To create a new rhythm—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon “free-verse” as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional form. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.

The poets since then have overwhelmingly agreed; today, only a few poets write in traditional forms more than occasionally, and many developing writers have never learned the structure of a sonnet, much less attempted one themselves. Lately, though, there’s been increasing interest in a return to, or at least a reexamination of, traditional formal elements like meter and end-rhymes. Some people have suggested that maybe the baby was thrown out along with the bathwater, and that there may be good reason to take another look at the techniques which produced so many magnificent poems in previous centuries. The issue, of course, isn’t whether anyone should write free verse or formal; that decision should come out of the poem’s requirements, out of the integration of form and content. Free verse, after all, has form, too. And it could also be said that each individual poem, whether in free verse or a traditional form, has its own unique, specific form. But we think it’s significant that the imagists and other poets were familiar with the formal tradition before they made the then-radical shift to free verse. They knew all about the effects that could be achieved with various meters, and that discipline was a good basis for formulating free verse lines that were rhythmically alive and interesting. These writers had extensive ear-training; they knew how to hear the music of language, and skillfully used that knowledge when they turned to free verse.

That music was apparent, too, to listeners in the days when poetry was an oral tradition, the myths and stories of the culture passed on in the speaking or singing voice. Today, many of us tend to read primarily with our eyes and our minds—studying the words, trying to make meaning, to pick up the writer’s nuances of thought and imagery. We don’t often enough read poems aloud, to let the lan-
guage vibrate through our rib cage and vocal chords, to savor the delicious taste of syllables on our tongue. And so we deprive ourselves of one of the crucial pleasures of poetry. As children, we all loved saying nursery rhymes aloud, or repeating tongue twisters like “She sells seashells by the sea shore.” We delighted in language not only for its necessary function of helping us communicate, but for the sheer physical satisfaction of saying things. That delight is one of the fundamental bases of poetry; so if you find your attention to listening is rather rusty, start developing it by reading poems aloud—your own and others—and attending live poetry readings. Pick up some cassettes of poets reading their work, or the work of other poets. Being stuck in traffic takes on a whole new meaning when Galway Kinnell is on your tape deck, soothing and inspiring you with those rolling, expansive lines from Whitman.

What has all this to do with meter and rhyme? Plenty. Because meter and rhyme are ultimately about the sounds of language. Meter is organized rhythm; rhyme has to do with echo, with a hearing again of a note that’s been played before. Such formal elements are at the roots of poetry in English, just as classical music is a source for contemporary composers, or the blues was a jumping-off point for rock ‘n roll.

So we think it’s important not only to be familiar with traditional forms—after all, you’d want to recognize a sonnet or a villanelle when it popped up in your reading—but to experiment with writing them as well. And trying on such forms needn’t be like putting on a straitjacket. In fact, if you’ve never had to make creative use of language to fit a formal requirement, you’re in for a pleasant surprise. Yes, it’s challenging and often difficult, but it may well send you down interesting paths you wouldn’t have taken otherwise. The restrictions of form push you to be more resourceful, to find the language you need. This not only teaches you a lot about language, but it’s also a lot of fun. Then, too, a number of writers have found that difficult emotional material may be more easily handled within some sort of defined boundaries; the restraints of meter, a rhyme scheme, or some pattern of repetition may help put the brakes on runaway material. But don’t take their, or our, word for it. Try some of the exercises following this chapter and see for yourself. First, though, you’ll need to know a bit about the common meters in English, and about rhyme.

Meter

Meter comes from the Greek for “measure.” Every poem has rhythm, but when the rhythm is highly organized into a pattern where the number of syllables is important, as well as whether those syllables are stressed or not then we have meter. (Remember from “The Music of the Line” that a stressed syllable gets a little push, an unstressed or slack syllable doesn’t. The word “sparrow” consists of a stressed syllable followed by a slack: SPARrow.)

The unit of measure that we pay attention to when talking about meter is called a foot. Here are the names of the most common feet in English (a u marks a slack syllable; a / marks a stressed one):

- iamb (u /): create, inspire, tonight, motel
- trochee (/ u): hungry, snowfall, argue, orchid
- dactyl (/ u u): longitude, messages, miracle, video
- anapest (u u /): by the edge, intertwine, in the end
- spondee (/ /): trap door, new shoes, blind pig

The other part of meter is knowing how many of these feet occur in each line. For example, read the following sentence aloud:

In metric verse the meter keeps the beat.

In terms of stresses and slack syllables, you should hear: daDUM dadUM dadUM daDUM daDUM daDUM. That’s a pretty easy pattern to pick out: five daDUMs, five iambics. You’ve just identified the most commonly used meter: iambic pentameter. Went, of course, is a prefix from the Latin, for five. All the meters are described in this way; if the above sentence had read, “In metric verse the meter counts,” you would have had four iambics, or iambic tetrameter. So depending on how many feet are in each line, you can then label them:

- monometer—one foot per line
- dimeter—two feet
- trimeter—three feet
- tetramer—four feet
pentameter—five feet  
hexameter—six feet  
and so forth

Scansion is the term used to talk about reading poetry in this way, paying attention to the prevailing meter. Scansion is not always, however, a precise technique. How do you pronounce the word “details”? Some people say DEtails, pronouncing it as a trochee. Many newscasters choose the iamb: “Rock star pleads not guilty, deTAILS at six.” One of your authors says TEvee for the television; the other hears it as a spondee: TEEVEE. Such regionalisms may affect your reading of a line; and some stressed syllables may sound, to your ear, more stressed than others, though there’s no system of notation for this. And, finally, here’s the real trick to meter: it’s more appropriately considered as the pattern behind the sounds you actually hear.

