Critical Rhythm

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Winter, writes W. H. Auden, is a “time for the trying-out / Of new meters and new recipes, proper time / To reflect on events noted in warmer months.” Those months follow a natural and unconscious rhythm:

Spring-time, summer and fall: days to behold a world
Antecedent to our knowing, where flowers think
Their concretely in scent-colors and beasts, the same
Age all over, pursue dumb horizontal lives
On one level of conduct and so cannot be
Secretary to man’s plot to become divine.
Lodged in all is a set metronome: thus, in May
Bird-babies still in the egg click to each other Hatch!

This metronomic clicking echoes the term famously chosen by Ezra Pound to forbid what he took to be the unnatural thud of overly metrical iambic rhythm: “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.” Auden revisits the dictum and asks how poetic meter defies the potentially limited rhythms of lived experience. His poem does more than imagine a different, metrical temporality. The careful enjambment of “proper time” yokes “new meters” with winter, translating the syntactical yoking of cooking and meter—of life and art—into a metrical experience in its own right. That experience requires in turn another round of wintry reflection; the poem is written in asclepiads, an Aeolic Greek meter built around a choriambic nucleus
Auden refers to his poem as “accentual Asclepiadeans,” replacing the classical quantities of long and short with stress and unstress: / x / x x / / x x / x / . This import is out of joint not just with English’s more-or-less native iambics but with the usual stories about how meter’s abstracted pattern emerges from the welter of linguistic (and other) rhythm as natural artifice, as a sensitive abstraction from the feel of an accentual tongue. To “reflect” in such a meter is not to seamlessly or properly engage the native or collective rhythms of a linguistic and cultural heritage. It is to encounter rhythm (through meter) as a defamiliarized and defamiliarizing force.

In an earlier and more sanguine moment, however, when Auden is editing an anthology to convince a suburban, commuting British public that they already like poetry and should do more of what they like, he depends upon a very broad sense of rhythm as both a social and aesthetic form:

All speech has rhythm, which is the result of the combination of the alternating periods of effort and rest necessary to all living things, and the laying of emphasis on what we consider important; and in all poetry there is a tension between the rhythm due to the poet’s personal values, and those due to the experiences of generations crystallised into habits of language such as the English tendency to alternate weak and accented syllables, and conventional verse forms like the hexameter, the heroic pentameter . . .

Here “rhythm” means linguistic rhythm, physical or physiological rhythm, the idiolect or subjective stressing of “the poet’s personal values,” and finally something closer to meter. I quote this in part to show the messiness and power of rhythm as it is called up by criticism. The passage manifests rhythm’s scalar power in the critical imagination and its tendency to paradoxically transcend the boundaries of the literary (or the poetic or lyric) in order to establish new aesthetic domains. That rhythm cannot always sustain this boundary game is, in my reading, one subject of “In Due Season.” There, even the commonplace “tension” between two rhythms—the idiosyncratic rhythm of the poet’s tongue and the rhythms of traditional meters—becomes a largely abstract tension between devalued conventional meter and a meter with largely “personal value.” As the prosodist Paul Fussell reminds us in Poetic Meter and Poetic Form (1965), Auden’s self-described “dream reader” is one who “keeps a look out for curious prosodic fauna like bacchics and choriambic.” Are we such readers? What does it mean to discover innovative rhythms not by experience and intuition but through recognition of marked metrical idiosyncrasy? How does poetry fare as a genre when poems leave the formalist pathways that
happily accept meter as a reflection of and on linguistic rhythm? What happens when, as with most theories of post-metrical and free verse, criticism makes a sharp turn to rhythm?

In the following pages I will suggest that a critical concept of rhythm more attentive to its genesis and present function will substantially aid present debates over formalism and its objects. I will suggest some paths forward from several tricky moments in twentieth- and twenty-first-century efforts to corral rhythm in order to articulate conceptions of form, poetry, and the literary. I pay special attention to pivots between meter and rhythm, such as Auden’s. My readings, and the essays in this volume, reveal rhythm a term at once suspicious and essential to the discipline of literary study. My co-editor notes, in his recent Theory of the Lyric, how “seductive” rhythm can be. Readers will find an extensive survey of “statements about the foundational character of rhythm” for poetry in the opening pages of his chapter on “Rhythm and Repetition.” These make clear that the attraction of rhythm as sound device tends to become the attraction of the concept of rhythm, especially as it offers escapes from interpretation or from what some see as a too hermetic concept of formalism.

