, finesses the division between “formal” and “free” in English poetics by the assumption that English poetry’s metric rhythms are only part of a larger set of rhythmic speech patterns, and that these speech patterns were not simply a one-time-only template for the rules of metrical prosody, but continue to be prior to these rules, and at least retain the potential to generate new ones. While his book addresses several possible “roots” of English lyric poetry, what I learned the first time I encountered the book years ago was that poetry can still be sought and heard “outside the book.” People still talk poetically in naturally heightened everyday speech situations such as curses, jokes, riddles, proverbs, prayers, words of comfort, grief, or wild joy, where we find ourselves coming out with phrases and sentences that rely as much on the rhythmic patterns as upon the meaning of the
words to make their impact. Children on the playground taunt one another in rhythmic chants that they have not learned from their parents, but which keep reappearing generation after generation. (Think of the rhythm of the taunt: NA na na NA NA; the pitch changes are essential to the rhythmic impact as well as the longer duration of the final two syllables. Words are not needed here, the sneer is implicit in the rhythm.)

People in states of emotional stress discover they are speaking words of endearment, grief, anger that may sound like stupid clichés if they stop to listen, but which bear a tone and rhythm that fulfils a need. The idea that the universal wellspring for both new and old poetic rhythms is the human soul aroused (aesthetically or emotionally), means that some of these spontaneous folk proto-poems may come from the darker side of human urgent behavior, such as the curse or the crude joke. Nonetheless, certain phrases—for better or for worse--tend to settle in the public mind in rhetorical units that can be triggered readily at appropriate times even without prior instruction. Such patterns would very likely be tapped into by individual poets, because poetry has become the practice of formally intensified, or heightened speech. A certain kind of information is conveyed by “dick-head,” or “the wine-dark sea” that doesn’t lend itself readily to a paraphrase.

But if we confine ourselves only to “heightened speech patterns” as a generator of poetry, this leaves out most of what people say. A high percentage of our daily talk is background noise of very low voltage, basically to reassure us that we still occupy a valuable spot on the planet. Everyday speech at various times in history has been regarded as either rough poetry (Whitman, and the “noble savage” idea), or prose (Wordsworth and others). In either case it is seen as a wellspring of poetry in some vague but romantic fashion. Yet scientifically and paradoxically, everyday speech is neither
prose nor poem *until it is written down*. We are a literate culture and even if human conversation was once in prehistoric times 100% poetry or nearly so, it ceased to be in most of the world long time ago.

People generally don’t talk one word at a time; we all talk in clumps, in phrases. These phrases arrive from various deep holes in our minds. Very old are these word-blocks, and I would venture that poets are people who use them to construct a special kind of house. These few examples, outside of the poems I extracted them from, are only potentially rhythmic (“I walked out today,” “It’s coming back to me,” “I put the book aside,” “Just pop one in your mouth,” “waiting for the plumber I still haven’t called,” “Where are you now? the one on the left says.”) and not innately poetic for the most part. For that to happen, the poets must do something with them that is not done otherwise. In this paper I am making the suggestion that what good contemporary free-verse poets do is to combine them into proportional patterns.

Here we come to a key question: to what degree is a poem invented, and to what degree assembled? The traditional oral-epic poet’s hoard of pre-memorized word clumps is something we believe we no longer possess, but I think this is not so. Paradoxically, serious contemporary poets are forced to practice their art as if poetry were a specialized language that rises from the individual, creative imagination newly minted, one word at a time. The same general public that holds this view, on the other hand, tends to regard literary poetry as a predetermined, formal, ritualized and vaguely spiritual language, something they can turn off their brains and settle into (very respectfully) as into a warm bath. In this, they are stubbornly adhering to a tradition that goes back thousands of years.
In his essay on prosody, Robert Hass gives an example of a poetically-patterned clump of ordinary speech from a crude but comical conversation he overheard in a bar, analyzing it metrically into a 4/3 pattern. Maybe not everybody, but word-conscious individuals at least, can “hear” patterned language, whether it be written or spoken. You could experiment by taking any sentence from a textbook or newspaper article and giving it random line breaks. The chances of it thus becoming a poem would be quite small.