Confused? It is really not as complicated as it seems. Think of how boring it would be to always clump along going daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM in everything you wrote. You’d sound, pretty quickly, like a nursery rhyme and not a poet. Many nursery rhymes, in fact, are written in that strict a meter. That’s why they’re so easy to remember: strict meter, strict rhyme. But poets try for more subtle effects. You’re not out to hit your reader over the head. When meter is working well, it announces its presence clearly but quietly. It hums along steadily behind the actual sounds of the words, keeping the beat without intruding.

The best way to understand this is first to read and hear poems written in meter, and then to practice writing some yourself. Read Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets to get a feel for iambic pentameter—or just about any other poet writing in English since Chaucer’s time. Then get hold of some contemporary examples (there are some suggestions for reading at the end of this chapter), so you don’t think that you need to include a lot of “thee’s” and “thou’s” and “fic on’t”s in your own efforts. You don’t want to sound old-fashioned just because you’re using something from the past. Language has changed since Shakespeare, and writing in the living language means your poems will be alive, too, not mummified in dead syntax and usages.

Let’s look for a minute at how Shakespeare used iambic pentameter, so you get a feel for what we mean when we say that meter is the pattern behind the actual sounds of the words. This example is from Hamlet:

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d  
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!  
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Read this cheerful passage over a couple of times. It’s in iambic pentameter, but there isn’t a line that clunks along in strict daDUMs. Yet listen carefully, and you’ll definitely hear it. Sometimes there’s an extra syllable or two; sometimes he begins, not with the unstressed syllable, but with a stressed one: “O” and “Thaw.” Such rhythms are more complex and interesting than any strict adherence to the pattern. But they depend on our hearing a pattern, so that they can play with that, can follow it or work against it. If you’re familiar with how jazz improvisation works, that’s a useful analogy: after the melody gets established, the soloist takes off in a new direction while the same chord changes are repeated. The meter establishes your pattern; then you, the soloist, get to dazzle your audience with variations and departures.

Meter can have an exciting effect on your language. Without it, it’s you and the blank page; with it, you have some tension, something to pull you and to push back against. Meter can help you establish a certain distance between you and your reader, which could be useful if you’re dealing with highly intense material. It can be a way of ordering chaotic emotions and experiences, which, come to think of it, is one thing poetry does anyway. Meter is a little added artifice, a heightening of the awareness that this thing you’re making is not just a journal entry or a record of your thoughts. It’s a way to work with those thoughts in a manner that constantly reminds you that language and rhythm—the way in which you say something—are as crucial as what you are saying.
Rhyme

Everyone knows what rhyme is. That’s the thing that poems are supposed to do, right? Only now poems don’t rhyme, do they? In fact, poems do still rhyme—even those written in free verse. Rhyme is based on similar sounds, and English is full of words that echo each other. It’s true that free verse poets don’t usually use end rhyme, the practice of placing rhyming words at the ends of lines—at least, not on a regular basis. They’re more likely to use internal rhyme—to rhyme a word within a line with another word in that line, or with one in the next line; or maybe a word within a line with the word at the end of that line. But a regular pattern of rhymes at the end of each line is a characteristic of formal verse, not free. Here’s an example of end rhyme, an excerpt from a Robert Frost poem:

The shattered water made a misty din,
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.

By the way, did you pick up the meter in Frost’s poem? When we said iambic pentameter was common, we weren’t kidding. You’ll also notice there is a rhyme scheme, a pattern to the end rhymes. Letters are commonly used to show such patterns, the letter changing each time the rhyme changes. In the case of this example, the rhyme scheme so far is aabb.

Look over these three lines from a contemporary poet, Ai, and notice her use of internal rhyme:

I’m not afraid of the blade
you’ve just pointed at my head.
If I were dead, you could take the boy . . .

Two rhymes stand out immediately: “afraid” and “blade” in the first line, and “head” and “dead” in the second and third. Such rhymes are called strict, or pure, or perfect rhymes. The initial sound of the word is different, but the rest is identical. Moon–June, trace–face, believe–relieve, go for it—show for it. Many people think that this is the only kind of rhyme, but luckily for poets, it isn’t. Look again at Ai’s lines, at the words “blade” and “head.” They aren’t strict rhyme, but they do share a similarity of sounds; the vowels are different, but the ending consonants are alike. Such rhymes of words whose sounds are closely related, but not identical, are called slant rhymes (also known as half rhymes or off rhymes). Some examples of slant rhymes are face–dress, fear–care, blend–stand, here–chair.