Critical Rhythm asks where the attraction of rhythm comes from, and how it operates (secretly or openly) in the history and present practice of criticism. A blunt but telling measure of that attraction might be the institutional prominence of Derek Attridge’s treatise The Rhythms of English Poetry and the eight reprints of his shorter handbook Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction between 1995 and 2008. When and why is it the case that rhythm, as Attridge puts it, arrives “not as one of a number of features that make up the poetic experience, but the heart of the experience”? Like “In Due Season,” which interrogates an idea of rhythm that Auden articulated more than three decades earlier but also entices us carefully back to the rhythms of “the poet’s personal values,” Critical Rhythm continues to reimagine rhythm as the potential nucleus of our engagement with poetry. In his contribution here, Attridge defines a widespread foundation of rhythmic play in what he calls the “English Dolnik,” but also attests to the variations and variable difficulties of its poetic executions. Thus if rhythm is still an apt synecdoche for poetic experience, that experience will not appear as unitary or given as the beating of a heart. As these essays worry our rhythmic inheritance, they consistently warn against taking rhythm to be a given, preexisting formal element later sorted out through scansion, description, and taxonomy. They press beyond isolated descriptions of technique, in the style of the prosody and poetics handbook, or inductive declarations of what rhythm “is,” and towards genealogical and
methodological inquiry. In doing so they develop new critical models for understanding how rhythm, in light of its historicity and generic functions, permeates poetry’s composition, formal objectivity, circulation, performance, and present critical horizons.

In large part the following essays center on literary and specifically poetic concepts of rhythm, though they engage with cognitive linguistics, anthropology, musicology and scientific acoustics, and continental philosophy. The collection is largely but not exclusively focused on English language poetry and criticism, primarily post-1800, for reasons detailed in this essay and several others. Attridge, in his entry on “Rhythm” for the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, provides a straightforward rationale for this periodization: “by the eighteenth century [rhythm] was being consistently employed to refer to the durational qualities of poetry and music, and soon extended to analogous properties of the visual arts. In the nineteenth century it was generalized to movement of a regular kind—most often the alternation of strong and weak elements—in any sphere, and appropriated by the physical sciences for periodicities and patterns in a wide range of natural phenomenon.” This narrative makes clear that there is much to be said about rhythm not covered here; a different set of essays could treat rhythm in cinema, visual arts, music, works of prose, and literature of many languages and time periods. But it also makes a clear case for scholars interested in rhythm outside this domain to reckon with its genesis in literary discourse of the past quarter-millennium.

Why is rhythm so portable or, less generously, labile? How do we account for the returns of such a peripatetic concept to literary discourse? Should we play along when poets and critics construct categories and genres around rhythm, often through genitive and adjectival constructions such as the “rhythm of verse” or the “rhythmic experience” of novelistic form? The latter example comes from Caroline Levine’s recent Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network. Levine explicitly adopts rhythm as a “term,” “category,” and “organizing concept” for her project because of its portability: “The term rhythm moves easily back and forth between aesthetic and non-aesthetic uses.” I would argue that the critical license to count rhythm as a form, or to define form through rhythm, derives from the history Attridge begins to trace in his entry and which this collection helps flesh out. This history, especially the late nineteenth-century reframing of poetic meter as a matter of the human pulse, supplies excellent material for the embodied, anti-hermetic, “political” formalism Levine pursues. She begins her chapter on “Rhythm” with an observation about this history: "Unlike the constraints of artful unities and rigid
boundaries, rhythmic forms have often seemed natural, arising from the lived time of the human body." This limited appeal to organicism becomes “conventional” and “traditional” as we arrive at Levine’s own formalist practice:

It is conventional to say that there are work rhythms and social rhythms. The traditional claim that poetic and musical rhythms arise in the body suggests an easy crossover between artistic and nonartistic realms. Rhythm is therefore a category that always already refuses the distinction between aesthetic form and other forms of lived experience.