A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity.

Bradford assumed the line breaks alone turned the prose into a poem, and I disagree because I hear neither metrical pattern nor internal proportion. Context alone cannot do all the work of making something into an art, and poetry is an art. Similar experiments could be done by simply listening, as Hass did, to what people are saying around us each day. Kim Stafford says that he keeps a notebook in his shirt pocket at all times for recording conversation snippets that might well grace the page of a future poem or piece of well-wrought prose. Cormac McCarthy’s dialogues are often almost biblical in rhythm, and yet carry the force and conviction of street rhetoric. Perhaps such random listening habits by contemporary writers could be formalized to constitute a branch of language education. Whereas in earlier—especially prehistoric—times, something like “the people” was a more cogent and manageable entity, there are too many of us now split into too many groups, so we no longer cohere well enough to make a story together.
Poetry is a way to speak well; it is the speech of “energy-discharge,” as Charles Olson says, not a phenomenon that can emerge or thrive in an atmosphere of apathy or laziness. As I have said, the same general public to whom “poetry” is a conventional set of sermon-like ideas presented in a small arena of mix-and-match rhythms, is also accustomed to think of poetry as a specialized art, not as part of the normal training a child receives on her way to becoming an adult. Yet ethnographic studies have shown that as late as the twentieth century, certain tribal societies were still actively engaged in a way of life that included poetry as a base level way of speaking. As one example, Martín Prechtel writes of this in his book *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar*, an account of his life in a Guatamalan village among the Tzutujil Mayans during the 1970s and 1980s before he was driven out by the wars that effectively destroyed this culture [I have omitted bracketing quotation marks to avoid confusion with the author’s]:

By speaking well, one’s speech magically developed one into a person, layer by layer... Initiated people speak a language called Speech of Enlarged People (“Big Twenty”), referring to the bulkier character of one’s soul as one adds layers (118).

Simple example of everyday speech’s poetry:

“*Poq chic rubi nbij rajawal ral rilajj vinaaq, pinaaq, conoy ruchi ctie, rumac poq rie cdta.*”

“A great amount of its name it spoke, that one, a woman’s child of the Old Complete Being [Twenty] searching for the mouth of Our Mother, because of the sharpness of Our Father’s Teeth.”
This translates more or less as follows:

“A great amount of its name it spoke,” means: He made a lot of noise according to his kind.


“Searching for the mouth of Our Mother” translates as: Looking for the lake, water.

“Because of the sharpness of Our Father’s Teeth” is how one says: In this great heat of the sun.

Or all together the meaning is assembled:

“The jaguar made a lot of noise, searching for water in his thirst!” (120, 121).

If simply asking for a drink of water was once poetry in many languages, we have indeed lost much. Nonetheless the generation of musically rhythmic and symbolically rich phrases is a very old and well-honed human habit. If we can think of poetry as a gate-keeping organism that prowls in the realm between the lands of Wordless and Word, allowing them to interact in the healthy way they must, then maybe we can begin to understand a different definition of knowledge.

“Knowledge” in many pre-literate cultures, seems to refer to a mental terrain that humans occupied before they separated themselves from animals and learned to speak. It is a highly developed sixth-sense, pre-conscious awareness that comes to us by way of our particular manner of being in and moving through the natural world. “Knowledge” by this view is intrinsically secret: once spoken, it becomes belief; it becomes a matter about which arguments can be made, persuasion brought to bear, opinions formed. Many kinds
of “epiphanies” that come all at once to poets, scientists, and other folks, do not arrive by way of words, yet are no less certain for that reason. What we call “intuition” is a non-verbal but perfectly trustworthy phenomenon. The concept of proportion and with it the spaces and harmonies that are its manifestation, cannot fully be translated into either words or numbers. Humans developed as creatures of language, and as such we have relinquished a huge body of knowledge. In opening our mouths to give voice and shape to the world, we condemned ourselves to a kind of perpetual forgetfulness. We cannot both know and tell what we know.