There are other kinds of rhyme as well. Apocopated, or cut-off rhyme, occurs when the last syllable of one of the rhymes is missing: wet–netted, trap–happen, case–treason. There’s even something called eye rhyme, which doesn’t have to do with sounds at all but is visual: plough–cough, inflate–considerate, happy–sky. And you can use the same word twice and get away with it—that’s identical rhyme. Or you might use vowel rhyme, commonly known as assonance: slope–road, sway–great, slim–glitter.

Knowing you have all these options puts a whole new spin on the prospect of using rhyme in your poems. Rhyme, like meter, is a technique that works best when it doesn’t call attention to itself. You want someone to be reading your poem, not following your rhyme scheme. If you’re working with a pattern of end rhymes, try not to make them all strict—take advantage of slant rhyme and other possibilities. In free verse, you can still use internal rhyme and occasional end rhyme to unify the music of your poem.

Remember, too, that rhyme is related to meaning. A rhymed word stands out—you can use rhyme to emphasize important words. And because a rhyme is essentially an echo, it has a feeling of closure. We call out—we get an answer. There’s something satisfying in that transaction, and free verse writers often take advantage of it to end their poems. Look at the last word of a number of free verse poems; then look back over the two or three lines before it. You’ll find that sometimes there’s a word that sets up that final word, a call and the answering echo.

A Traditional Form: The Sonnet

You know those ads that say, “If you see only one movie this year, see this one”? We want to say the same thing about the sonnet. If you
experiment with writing in only one traditional form, this should be
it. The sonnet has been enormously popular with poets, and you’re
not going to get very far in poetry before you encounter one. You’ve
no doubt encountered one already: something from Shakespeare or
Wordsworth or Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Edna St. Vincent
Millay. If this sounds like intimidating company, don’t worry. After
all, those writers are dead. You’re alive and writing, and you don’t
have to compete.

The sonnet originated in Italy; its name comes from the Italian
sonnetto, meaning “little song.” A sonnet is short—just fourteen lines.
It’s written in iambic pentameter, and it has a rhyme scheme.
Actually there are three different rhyme schemes for the three differ-
ent kinds of sonnets: Italian or Petrarchan (named after the poet
Petrarch, who wrote many sonnets to his love, Laura); English or
Shakespearean (named after guess who); and Spenserian, after the
poet Edmund Spenser. The easiest one to write—or at least, the one
in which you have to find the least rhymes—is the Shakespearean.
Here are the rhyme schemes for each type of sonnet:

**Petrarchan:** The fourteen lines are divided into an octet (eight-line
stanzas) and sestet (six-line stanza) rhymed a–b–b–a–a–b–b–a and
c–d–c–d–e–d (the sestet is sometimes varied).

**Shakespearean:** a–b–a–b–c–d–c–d–e–f–e–f–g–g.

**Spenserian:** The least commonly seen, this is a mix of the other

The original sonnet—the Italian one—took advantage of the great
number of rhymes in that language. When English poets got hold of
it, they devised a rhyme scheme that would be easier to handle in a
language with fewer rhymes. Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets
suggest different ways of developing your material, because of how
the rhymes work. In the Petrarchan, an idea is commonly laid out in
the octet. Then there’s often a “turn” (volta in Italian), a shift of some
sort, the sestet develops this new line of thought. That is, the shift in
rhyming lends itself to a shift in the content of the poem—form and
content working together. In the Shakespearean sonnet, there is also
often a shift after the octet; but then, too, that final couplet pushes

the poem towards some sort of two-line closing statement, since those
two rhymes back to back at the end give a reader a strong sense of
finality. The Spenserian sonnet, too, can end with a strong sense of
closure—if you can get to the last two lines before losing your sanity.

Here’s a contemporary Shakespearean sonnet by Molly Peacock:

**THE LULL**

The possum lay on the tracks fully dead.
I’m the kind of person who stops to look.
It was big and white with flies on its head,
a thick healthy hairless tail, and strong, hooked
nails on its raccoon-like feet. It was a full
grown possum. It was sturdy and adult.
Only its head was smashed. In the lull
that it took to look, you took the time to insult
the corpse, the flies, the world, the fact that we were
traipsing in our dress shoes down the railroad tracks.
“That’s disgusting.” You said that. Dreams, brains, fur
and guts: what we are. That’s my bargain, the Pax
Peacock, with the world. Look hard, life’s soft. Life’s cache
is flesh, flesh, and flesh.

The tone here is casual, conversational: “I’m the kind of person
who stops to look.” The friends are “traipsing” in their dress shoes; the
narrator’s friend exclaims, “That’s disgusting.” There’s none of the
elevated language we might be tempted to think a sonnet requires;
the poem, in fact, takes us down to the gritty level of “the corpse, the
flies, the world,” insisting that we “look hard.” Some lines stick pret-
ty closely to iambic pentameter; some stretch the line out and out—
we counted eight beats in that second-to-last line. And what about the
end—how does she get away with three stresses, instead of five?
Imagine if she’d written “Life’s cache / is flesh, and flesh, and flesh,
and flesh, and flesh.” That would fit the meter, but the deliberate
breaking of the pattern is more interesting. The line is cut off; we’re
stopped short by its abruptness. Perhaps it recalls the possum’s life
that has prematurely ended; but in any case, it calls attention to itself,
and to the word “flesh.” Saying it five times would have been too
many. Remember, as a kid, how you could repeat a word like “dog” until it sounded completely meaningless? Then, too, there are three characters in this poem; maybe flesh is repeated once for each of them. The poet asks us not to turn away in disgust at the realization that for all of us, it all comes down to flesh.