Between the nineteenth century and the present, following the demands and desires of formalism at its “millennial reboot,” rhythm grows into the expansive, analogic role most exemplified by the genitive form “rhythm of.” This suggests that we might alter “always already” to “has come to,” and then explore both the slippery notions of the aesthetic or literary hiding behind rhythm and the sometimes awkward necessity of rhythm to conceptions of form and formalist practice.

David Nowell Smith suggests one such approach in his essay’s wide-ranging survey of philosophical and literary conceptions of rhythm. Rhythm is central, he argues, in laying the ground for the post-Kantian critical subject’s appearance in language and poetry. But it is also a proleptic figure, always doing explanatory work in advance of labors of definition. For Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and others it is a “legend” in a double sense: both key and myth. The double view of rhythm as key and myth for definitions of literary and poetic language resonates across the diverse contexts of these essays. For example, rhythm is a key to understanding twentieth-century African-American poetry as it participates in and builds from musical traditions like the spirituals or blues. But it also evokes the myth of the “naturally musical black,” and a much longer tradition of racializing subjects and peoples through theories of rhythmic aptitude and development.

Rhythm is the key, in several essays in this collection, to understanding the critical force through which poems rupture dominant logical, representational, or conceptual views of language. This has special importance for lyric theory, an important area of debate in essays by Virginia Jackson and others. Even as rhythm offers criticism an opportunity to reassert textual musicality, the potential for alternate voicing, and the development of new kinds of sympathetic awareness, it remains as a myth unfolding logics of expressive form and voice that threaten to submerge technical play. As Yopie Prins’ essay shows, for instance, poets have long
sought “a primal rhythm” and Sappho herself at the “heart” of the Sapphic stanza.

Perhaps the foremost rhythmic “legend” involves this claim to embodiment and experience, especially in the (prosodic) phonology of spoken language. This was the case well before structural and generative linguistics began articulating increasingly more refined theories of exactly how rhythm manifests in language (for instance, the “English Rhythm Rule”). Rhythm, unlike meter, rarely gets described without some claim that it can be heard, felt, and shared because it has physical effects on bodies or tympanums. Valéry, in a passage cited by Culler, claimed that it is “via rhythm and the sensory properties of language that literature can reach the organic being of a reader with any confidence in the conformity between intention and the results.” Yet it can be odd, if not unfortunate, to use the same word to describe both linguistic and poetic rhythm. That the latter has been most commonly understood as an abstraction from linguistic properties and assigned the name “meter” suggests we must pause and consider rhythm’s complex relation to meter.

Meter and Rhythm

An argument could be made that “critical meter” might more safely retain the historicity of versification, and indeed several of the essays below gain traction from studying the techniques of traditions best called metrical. There has been excellent and diverse work on meter in historical prosody, a field that at its best puts formalist and cultural studies methodologies in conversation with help from archival work and digital projects. Recent debates within and about historical poetics also focus on meter. So in a sense we are already benefiting from a newly critical sense of meter, one that reveals both the centrality and eccentricity of rhythm within a prosodic discourse whose focal term was, until the twentieth century, meter.

There continues to be a strong and useful tendency within Anglo-American criticism to think primarily in terms of meter, and to limit rhythm to what Isobel Armstrong has helpfully called the “binary account of meter”: its normative metrical pattern and rhythmic departures. For instance, John Hollander’s Rhyme’s Reason, which playfully enacts a range of meters and forms with emphasis on local effects, defines rhythm in the limited sense of a “particular rhythm which depart[s] from the metrical pattern slightly.” Like Rhyme’s Reason, Timothy Steele’s 1999 All the Fun’s in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification prefers the term “meter.” This is to be expected from the author of Missing Measures and two books of poetry in Sapphics. At less generous mo-
ments meter has been understood as a prescription, as merely one rigid and codified rhythmic possibility. Attridge, in the encyclopedia entry on “Rhythm” noted earlier, feels no such prescription yet argues that “meter can be . . . understood as a particular form of rhythm” and that meter is perceived when regularities in “language’s natural rhythm” become “marked.”