Poetry operates in the place of emergence between knowledge and belief, and the turbulence caused by that constant emerging shows up as a split between “ordinary speech,” and “formal, or heightened, or poetic speech.” At best, poetry is simply the only way that language can impart knowledge.

This idea seems to offer a cosmic underpinning for a way of moving forward in the craft of poetry towards a formality based on the proportions continuously available to us in the world we know in our bodies and minds, if not in our brains. The role of our brains then would be to devise strategies to recognize and reinforce what our intuition brings us as we keep returning to “the known world” for guidance.

To what degree brand new rhythmic, metaphorically-charged, “poetic” speech patterns are actually being formed in English nowadays, and/or old ones are being put to use subconsciously in new venues (advertising, blogs, bumper stickers, political slogans, slang, text messages, words and patterns from the languages of immigrants, film dialogue, song lyrics) is difficult to sort out. Everyday speech at its poetry-generating best has, in historical times, been assumed to be the speech of people who are alive,
people who have something passionate about their lives, who are exiles, minority groups, prisoners and slaves, the downtrodden but still capable of singing. Nowadays we likely should not expect vital new poetic energy to come from the voice of the majority on their cell phones, or from the conversations of those folks pushing their shopping carts around K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Safeway, Rite-Aid, Bi-Mart, with their flabby pasty bodies and dead eyes. Yet any literary tradition becomes stagnant as soon as it is no longer being orally fed. What is feeding our poetry now, what music?
By way of illustrating the idea of proportion being an important governing rhythm in contemporary free verse, let’s go into a poetry bar. Here in one corner we have William Stafford, who has just finished answering an angry formalist’s question, “Well, what’s your definition of a poem, then?” by saying laconically, “A poem is anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention” (Writing the Australian Crawl, 61).

Right away Jack Gilbert gets up to declaim the opening lines of his poem “Bring in the Gods” from his book Refusing Heaven:

Bring in the gods, I say, and he goes out. When he comes back and I know they are with him, I say, Put tables in front

He gets our attention with a rousing pentameter that is not iambic, followed by a little tail. Both lines do this, and if you look through the rest of the poem you will allow this as its prevailing rhetoric, the tails varying each time. The lines have “swing” but it is not metric, but it is swing nonetheless and you immediately enter the poem with trust. Elements of silence and duration are key in these lines also: you would likely linger on the word “gods,” after which you might pause the length of an entire word, lower your voice for a quick “I say,” and then lower your voice even further as you linger on the final word of the pentameter, “out.”
After Gilbert has resumed his chair Anne Marie Macari rises to give us a few opening lines from “Book One” of her collection *Gloryland*:

Light *was* being, held by her own hands or
touched like water burning bare skin.
In the beginning meant learning to see: a thousand
kinds of green, the vine-crawl along rocks,
the groping mouths of flowers. In the beginning

The opening line has ten syllables, but is not iambic pentameter. Rather it is divided by the caesura after “being” into a pattern of four and six syllables. But the first three words are a declamation that, to be fully musical, would require an equal *duration* with the six syllables of the second part, thus imposing a duple symmetry on top of an irregular one. After a second line of five strong accents against eight syllables, she produces three pretty clear iambic trimeters in a row: “a thousand kinds of green,” “the vine-crawl along rocks,” “the groping mouths of flowers.” But this meter does not then move in to dominate the poem, it only reinforces the “attention” that has been garnered by the original proportional pattern.

Now the bar is filled with mutters and rustlings as some poets stuff pieces of paper into their backpacks, while others pull them out. David Wagoner stands up to read the opening lines from “The Silence of the Stars” from his collection *Traveling Light*.