Though she sometimes loosens the meter, Peacock’s rhymes here are pretty strict. Notice, though, that she uses a lot of enjambed to keep those strict end rhymes from sounding too obvious; we get to the end of the line and move right on to see where she’s going.

One tendency of contemporary writers has been to play with the sonnet form, to stretch it and expand it beyond the rules. Some writers develop their own quirky rhyme schemes, while sticking to the other requirements of the form. We’ve seen sixteen-line sonnets that faithfully follow the Shakespearean pattern, then add on an extra couplet at the end. And there are some pieces titled “Sonnet” that we can’t, for the life of us, figure out why the writer thought there was any relationship—beyond, maybe, the original meaning of “little song”; they tend to be short, at least. The sonnet seems to have adapted well to the needs of all kinds of writers.

If you’re curious about other traditional forms, we’d like to recommend two anthologies, both of which are listed in Appendix B at the end of the book. *Strong Measures* contains many contemporary examples of ballads, rondels, rhyme royal, and a wealth of other possibilities. There’s also a handy index that gives a description of the requirements of each form and refers you to which poems are in that particular form. A *Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* not only includes formal poems but brief essays by each writer. In the meantime, if you can’t wait for the bookstore to open, the next two chapters will give you more food for thought.

**IDEAS FOR WRITING**

1. Try a few lines of *accentual* verse. That means you only count accents (stresses), without worrying about iambics and anapests.

Write four lines, making sure there are four stresses in each line. (You can have as many unstressed syllables as you need.) When you're comfortable with that, write four lines of three stresses each. Then write four lines in which you alternate the number of stresses: 4-3-4-3.

2. Write a poem in *blank verse*—unrhymed iambic pentameter. To get the rhythm going in your subconscious, first read a lot of blank verse: besides Shakespeare's plays, try Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or more recent works by Robert Frost—"Mending Wall," "Home Burial," and many others, or Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." Don't write anything until you've spent at least half an hour reading.

3. Write four lines and use as much internal rhyme in them as possible. Push it to the point of ridiculousness. Don't try to write anything serious; just see how far you can go.

4. Write a "silly sonnet" using strict meter and rhyme—the obvious kind you're not supposed to write. These can be a lot of fun with a group of people, each person adding a line.

5. Write a serious sonnet following any of the three rhyme schemes, but forget about the meter; make the lines any length and rhythm that you want.

6. Write a free verse poem with a rhyme scheme you've invented. One we've tried is six-line stanzas rhyming a-b-c-c-b-a.

7. Take some raw material for a poem—notes, jotted images, thoughts—or use a failed poem from the bottom of the pile. Cast it into three different forms:
   - iambic tetrameter (rhymed or unrhymed)
   - rhymed couplets
   - a limerick (you remember limericks, don’t you?)

8. *Syllabic verse* counts only syllables, not accents. Marianne Moore was fond of syllabics. Look also at Sylvia Plath's
“Mushrooms” and Philip Levine’s “Animals Are Passing From Our Lives.” Then write your own syllabic poem.

9. Do an acrostic, a poem in which you spell something down the left-hand side of the page; those letters then start each line of the poem. An example we like is Diane Wakowski’s “Justice Is Reason Enough.”

10. Invent rules that you then religiously, or not so religiously, follow: one sound per line; a poem that uses all the synonyms for “love”; a poem in which each stanza begins and ends with the same word. The point is to challenge yourself, to nudge your imagination in a potentially surprising direction.

Repetition, Rhythm, and Blues

Everything repeats. The seasons, the patterns of day and night, babies being born and parents dying, two people discovering each other’s bodies: everything, large and small, has happened before—or almost. Nothing repeats itself in exactly the same way. Every moment is new: this day, this child, these pairs of hands and arms and eyes.

In our lives, we need both the comforts of repetition and the delights of change, and they need to be in balance. Too much repetition means a routine of dull habit, of closing out the world. Too much change, and we lose our center. The same principle applies to poems that use repetition.

Why say, in a poem, what you’ve already said? First, because it’s pleasurable. We say “I love you” over and over to the people dear to us (or we should!). If you’ve just fallen head-over-heels for someone, you’re likely to write their name from margin to margin in your journal, say it twenty times a day to yourself, and work it into every conversation until your friends are sick of it. Like good food and wine, words can be savored more than once.

And repeated words are powerful; they assert themselves, insist on our attention. Children know this: “Can I have some more? Please? Please please? Please please please please please?” In Catholicism, the repetition of prayers by the living is said to help reduce the time departed souls spend in purgatory. Buddhists repeat Sanskrit phrases
Goatfoot, Milktongue, Twinbird

The Psychic Origins of Poetic Form

When we pursue the psychic origins of our satisfaction with poetic form, we come to the end of the trail. It is deep in the woods, and there is a fire; Twinbird sits quietly, absorbed in the play of flame that leaps and falls; Goatfoot dances by the fire, his eyes reflecting the orange coals, as his lean foot taps the stone. Inside the fire there is a mother and child, made one, the universe of the red coal. This is Milktongue.