Modernism in particular structured its ideas of prosody around the realignment of meter as a species of rhythm rather than a meaningful aesthetic process defined by the abstraction and patterning of linguistic material. As tracked here in Natalie Gerber’s study of modernism’s particular extremities of belief in alternate terminologies, twentieth-century invocations of rhythm frequently harbor a desire to escape the merely “technical.” Rhythm’s importance to modernist and then twentieth-century poetics helps explains why the first word of Fussell’s aforementioned handbook is “rhythm.” It begins a quotation of Ezra Pound—“Rhythm must have meaning”—an idea Fussell immediately restates in terms of meter: “Meter is a prime physical and emotional constituent of poetic meaning.” That Fussell doesn’t intend to equate meter and rhythm bespeaks the slippery relation between the two terms; elsewhere he frames rhythm in the binary sense, as the opposition between a “‘sense’ pattern of the language” and the “normal or ‘base’ abstract rhythm of the metrical scheme.” Moreover, Fussell emphasizes how poems often “reveal an excitement with meter almost as an object of fundamental meaning itself.” Why start with Pound’s comment—in its epistolary context a screed against meter’s tendency to produce cliché—only to revert to technical formulations of rhythm as a property of language that both generates and works in tension with meter? It is, I think, because Pound’s (often exorbitant) ideas about rhythm preclude a hermeneutic approach to meter as anything more than a prop to poetic meaning. Rhythm, via Pound, helps Fussell channel a theory of poetry in which a too prosaic sense of “poetic meaning” is destabilized by the primacy of prosodic organization. Pound and later theorists ranging from Henri Meschonnic to Mutlu Blasing have taken rhythm as the locus of intention, of (as Culler puts it) “higher level functions that mark language as embodying the intention to mean.” It is not that meter does not do this. Its formal (rather than authorial) intentionality is central to Wordsworth’s theory of meter as “co-presence” in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Rather, meter appears now to require the supplement of rhythm to preserve the salience of sound-form within theories of the aesthetic or literary.

Rhythm has a similarly ephemeral but critical role in John Thompson’s seminal Founding of English Metre (1961). It may be that Thompson
overcame the “prevailing confused rivalry of metrical theories,” as W. K. Wimsatt put it in his book review, by almost entirely avoiding the term rhythm. As John Hollander notes in his preface to the book’s 1989 reprint, the modernist desire for a return to speech “cadences” (a common synonym for rhythm) and the confusion of terms across mid-century criticism necessitated Thompson’s “housecleaning of formal discourse.”

His central term is meter, yet this housecleaning and an engagement with new work in structural linguistics mandates a striking encounter with rhythm. Thompson, in line with Wordsworth and Fussell, views meter as having a “kind of independent existence.” It exemplifies poetic form as “imitative” of its linguistic material in the sense of being an abstraction from it. At the central moment where Thompson defines meter and, much more broadly, poetry as formal mimesis, “rhythm” and especially “the rhythm of verse” appear eight times in one paragraph before disappearing for the remainder of the book:

The rhythms of verse are . . . an imitation of speech. When we hear the sounds that are our language, it is the rhythmic pattern of stresses and junctures that gives us our understanding of the grouping and ordering of these sounds. There is even in English a tendency for the rhythm to become regular, for the stresses to occur at ‘isochronic’ intervals. This tendency of our speech, abstracted and simplified into a pattern, becomes the rhythms of our verse. It is not rhythm itself which distinguishes verse from other kinds of language; it is the fact that the rhythm of verse is the result of the process of art. The elements of rhythm have been abstracted from their source in the language and then ordered into patterns; the patterns imitate in a simplified form the patterns that occur naturally in the language. In altering the natural speech rhythms of the language in verse, these patterns of course alter the meaning of the language . . . . If there is one meaning which the metrical pattern enforces on all language submitted to its influence, it is this: Whatever else I may be talking about, I am talking also about language itself.

Thompson carefully manages the relation between rhythm as the natural province of speech (“the rhythmic pattern of stresses,” “natural speech rhythms”) and “the rhythm of verse,” or rhythm as poetic effect or abstraction. “Rhythm itself” exists in language prior to poetry, as a phonological fact that may tend towards equal units (whether or not those units are temporally equal, i.e. “isochronic”); this is not controversial or surprising and corresponds to both more recent work in prosodic phonology and the nineteenth-century philological understanding of English
(and other Germanic languages) as stress-based. Thompson recognizes, however, that rhythm gets much thornier when linguistic observations become claims about literary forms and traditions; this is especially evident in the not-yet-banished nineteenth-century understanding of Old and Middle English poetry through an “accentual paradigm.”