*When Laurens van der Post one night  In the Kalihari Desert told the Bushmen  He couldn’t hear the stars  Singing, they didn’t believe him. They looked at him, Half-smiling. They examined his face To see whether he was joking*

There is a silence after this, and a young poet from the back whispers, in proportional rhythm, “But THAT sounds just like PROSE to ME!” I agree with this young poet, since I hear neither meter nor rhythm in Wagoner’s lines; he has written a lovely small essay.
Before the rising hubbub can erupt into full argument, Barbara Molloy-Olund slips quietly from her bar stool and starts to read from “Blockstarken.”

They must have taken our breath with them, these words,/ now no more/ than the substance of feathers,

The first line has nine syllables and I hear four strong accents, but to my ear the second stanza has no truly obvious stress pattern, and is best spoken in a monotone with small pauses making groupings of two, three, and then seven syllables. This is not a random prose pattern; it has a swing.

I decide to leave the bar at the point when Henry Reed is persuaded to read the opening stanza of his beautiful 1914 anti-war poem “Naming of Parts.” The formalists shift uncomfortably in their chairs. In fact, we all do, for Mr. Reed slams poetry patterns alongside prose patterns, like prisoners piled cheek by jowl into a flatbed truck poking and shoving one another in constant territorial disputes.

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

Every time we are lulled into thinking the dactyls have prevailed:

“Today we have naming of parts,” Japonica,” “Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,” he throws a spanner into the works: “We had daily cleaning,” “We shall have what to do after firing.” This is the ugly prose monotone of the Instruction Manual. There is no way that the prose and poetry rhythms in this poem are going to join
hands and merge into some higher, holistic pattern. Is this free verse? Is it metrical? Is it proportional? No, it’s a poem carrying out the kind of mission that only poetry can perform.
8. ONCE MORE INTO THE MUSIC

“Bernardo de Sahagun [in 16th century Mexico] . . . took down hundreds of Aztec songs. He tried to apply the rules of textual criticism to several songs on the same theme all attributed to Prince Netzalhuacoyotl, but failed to reconstruct an original. In their deceptive similarity, each song, when written down, was not a variant but an original.”

(Ivan Ilich, The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind)

“The rhythmical ictus is simply a “dip” of the voice, an alighting place sought by the rhythm at intervals of every two or three notes in order to renew or sustain its flight until it reaches its final resting place. The ictus must be divorced from any idea of force or lengthening out. It is a common fault to assimilate it to the accent of the words and give it their value. In itself it may be strong or weak; it only gains its dynamic or quantitative value from the note which happens to correspond to it. If the ictus chances to be strong by its position, it does not appropriate the intensity it commands, and it keeps only the function of an alighting or resting place. It can be readily understood that this must be so in order to safeguard the unity of the compound beat.”

(Gregory Suñol, Text Book of Gregorian Chant)

Do the poems begin with the music? If so, what music?

In approaching this enormous question, already fully troped with the nuclear fission-worthy possibilities contained in the words “poetry,” “begin” and “music, I feel like an innocent child crossing a pond thinly covered with ice: with each step a new flare of cracks radiates out from the tiny foot, but the child, moving continually forward, sees only the shining surface ahead.

Nonetheless, at the risk of perpetrating severe implosions in the ice, I cannot close without coming back to the issue of music in poetry. Where do the ends leave off between the two, as leave off they must in order for each to go about its business in the world? What music is poetry aligning itself with when it is declared to emerge from, or at least be closely related to this other art? One of the final inner tubes (or ice floes) lyric poetry has to keep itself afloat, now that the poetic line seems to be gone, is “that swing.”