1. Some Premises

First, in connection with oppositions:

1. Any quality of poetry can be used for a number of purposes, including opposed purposes. Thus, concentration on technique has often been used to trivialize content, by poets afraid of what they will learn about themselves. But concentration on technique can absorb the attention while unacknowledged material enters the language; so technique can facilitate inspiration.

On the other hand, a poet can subscribe to an anti-technical doctrine of inspiration in a way that simply
substitutes one technique for another. Surrealism can become as formulaic as a pastoral elegy.

2. When a poet says he is doing north, look and see if he is not actually doing south. Chances are that his bent is so entirely south that he must swear total allegiance to north in order to include the globe.

3. Energy arises from conflict. Without conflict, no energy. Yin and yang. Dark and light. Pleasure and pain. No synthesis without thesis and antithesis. Conflict of course need not be binary but may include a number of terms.

4. Every present event that moves us deeply connects in our psyches with something (or things) in the past. The analogy is the two pieces of carbon that make an arc light. When they come close enough, the spark leaps across. The one mourning is all mourning; “After the first death, there is no other.” This generalization applies to the composition of poems (writing), and to the recomposition of poems (reading).

5. The way out is the same as the way in. To investigate the process of making a poem is not merely an exercise in curiosity or gossip, but an attempt to understand the nature of literature. In the act of reading, the reader undergoes a process—largely without awareness, as the author was largely without intention—which resembles, like a slightly fainter copy of the original, the process of discovery or recovery that the poet went through in his madness or inspiration.

And then, more general:

6. A poem is one man’s inside talking to another man’s inside. It may also be reasonable man talking to reasonable man, but if it is not inside talking to inside, it is not a poem. This inside speaks through the second language of poetry, the unintended language. Sometimes, as in surrealism, the second language is the only language. It is the ancient prong of carbon in the arc light. We all share more when we are five years old than when we are twenty-five; more at five minutes than at five years. The second language allows poetry to be universal.

7. Lyric poetry, typically, has one goal and one message, which is to urge the condition of inwardness, the “inside” from which its own structure derives.

2. Form: the Sensual Body

There is the old false distinction between vates and poiein. It is a boring distinction, and I apologize for dragging it out again. I want to use it in its own despite.

The poiein, from the Greek verb for making or doing, becomes the poet—the master of craft, the maker of the labyrinth of epic or tragedy or lyric hymn, tale-teller and spell-binder. The vates is bound in his own spell. He is the rhapsode Socrates patronizes in Ion. In his purest form he utters what he does not understand at all, be he oracle or André Breton. He is the visionary, divinely inspired, who like Blake may take dictation from voices.

But Blake’s voices returned to dictate revisions. The more intimately we observe any poet who claims extremes of inspiration or of craftsmanship, the more we realize that his claims are a disguise. There is no poiein for the same reason that there is no vates. The claims may be serious (they may be the compensatory distortion which allows the poet to write at all) and the claims may affect the looks of the poem—a surrealist poem and
a neoclassic Imitation of Horace look different—but
the distinction becomes trivial when we discover the
psychic origins of poetic form.

I speak of the psychic origins of poetic form. Psychologists have written convincingly of the origins of the material of arts, in wish-fulfillment and in the universality of myth. We need not go over ideas of the poet as daydreamer, or of the collective unconsciousness. Ernst Kris’s “regression in the service of the ego” names an event but does not explain how it comes about. But one bit of Freud’s essay on the poet as daydreamer has been a clue in this search. At the end of his intelligent, snippy paper, Freud says that he lacks time now to deal with form, but that he suspects that formal pleasure is related to forepleasure. Then he ducks through the curtain and disappears. Suppose we consider the implications of his parting shot. Forepleasure develops out of the sensuality of the whole body which the infant experiences in the pleasure of the crib and of the breast. The connection between forepleasure and infancy is the motion from rationality to metaphor.

But to begin our search for the psychic origins of poetic form, we must first think of what is usually meant by the word “form,” and then we must look for the reality. So often form is looked upon only as the fulfillment of metrical expectations. Meter is nothing but a loose set of probabilities; it is a trick easily learned; anyone can learn to arrange one-hundred-and-forty syllables so that the even syllables are louder than the odd ones, and every tenth syllable rhymes: the object will be a sonnet. But only when you have forgotten the requirements of meter do you begin to write poetry in it. The resolutions of form which ultimately provide the wholeness of a poem—resolutions of syntax, metaphor, diction, and sound—are minute and subtle and vary from poem to poem. They vary from sonnet to sonnet, or, equally and not more greatly, from sonnet to free verse lyric.