It is because of this potential for slippage that Thompson so carefully constructs the genitive “rhythm of verse,” which suspends a question endemic to his theory of art, and perhaps formalism today: whether and how the natural rhythms of speech become poetic meter.

Verse’s mimesis of rhythm is especially interesting because it occurs, in the body of Thompson’s treatise, at a much larger scale than that of individual lines or poems. Thompson’s realization about the “founding” of early modern prosody from Wyatt to Sidney is that the abstractions of metrical rule variably align with the rhythms of natural language. When he (and the tradition) arrives at Sidney, he discovers a moment of “maximal tension” between colloquial language (i.e. speech, not disfigured by the requirements of meter) and the “abstract pattern of the metre” now settled into place. This is close-readable tension; even the term “tension” conforms to New Critical nomenclature. But without the story of “founding”—of the suboptimal moments where language is not quite language and meter is not yet meter—we lose sight of Thompson’s deep investment in aesthetics as a process of formal imitation via abstraction. The triumph of “tension,” which becomes the triumph of the binary model of meter and rhythm and the triumph of one kind of formalist reading, obscures the developmental moment where both terms are in states of suspense. Even Hollander, in his preface, locates the life of verse in “rhythmic incident . . . occasioned by the complex relation between meter . . . and the actual phonological rhythm of any utterance.”

This is why the “rhythm of verse” is so important a concept for Thompson, and for the study of poetic and metrical form now. It can be distinguished from the objective guise of rhythm that Erin Kappeler’s essay locates in Amy Lowell and others’ attempts to “scientifically” measure poetic rhythm. They do so to feel less alienated from spoken language, the rhythms of which, Gerber notes, get treated as de facto aesthetic material by modernism’s utopian prosodic theory.

Thompson, like many of the contributors here, turns to rhythm to understand the tricky ontological (or generic) position of aesthetic objects that obey their own formal laws but depend as well on the shared qualities of the language they imitate. His suspension of “rhythm” between natural and aesthetic language can only exist ephemerally, however, within this foundational work on meter. A very different, entirely negative role falls
to rhythm in an important article published while Thompson developed his dissertation into a book. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s *PMLA* article “The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction” avoids the term rhythm and focuses on meter as an aesthetic law that poetry gives unto itself (in a more thorough and achieved “abstraction” from properties of language).

Meter is objective but not in an empirical sense (they attack pseudoscientific “timers and linguistic recorders”).

Yet avoiding rhythm does not eliminate the ontological questions it frames for Thompson. Tom Cable’s essay notes Wimsatt and Beardsley’s oddly visual construction of what must at some level be a temporal form. A *PMLA* rebuttal from 1962 attacked their “intellectualist” removal of the reader, turning predictably to the reader’s “experience of rhythm” and taking issue with a supposedly erroneous equation of meter and rhythm. Wimsatt and Beardsley responded that temporal aspects are subjective and therefore (as they had previously argued) “beyond verifiable public discussion.”

As in “The Affective Fallacy,” the authors here foreclose an exploration of how poetry does or does not circulate publicly. But, as will be obvious from the essays in this collection, rhythm is all about public discussion even if its “observable phenomena” have eluded ultimate verification. Consenting to meter as “verifiable” would have raised few eyebrows in 1960. Thompson’s work, in line with earlier figures like George Saintsbury, discovers in meter something like a teleological “iambicisation” to which generations of poets and readers ultimately consent. Wordsworth felt this to be the case by 1802: “Metre obeys certain laws, to which the Poet and Reader both willingly submit because they are certain.”