If our poems are not musical, at the very least, then what is left for them? Music may not
always be the root inspiration for each individual poem (there may be the image, the 
thought, the pearl of Other. . . ). Yet in the end, a poem always has a sonic and a rhythmic 
component that is in some way recognizable; otherwise it’s plain prose. Thus we continue 
to insist that poetry analysis sustain certain superficial similarities in these two terminally 
quixotic arts. Music itself has long been split by pretty much the same “formal” vs. “free” 
or “pulse” vs. “breath” divide that occurs in poetry. There are musical equivalents to the 
language of ordinary speech, such as “folk music,” “aleatory music,” or a variety of other 
practices where formal structure is either deliberately demolished or is impossible to 
extract by analysis. The regular time signatures and pulse or “beat” patterns of popular 
and classical music do not exist at all in much contemporary art music, nor do many of 
the sounds utilized in compositions necessarily come from what we would call “musical 
instruments.” To put it simply, there’s many a slip between the drum and the lip. Even 
much instrumental music is based on something other than the strong/weak stress pattern 
of the beat. Musicians such as C.P.E. Bach, for example, wrote “fantasies” in which there 
is neither time signature nor tempo, and the performer would seem to have total freedom 
to come out with a random collection of unstructured sounds. What happens, though, is 
something like what Charles Olson describes as the composing of a projective poem: 
“one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception” (175). That 
is, a kind of appropriate body emerges from the music despite the apparent freedom. 
Why? Likely because each phrase is related to the one before it, is “birthed” by it, and 
thus inclined to remain within the same proportional framework. This implies an organic 
kind of symmetry, and would mean that as the piece unfolds for the first time, a phrase 
would not need to be repeated in order to display a recognizable pattern. The instructions
in seventeenth and eighteenth century manuscripts for tuning keyboard temperaments, for example, regularly use words like “almost,” “approximate,” “appropriate,” and phrases such as “inclined to,” or “as sharp as the ear can bear” and regard them to be equal in precision to the numbers and equations of mathematics and science. Just so in poetry, free verse phrases should emerge riding upon the breath, its particularly appropriate of-the-moment loudness, strength, duration, pitch, and swellings, and each breath hands off to the next in a way that preserves an overall harmony. Involved in music and poetry is both the urgency of motion and its innate, simple limitations.

Again, if poetry begins with music, what music is that, exactly?

Steve Pinker in one of his many books about the nature of language, made an observation once about the verb that might be helpful. He said that irregular verbs make no sense, so we just have to memorize them; regular verbs, on the other hand, follow rules that we can just plug new words into. Irregular verbs, he says, are basically not being formed any more, as if they emerged once from a primal magma that hardened, and has never again attained molten state. Thus most new verbs are taken into languages as regular, so we don’t have to memorize each one as an individual any more, but can just carry around a simple few templates in our head to plug new words into whenever they happen to arrive.

The primary way English-language poets grounded themselves metrically for so many hundreds of years was by passing along the axiom that the primal standards for metrical prosody are the same as (not merely analogous to) those in music. In other words, speech had accents that closely enough approximated the idea of “beats” that it was fine to regulate verse according to musical patterns. These musical rhythms—and by
extension the verbal ones—were assumed to be grounded in the human body’s regularly recurring biological motions: the heartbeat, the breath. In Medieval music the fundamental musical tempo, the “tactus,” was based on the human pulse. However, that was only a tempo regulator, not a rhythmic one, something that verse has not needed for many centuries. Nonetheless, poets have felt the need for a fixed, a single, invariant standard at the heart of our craft, one that is sanctioned by nature. Then we can deviate from it, while keeping it around as a gyro every time we feel ourselves slipping off the straight and narrow too far.

But actually, a moveable standard works just as well, and is equally as natural. Recently in a workshop on modern piano scale design, the engineer leading the workshop said, when asked what he used as a guide for relative string lengths, “You have to come up with some kind of a standard that you personally can use as a point of reference.” Instrument builders for centuries have operated by this, sometimes literal, “rule of thumb.” It’s not that they are being unscientific, quite the contrary. They are setting up the framework inside which their complex of relationships will flourish. The differences between the standards of each piano scale designer are likely very small. But they are not relying upon something fixed and unchanging like the decay rate of an atomic nucleus, to guide all their measurements, _even to deviate from_, because the result would be, ironically, chaos. Adhering to a portable, a flexible standard is a little like building the house and taking the measurements afterwards. Such a builder really needs to know a house from a handsaw!