Meter is no more seriously binding than the frame we put around a picture. But the form of free verse is as binding and as liberating as the form of a rondeau. Free verse is simply less predictable. Yeats said that the finished poem made a sound like the click of the lid on a perfectly made box. One-hundred-and-forty syllables, organized into a sonnet, do not necessarily make a click; the same number of syllables, dispersed in asymmetric lines of free verse, will click like a lid if the poem is good. In the sonnet and in the free verse poem, the poet improvises toward that click, and achieves his resolution in unpredictable ways. The rhymes and line-lengths of the sonnet are too gross to contribute greatly to that sense of resolution. The click is our sense of lyric form. This pleasure in resolution is Twinbird.

The wholeness and identity of the completed poem, the poem as object in time, the sensual body of the poem—this wholeness depends upon a complex of unpredictable fulfillments. The satisfying resolutions in a sonnet are more subtle than rhyme and meter, and less predictable. The body of sound grows in resolutions like assonance and alliteration, and in near-misses of both; or in the alternations, the going-away and coming-back, of fast and slow, long and short, high and low. The poet—free verse or meter, whatever—may start with lines full of long vowels, glide on diphthong sounds like “eye” and “ay” for instance, move to quick alternative lines of short vowels and clipped consonants, and return in a coda to the long vowels “eye” and “ay.” The assonance is shaped like a saucer.

The requirements of fixity are complex, and the conscious mind seldom deals with them. Any poet who
has written metrically can write arithmetically correct iambic pentameter as fast as his hand can move. In improvising towards the click, the poet is mostly aware of what sounds right and what does not. When something persists in not sounding right, the poet can examine it bit by bit—can analyze it—in the attempt to consult his knowledge and apply it.

This knowledge is habitual. It is usually not visible to the poet, but it is available for consultation. When you learn something so well that you forget it, you can begin to do it. You dance best when you forget that you are dancing. Athletics—a tennis stroke, swimming, a receiver catching a football—is full of examples of actions done as if by instinct, which are actually learned procedure, studied and practiced until they become “second nature.” So it is with poetry. The literary form of poems is created largely by learning—in collaboration with the unconscious by a process I will talk about later. Possible resolutions of metaphor, diction, and sound are coded into memory from our reading of other poets, occasionally from our reading of criticism, from our talk with other poets, and from our revisions of our own work, with the conscious analysis that this revision sometimes entails. New resolutions are combinations of parts of old ones, making new what may later be combined again and made new again.

When the experienced reader takes a poem in, his sense of fixity comes also from memory. He too has the codes in his head. The new poem fulfills the old habits of expectation in some unexpected way. The reader does not know why—unless he bothers to analyze; then probably not fully—he is pleased by the sensual body of the poem. He does not need to know why, unless he must write about it. The pleasure is sufficient. Since the poet’s madness is the reader’s madness, the resolution of the mad material is the reader’s resolution as well as the poet’s. The way in is the same as the way out.

Whatever else we may say of a poem we admire, it exists as a sensual body. It is beautiful and pleasant, manifest content aside, like a worn stone that is good to touch, or like a shape of flowers arranged or accidental. This sensual body reaches us through our mouths, which are warm in the love of vowels held together, and in the muscles of our legs which as in dance tap the motion and pause of linear and syntactic structure. These pleasures are Miltongue and Goatfoot.

There is a nonintellectual beauty in the moving together of words in phrases—“the music of diction”—and in resolution of image and metaphor. The sophisticated reader of poetry responds quickly to the sensual body of a poem, before he interrogates the poem at all. The pleasure we feel, reading a poem, is our assurance of its integrity. (So Pound said that technique is the test of sincerity.) We will glance through a poem rapidly and if it is a skillful fake we will feel repelled. If the poem is alive and honest, we will feel assent in our quickening pulse—though it might take us some time to explain what we were reacting to.

The soi-disant vates feels that he speaks from the unconscious (or with the voice of the God), and the poiein that he makes all these wholenesses of shape on purpose. Both of them disguise the truth. All poets are poiein and vates. The poiein comes from memory of reading, and the vates from memory of infancy. The sensual body of the poem derives from memory of reading most obviously, but ultimately it leads us back further—to the most primitive psychic origins of poetic form.
3. Conflict Makes Energy

People frequently notice that poetry concerns itself with unpleasant subjects: death, deprivation, loneliness, despair, if love then the death of love, and abandon-ment. Of course there are happy poems, but in English poetry there are few which are happy through and through—and those few tend to be light, short, pleasant, and forgettable. Most memorable happy poems have a portion of blackness in them. Over all—Keats, Blake, Donne, Yeats, Eliot, Shakespeare, Wordsworth—there is more dark than light, more elegy than celebration. There is no great poem in our language which is simply happy.

Noticing these facts, we reach for explanations: maybe to be happy is to be a simpleton; maybe poets are morbid; maybe life is darker than it is light; maybe when you are happy you are too busy being happy to write poems about it and when you are sad, you write poems in order to do something. There may be half-truths in these common ideas, but the real explanation lies in the structure of a poem; and, I suggest, in the structure of human reality.

Energy arises from conflict.

A) The sensual body of a poem is a pleasure separate from any message the poem may contain.

B) If the poem contains a message which is pleasurable (a word I have just substituted for “happy”), then the two pleasures walk agreeably together for a few feet, and collapse into a smiling lethargy. The happy poem sleeps in the sun.