Consent to rhythm, however, turns out to be a very different matter. For Wimsatt and Beardsley it is impossible; for nineteenth-century thought about poetry it was essential. For Francis Gummere, a nineteenth-century theorist of balladry discussed at length in Jackson’s contribution, the notional power of poetry to develop and represent a public depended upon a shared rhythmic capacity that seemed attenuated in modern societies (but present in racial others, especially the African-American “folk”); Wimsatt and Beardsley erase the doubt about rhythmic consent (though likely unaware of it) through an improvised canon and a set of underlying assumptions about what a poem is and what qualities it has. “We are concerned,” they respond, “with such observable facts as that when two poems have the same meter, they have a common quality which can be heard in both . . . .” For theorists of folk and oral poetry in previous intellectual generations this “common quality” would have been spoken of with nostalgic desire for a community of “hearers” entranced by common qualities of rhythm. Wimsatt and Beardsley are correct exactly to
the degree that they make possible such hearing through pedagogy: their essay, like Whitman’s grand claims to unify the nation through his new poetic forms (studied in Kappeler’s contribution), would need to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet there is, simply, not a great deal of common training in prosody, nor has there been since the fin de siècle ascendancy in English national culture and schooling of what Meredith Martin terms the “military-metrical complex.” The subsequent “Fall of Meter” and the emergence of what one critic has called the twentieth century’s “prosodic pluralism” return us to “rhythm” as the crucial term for exploring poetry’s generic and aesthetic instability.

There is no possibility of fully articulating here a disciplinary history of rhythm as a keyword for the study of poetics and prosody, but these episodes show its place at the root of debates over literariness, the nature of poetic language, techniques of reading and listening, and the circulation of poetic sound. The essays in this collection all deal in various ways with the problematic inheritance of “rhythm” as a disciplinary term, debating and demonstrating its value.

Description of Essays

The first grouping of essays, Rhythm’s Critiques, opens the collection by sketching rhythm’s insubordination with respect to language and especially poetic language’s conceptual, representational, and semantic order. Rhythm is an event, for Jonathan Culler, not only in the experience of passions or affects, but in its dense system of references to other poetic rhythms and in its mnemonic potency. His essay cites a wide range of nineteenth and twentieth-century poets and critics “seized” by rhythm and for whom rhythm is foundational to any intention to produce meaning. David Nowell Smith explores this same foundational status as a crucial component of post-Kantian critical philosophy, and specifically as an exploratory, provisional name for the subject’s emergence into language and literature. His essay invites us to return to both critical theory and contemporary poetics for rhythms of absence and presence not restricted to stress and unstress. Simon Jarvis’ contribution provides a rich description of the endeavors of rhythm and other verse technique in Browning’s Sordello as they push against the “syntactic day job” of lines. Through a compelling reading of the role of prosody as necessary constraint in Kant’s Critique of Judgment, Jarvis invites us to “read irresponsibly,” attentive to the endeavors of rhythm as a mode of verse thinking antagonistic towards meaning and content (whether propositional, expressive, historical, etc.).
The second grouping of essays, *Body, Throng, Race*, explores claims of rhythm’s embodiment and the stakes thereof, especially concerning logics of race. Each denaturalizes rhythm by situating it within histories of science, anthropology, ethnography, and the nascent enterprise of literary criticism. Across these essays one discovers an unexpectedly intense belief in or nostalgia for a rhythmic “throng” which emerged in nineteenth and then twentieth-century literary discourse from Herder’s theories of the *Volksgeist*. Virginia Jackson’s essay attends to the racialized reading of rhythm, past and present, which manifests the desire to recover through rhythm an “imagined community”—a term first used, she notes, by Gummere. Jackson extends her previous work on the disembodied and dehistoricized subject of lyric and lyric reading by arguing that such imagined communities of rhythm render poetry “racial in origin and post-racial in effect.” Haun Saussy’s essay expands the history of conceiving and testing rhythmic bodies to the Anglophone and Francophone natural sciences, for instance Herbert Spencer’s theories of rhythm as it evolves from a “homogenized” presence in the music-speech-dance of the primitive throng to the increasingly specialized faculties of complex civilization. Leveraging Marcel Mauss’ theory of bodily techniques as cultural processes “mounted” in bodies (rather than organically present, as rhythms are often imagined to be), he encourages a comparatist critical practice focused on moments where rhythms are exposed as they interact and break down. Erin Kappeler’s essay picks up on rhythm’s theoretical harmonizing of the potentially disparate aspects of complex national culture. Studying Whitman’s critical legacy across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she explores anxieties about the lack of “social consent,” aesthetic and otherwise, in the industrial era, and resulting efforts to claim “ancestral cadences” flowing through Whitman and his free verse.