The moveable standard for a poet writing free verse would be her own personal collection of rhythmic patterns, gleaned (hopefully) from recurring beloved rhythms in
the landscape of her life. These patterns will be internalized and will feed into her own hoard, which she will draw upon when composing poems. Though this idea might seem to throw caution and standards to the wind, and bring us back to “free” again, I believe it does not. For, as each serious poet discovers, there is truly nothing free in free verse. What, ultimately, do we possess in the world that works as well as what we are most prone to when we act as our own urgently striving best selves?
9. POETRY IN THE FORM OF A BIRD

“He asked me this question: ‘What manner of solution have you found through divine illumination and inspiration? Is it identical with that which we obtain from speculative reflection?’ I replied: ‘Yes and no. Between the yes and the no, spirits take their flight from their matter, and heads are separated from their bodies . . .’”

(Ibn ‘Arab_ upon meeting Averroës)

In a Chinese fairy tale, the hidebound city council members are impatient with the earnest little old man who comes to offer them protection from the advancing armies of their enemy. When he tells them “I am a powerful dragon, that’s why I am able to offer you help,” they laugh him out of town. “Everyone knows what a Dragon looks like!” they shout. That’s the Dragon they will await.

Quite the opposite has become the case regarding a poem. Nobody knows for sure any more what a poem looks like, or sounds like, or scans like, or its proper subject matter, or if such questions are even decent. Because of the small percentage of people who read serious literature, and the even smaller percentage who admit that they like to read or write poetry, there is a great deal of social pressure to dumb-down poems, to present them in song lyric forms that “everybody knows” or at least used to know. But for an even smaller percentage of people who seek to practice the Craft of Poetry, a poem remains ultimately a creature in disguise, a kind of holy, immortal dragon whose presence in our midst we only find out about after it has left, by the vapor, the whiff in the air. As Osip Mandelstam wryly remarks in his marvelous riff on poetry disguised as a treatise on Dante: “We do not know things themselves; on the other hand, we are highly sensitive to the facts of their existence” (401). We could say the same for poems.

Poetry and music both have “pulse” and “breath” aspects. Like the ages-long political struggle between the Pope and the Crown in Europe, the vocal and instrumental
elements of music have struggled for dominance in that art. Will the music defer to the natural music of the words, or will the words be stuffed into the metrical requirements of the music? Both are very strong and willful powers. Amicable and fruitful marriage between the two is rarer than we admit.

We are less aware that a similar tension exists in poetry. The proportional rhythms hidden among the lines and stanzas of English poetry for centuries did not show up under the grid of metrical prosody. Even though English is considered an “accentual” language that with fair docility will render up its heightened speech patterns into a prosody based on the counting of “feet,” nonetheless, the other rhythm is always there as well. I believe that what was generally agreed upon as poetry for about four centuries, (insisting upon, as Richard Bradford says, “pentameter as the appropriate vehicle”), was able to ignore the more vocal, proportional aspects of poetic rhythm; in part because of a false sense that the accentual patterns were a constant and reliable musical signal, and in part because poets were reluctant to disengage poetry from meter because they didn’t believe it had enough music of its own to keep it from collapsing into prose. In one sense they were right, because the collective ear has now become too jaded to notice the difference. Ironically, a similar situation has somewhat recently occurred in music, where the single tuning system in use on pianos for the past 100 years, based on a notion of rigidly equal divisions of the octave’s twelve semitones, is now giving way slowly to a more diverse set of proportional tunings to allow greater nuances of intonation on the instrument. This change has generated much controversy between traditionalists and modernists, even though the advocates of the “new” more flexible system are actually returning to a much older practice.
I believe that a prosody grounded on the metrics of the iamb and the foot is no longer useful, and that we need to ground our craft upon the assumption that human poetically charged speech has its own reliable music, and that we have been using many more aspects of this speech-music than we realized, unconsciously and collectively for generations. Studying “the basics” means going way beyond metrical verse. As the robot slowly discovered in Stanislaw Lem’s science fiction tale “Trurl’s Electronic Bard”:

“ . . . the construction of the machine itself was child’s play in comparison with the writing of the program . . . in order to program a poetry machine, one would first have to repeat the entire Universe from the beginning” (Lem, 43, 44). We need to re-visit the myriad of ancient, perhaps biologically-archetypal poetic patterns in our collective past, as well as to listen with great sensitivity to the ones typical of our own contemporary language and its many cultures. A poem is a multi-dimensional construct by nature—Alice Fulton called it a fractal phenomenon—some of its dimensions must be received, or sensed, by faculties other than the language processing part of the brain.