C) If the message of the poem, on the whole, is terrifying—that They flee from me, that one time did me seek; that I am sick, I must die; that On Margate Sands/I can connect/Nothing with nothing; that Things fall apart, the center will not hold—then pain of message and pleasure of body copulate in a glorious conflict-
dance of energy. This alternation of pleasure and pain is so swift as to seem simultaneous, to be simultaneous in the complexity both of creation and reception, a fused circle of yin and yang, a oneness in diversity.

The pain is clear to anyone. The pleasure is clear (clear) to anyone who loves poems. If we acknowledge the pleasure of the sensual body of the poem, we can see why painful poems are best: conflict makes energy and resolves our suffering into ambivalent living tissue. If human nature is necessarily ambivalent, then the structure of the energetic poem resembles the structure of human nature.

The sensual body, in poems, is not simply a compensation for the pain of the message. It is considerably more important, and more central to the nature of poetry. When we pursue the psychic origins of our satisfaction with poetic form, we come to the end of the trail. It is deep in the woods, and there is a fire; Twinbird sits quietly, absorbed in the play of flame that leaps and falls; Goatfoot dances by the fire, his eyes reflecting the orange coals, as his lean foot taps the stone. Inside the fire there is a mother and child, made one, the universe of the red coal. This is Milktongue.

4. Goatfoot, Milktongue, Twinbird

Once at a conference on creativity, a young linguist presented a model of language. Xeroxed in outline, it was beautiful like a concrete poem. I looked for language as used in poems and looked a long time. Finally I found it, under “autistic utterance,” with the note that this utterance might later be refined into lyric po-
etry. It reminded me of another conference I had attended a year or two earlier. A psychoanalyst delivered a paper on deriving biographical information about an author from his fiction. He distributed mimeographed copies of his paper, which his secretary had typed from his obscure handwriting; he began his remarks by presenting a list of errata. The first correction was, “For ‘autistic,’ read ‘artistic’ throughout.”

The newborn infant cries, he sucks at the air until he finds the nipple. At first he finds his hand to suck by accident—fingers, thumb; then he learns to repeat that pleasure. Another mouth-pleasure is the autistic babble, the “goo-goo,” the small cooing and purring and bubbling. These are sounds of pleasure; they are without message, except that a parent interprets them as “happy”: pleasure is happy. Wittgenstein once said that we could sing the song with expression or without expression; very well, he said, let us have the expression without the song. (He was being ironic; I am not.) The baby’s autistic murmur is the expression without the song. His small tongue curls around the sounds, the way his tongue warms with the tiny thread of milk that he pulls from his mother. This is Milk Tongue, and in poetry it is the deep and primitive pleasure of vowels in the mouth, of assonance and of holds on adjacent long vowels; of consonance, mmm, and alliteration. It is Dylan Thomas and the curlew cry; it is That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea; it is Then, in a wailful choir, the small gnats mourn.

As Milk Tongue mouths the noises it curls around, the rest of his body plays in pleasure also. His fists open and close spasmodically. His small bowed legs, no good for walking, contract and expand in a rhythmic beat. He has begun the dance, his muscles move like his heartbeat, and Goatfoot improvises his circle around the fire. His whole body throbs and thrills with pleasure. The first parts of his body which he notices are his hands; then his feet. The strange birds fly at his head, waver, and pause. After a while he perceives that there are two of them. They begin to act when he wishes them to act, and since the mental creates the physical, Twinbird is the first magic he performs. He examines these independent/dependent twin birds. They are exactly alike. And they are exactly unalike, mirror images of each other, the perfection of opposite-same.

As the infant grows, the noises split off partly into messages. “Mmm” can be milk and mother. “Da-da” belongs to another huge shape. He crawls and his muscles become useful to move him toward the toy and the soda cracker. Twinbird flies more and more at his will, as Milk Tongue speaks, and Goatfoot crawls. But still he rolls on his back and his legs beat in the air. Still, the sister hands flutter at his face. Still, the noises without message fill the happy time of waking before hunger, and the softening down, milk tongue full, into sleep. The growing child skips rope, hops, dances to a music outside intelligence, rhymes to the hopscotch or jump rope, and listens to the sounds his parents please him with:

- Pease porridge hot
- Pease porridge cold
- Pease porridge in-the-pot
- Five days old.

Or himself learns:

- Bah, bah, black sheep
- Have you any wool?
- Yes, sir, yes, sir,
- Three bags full.
- One for my master,
- One for my dame
- And one for the little boy
- That lives down the lane.
The mouth-pleasure, the muscle-pleasure, the pleasure of match-unmatch.

But “Shades of the prison house begin to close/Upon the growing boy.” Civilized humans try gradually to cut away the autistic component in their speech. Goatfoot survives in the dance, Twinbird in rhyme and resolution of dance and noise. Milktongue hides itself more. It ties us to the mother so obviously that men are ashamed of it. Tribal society was unashamed and worshipped Milktongue in religion and history. Among the outcast in the modern world, Milktongue sometimes endures in language, as it does in the American black world, and in the world of the poor Southern whites. In Ireland where the mother (and the Virgin) are still central, Milktongue remains in swearing and in the love of sweet speech. Probably, in most of the modern world, Milktongue exists only in smoking, eating, and drinking; and in oral sexuality.