The third grouping of essays, *Beat and Count*, explores the embodiment and phenomenology of rhythm from the alternate perspective of our experience of phonology and especially verse’s uncertain temporality. The question, answered differently in each essay, is what “counts” as poetic rhythm and what constitutes a rhythmic verse form cognitively and historically. Derek Attridge’s essay makes a strong case for an extended tradition in poetry and song of a four-beat stanza form called “dolnik,” in which readers without specific training or efforts of scansion perceive rhythmic patterning in either double or triple time. What makes that tradition interesting, however, are the “psycho-physical” boundary conditions engaged by complex verse as it sets up and contravenes the
stanza’s powerful expectations. Tom Cable’s essay studies these boundary conditions through neglected but promising work in cognitive science. Bringing this field into conversation with theories of phenomenology and recent work in musicology, Cable shows how our expectations of rhythm can be shaped pre-consciously. This does not imply that poems have a definite or given rhythm, however, as the written form of poetry gives way to variations in performance dependent in turn on culturally determined reading practices. Neither Attridge nor Cable would expect much potential for rhythmic expectation or play in “recherche” meters such as Auden’s, mentioned previously, or the syllabics studied in Meredith Martin’s contribution. Yet syllabics occupy a fascinating and neglected place in the history of versification as a form at once aesthetic and scientific. Depending on the recent formalization of the “syllable” as a linguistic object, the efforts of Adelaide Crapsey, Robert Bridges, and others eschewed the new kinds of scientific measurement explored by Saussy and Cable. While syllabics are among the least “rhythmic” forms we might conceive in an accentual language like English (Romance languages are a separate matter), Martin shows how dynamically modern poets invested in a rhythmic experience at a tangent from the prosodic phonology of the language. This returns us to rhythm’s critique of poetry’s aspiration to the status of natural language or oral form.

The final section, Fictions of Rhythm, embraces the divide between spoken and poetic rhythm and between subjective expression and its variousmetrical incarnations. Natalie Gerber articulates and compares often radically divergent treatments of speech rhythm by modernist poets. Frost engaged with rhythm at the phrasal or intonational level, while Stevens placed words to enjoy disjointing effects of their stress, and Williams divided his verse into syntactic units. The latter approach might have encouraged the appearance of simulated speech (such has been claimed), and yet Williams himself later found many of his efforts as “overdone, artificial, archaic” as Spenser’s alexandrine. Obscuring the imbrications of voice and speech in meter leads, Yopie Prins shows, to the discovery of Sappho’s voice and rhythm in what became known, across time and language, as her stanza. Prins reads Sappho as an allegorical figure for rhythm rather than its lyrical origin. The many excited historical re-inventions of her stanza from the nineteenth century to the present reveal changing theories of meter and meter’s materialization as rhythm. The collection closes with what might be rhythm’s Ur-invention in its “critical” post-Kantian form: Coleridge’s “Christabel” meter. Ewan Jones interrogates rhythm’s association, via that poem, with a free, impassioned
human will. In Jones’s rereading, “Christabel” is a poem that confuses rhythm, and whose rhythm confuses, and in which we often do not know who speaks, much less which passion or emotion the rhythm compels. As it “engenders drama and character” rather than reflecting or illuminating existing voices, rhythm compels attention to the philosophical problem (felt across Coleridge’s works, and many other poets and theorists discussed in these essays) of how texts mediate intersubjective passions, affects, and voices.

This point returns us to a central lesson of the collection as a whole: rhythm may constitute the most substantial part of encounters with (many) poems, and may appear prior to hermeneutic efforts, but actual definitions of rhythm seem to be playing catch-up across the critical landscape. The ontology of rhythm need not be secure, however, to be critical, and these essays repeatedly show how many of the lacunae of literary studies, especially in its Anglophone, post-Romantic incarnation, revolve around ideas and experiences of rhythm. It has been, for instance, a focal point in African-American and Caribbean poetics since the New Negro Renaissance and Negritude movements. Even as rhythm stands for the possibility of new orality, nationality, embodiment, and tradition, scholars have cautioned against the continued invention of “African” rhythm and reminded us of the mediation and transformation of musical or natural rhythms in literary practice. As Tsitsi Jaji notes, Senegalese president and poet Leopold Senghor’s “elastic use of rhythm . . . render[s] the notion that ‘le Nègre était un être rythmique’ so broad that it becomes virtually meaningless.”