To continue this restructuring process, which has already begun, I believe we should allow ourselves to regard “poem” as a form in itself that can be isolated, recognized, and regularly perpetrated with flair and confidence by poets. Maybe the first three years of the Bardic School could be devoted to a rigorous review of metric forms and other properties by which our poems were once recognized and composed. After that apprenticeship we would turn away from the garden wall with our clutch of poems, unable to avoid any longer a pilgrimage to the origins of language itself. Here we would confront many labyrinths, seductive cul-de-sacs and monsters before we could return to our own garden as master poem makers, whatever that might turn out to mean.
Such an idea can only be truly rendered by an extended metaphor, which is to say a poem. Here I offer “To Paint the Portrait of a Bird” by Jacques Prévert (a poem that, because it lacks proportional rhythms—in translation at least—I would have to call prose instead of poem if proportional rhythm were the sole criterion for making that distinction. Thus I close my argument, deliberately introducing a loose end with which to begin its deconstruction; or rather, in due proportion, to enlarge it).

First paint a cage
with an open door
then paint
something pretty
something simple
something beautiful
something useful
for the bird
then place the canvas against a tree
in a garden
in a wood
or in a forest
hide behind the tree
without speaking
without moving... Sometimes the bird comes quickly
but he can just as well spend long years before deciding
Don’t get discouraged
wait
wait years if necessary
the swiftness or slowness of the coming
of the bird having no rapport
with the success of the picture
When the bird comes
if he comes
observe the most profound silence
wait till the bird enters the cage
and when he has entered
gently close the door with a brush
then
paint out all the bars one by one
taking care not to touch any of the feathers of the bird
Then paint the portrait of the tree
choosing the most beautiful of its branches
for the bird
paint also the green foliage and the wind’s freshness
the dust of the sun
and the noise of insects in the summer heat
and then wait for the bird to decide to sing
If the bird doesn’t sing
it’s a bad sign
a sign that the painting is bad
but if he sings it’s a good sign
a sign that you can sign
so then so very gently you pull out
one of the feathers of the bird
and you write your name in a corner of the picture.

We know in advance, from thousands of years of practice by every culture on the
planet, that Poetry is not a Boojum, it’s more like a Bird. Not just any bird, however, and
one with somewhat quirky requirements. So, we can’t create it or hunt it down, exactly.
We paint out the bars and wait for the singing.
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Poetic process resides inside the head of the poet during the composition of a poem; it is invisible to an observer, and to a greater or lesser extent (depending on who you talk to) invisible to the poet as well. It's no wonder, then, that poets young and old find themselves from time to time in blind alleys, box canyons, strait jackets choose your favorite metaphor for frustration. And at such times it's a godsend, so to speak, to have anything even remotely resembling a road map to the abyss. Michael Bugeja’s The Art and Craft of Poetry is actually more an atlas than a road map Essay on Poetic Theory. A Defence of Poetry. By Percy Bysshe Shelley. Introduction. The next portion of Shelley’s argument approaches the question of morality in poetry. To Shelley, poetry is utilitarian, as it brings civilization by "awakening and enlarging the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. In relation to the objects which delight a child these expressions are what poetry is to higher objects. The savage (for the savage is to ages what the child is to years) expresses the emotions produced in him by surrounding objects in a similar manner; and language and gesture, together with plastic or pictorial imitation, become the image of the combined effect of those objects, and of his apprehension of them."