But Milktongue and Goatfoot and Twinbird have always lived in the lyric poem, for poet and for reader. They are the ancestors, and they remain the psychic origins of poetic form, primitive both personally (back to the crib) and historically (back to the fire in front of the cave). They keep pure the sensual pleasure that is the dark secret shape of the poem. We need an intermediary to deal with them, for a clear reason: Goatfoot and Milktongue and Twinbird, like other figures that inhabit the forest, are wholly preverbal. They live before words.

They approach the edge of the clearing, able to come close because the Priestess has no eyes to frighten them with. The Priestess, built of the memory of old pleasures, only knows how to select and order. The Priestess does not know what she says, but she knows that she says it in dactylic hexameter. Goatfoot and Milktongue and Twinbird leave gifts at the edge of the forest. The Priestess picks up the gifts, and turns to the light, and speaks words that carry the dark mysterious memory of the forest and the pleasure.

The poet writing, and the reader reading, lulled by Goatfoot and Milktongue and Twinbird into the oldest world, become able to think as the infant thinks, with transformation and omnipotence and magic. The form of the poem, because it exists separately from messages, can act as trigger or catalyst or enzyme to activate not messages but types of mental behavior. Coleridge spoke of meter as effecting the willing suspension of disbelief. They are the three memories of the body—not only meter; and they are powerful magic—not only suspension of disbelief. The form of the poem unlocks the mind to old pleasures. Pleasure leaves the mind vulnerable to the content of experience before we have intellectualized the experience and made it acceptable to the civilized consciousness. The form allows the mind to encounter real experience, and so the real message is permitted to speak—but only because the figures in the forest, untouched by messages, have danced and crooned and shaped.

The release of power and sweetness! Milktongue also remembers hunger, and the cry without answer. Goatfoot remembers falling, and the ache that bent the night. Twinbird remembers the loss of the brother, so long he believed in abandonment forever. From the earliest times, poetry has existed in order to retrieve, to find again, and to release. In the man who writes the poem, in the reader who lives it again, in the ideas, the wit, the images, the doctrines, the exhortations, the laments and the cries of joy, the lost forest struggles to be born again inside the words. The life or urge and instinct, that rages and coos, kicks and frolics, as it chooses only without choosing—this life is the life the poem grows from, and leans toward.
English 108—Introduction to Literature
Journal Assignment
Poem 3—Meter

1. In your journals write four to six metrical lines—using enjambment, and few end-stopped lines—for each of the following rhythms:

   a. iambic: a light stress followed by a heavy stress.
   b. trochee: a heavy stress followed by a light stress.
   c. dactyl: a heavy stress followed by two light stresses.
   d. anapest: two light stresses followed by a heavy stress.

2. When you are finished, pick one of the poems you have started and expand on it (12-16 lines). Continue to write in meter; it’s okay if you pay more attention to the rhythm than the words for now. Once you are done writing the poem you can go back and make any necessary changes.

Sample Lines

Shakespeare, Macbeth (trochee) Double, double toil and trouble
Fire, burn: and, cauldron, bubble.

Longfellow, “Evangeline” (dactyl) This is the forest primeval. The murmuring
Pines and the hemlocks,

Poe, “Annabel Lee” (anapest) For the moon never beams without bring
ing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:

Sample Poems:

Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods” (iambic tetrameter)

Theodore Roethke, “My Papa’s Waltz” (iambic trimeter)

James Dickey “The Lifeguard” (impure anapest)
My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Theodore Roethke

Robert Frost

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
The Lifeguard

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

Take on the utmost of its power.
I rise and go out through the boats.
I set my broad sole upon silver,
On the skin of the sky, on the moonlight,
Stepping outward from earth onto water
In quest of the miracle.

This village of children believed
That I could perform as I dived
For one who had sunk from my sight.
I saw his cropped haircut go under.
I leapt, and my steep body flashed
Once, in the sun.

Dark drew all the light from my eyes.
Like a man who explores his death
By the pull of his slow-moving shoulders,
I hung head down in the cold,
Wide-eyed, contained, and alone
Among the weeds,

And my fingertips turned into stone
From clutching immovable blackness.

Time after time I leapt upward
Exploding in breath, and fell back
From the change in the children’s faces
At my defeat.

Beneath them I swam to the boathouse
With only my life in my arms
To wait for the lake to shine back
At the risen moon with such power
That my steps on the light of the ripples
Might be sustained.

Beneath me is nothing but brightness
Like the ghost of a snowfield in summer.
As I move toward the center of the lake,
Which is also the center of the moon,
I am thinking of how I may be
The savior of one

Who has already died in my care.
The dark trees fade from around me.
The moon’s dust hovers together.
I call softly out, and the child’s
Voice answers through blinding water.
Patiently, slowly,

He rises, dilating to break
The surface of stone with his forehead.
He is one I do not remember
Having ever seen in his life.
The ground I stand on is trembling
Upon his smile.

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