It is telling that Kamau Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice*, effectively a manifesto of post-colonial rhythm, spells the word “riddim”: a nod to orality built on orthographic play and deeply conscious of dialect traditions. Braithwaite’s contemporary John Figueroa, a Jamaican poet known for classical allusion and form, spells the word “rydhm” in his ironic appeal to Derek Walcott to listen to a white critic and be “Full of rydhm like all true spades.” The divergent spelling of the word in this Afro-Caribbean context neatly reflects both the potency and instability of investments in rhythm across the relatively brief history of its preeminence in literary criticism. Figueroa’s pun on “spade” as both slur and as the laborer’s rhythmic object returns us to rhythm’s mercurial relation to embodiment, race, and will; but his orthographic and lexical sleight also recalls rhythm’s creative destabilization of language in the poem and beyond. He suggests, as do each of the essays in this collection, that it is impossible to imagine a poetics or literary history inattentive to rhythm’s decisive role in how we conceive aesthetic objects, literary genres, subjectivity, nation, language, and culture.
Notes

10. Ibid., 49.
12. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, “Form and Explanation,” Critical Inquiry 43 (Spring 2017): 652. The authors characterize Levine’s as a kind of “fundamentalist formalism” for its belief that “one ought to be able to analyze form without making reference to its various predicates: this genre, that historical example, and so on” (656).
non-mimetic prosodic functions. Relevant here is Jackson’s theory of “lyricization” as the displacement of subgenres and accompanying modes of reading and circulation into the master genre of the “expressive romantic lyric”; this model of lyric occurs in an “idealized moment of reading progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression.” Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7. One outcome of lyricization would be a formalism that obsessively reads prosodic form as expressive form.


15. The field has been dominated by work in the nineteenth century. Especially important here are the 2008 Exeter conference “Metre Matters” and subsequent collection with that title edited by Jason David Hall (2011); a special 2011 issue of Victorian Poetry dedicated to prosody (ed. Meredith Martin and Yisrael Levin); a 2014 conference at the University of Chicago on “Poetic Genre” dedicated to questions of historical poetics and with keynotes by two prosodists also present in this collection, Yopie Prins and Simon Jarvis. Their dialogue has resulted in several important essays concerning the definition of “historical poetics”; these pivot in large part on the question of our “cognition” or “recognition” of versification. Simon Jarvis, “What Is Historical Poetics?,” in Theory Aside, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 97–116; Yopie Prins, “What Is Historical Poetics?” Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History 77, no. 1 (2016): 13–40. Although “historical prosody” needs no absolute origin story, Prins’ Victorian Sappho (1999) contained a landmark analysis of the aesthetics of Victorian meter in their broader discursive context, a research project more directly and broadly defined by Meredith Martin’s Rise and Fall of Meter. Martin’s forthcoming online Princeton Prosody Archive will support that program and enable a range of digital projects.


18. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 1197. Prins’ essay in this collection provocatively inverts such formulations, arguing that the phenomenology of rhythm “depends on readings of meter generated by a wide range of metrical theories at different moments in history.”

19. Fussell, Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, 3.

20. Ibid., 14.


22. In particular, his claim that meter not only “temper[s] and restrain[s] the passion” but is a kind of “co-presence” that “divest[s] language in a certain degree of its reality, and thus . . . throw[s] a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence


26. As Ian Cornelius notes, it was Edwin Guest’s *History of English Rhythms* (1838) (and later W. W. Skeat in his revised edition) who “made accentual rhythm the uniform organizing principle of English poetry, from Caedmon to the present.” *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 54. It is telling that Guest turns to “rhythm” to conflate two metrical traditions now known to be radically different: the alliterative corpus of Old, Middle, and Late Middle English (roughly up to the court of James VI of Scotland), and the accentual-syllabic tradition whose fitful beginnings Thompson traces. See also Thomas Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Eric Weiskott, “Alliterative Meter and English Literary History, 1700–2000,” *ELH* 84, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 268–69.


29. Ibid., 587.


31. Ibid., 674.


34. “Rhythm and ‘Exercises in Abstraction,’” 674.


