Critical Rhythm

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RHYTHM’S CRITIQUES
“We know poetry is rhythm,” writes W. B. Yeats, contrasting the rhythms that pick up and spectrally convey a tradition with the mechanistic cadences of music hall verse: “It is the rhythm of a poem that is the principal part of the art.” Other poets attribute the genesis of a poem to a rhythm that enters their head obsessionally, and won’t let them go until they have found words for it. And for readers rhythm is often what makes a poem especially memorable. Many of us have a good deal of verse stuck in our minds, lodged there not by any wisdom it conveys, but by rhythms that have refused to desert us, as if they led a life independent of our will.

One, two,
Buckle my shoe.
Three, four;
Shut the door.

Counting rhymes and nursery rhymes are perhaps the least of it, since they bear the association of childhood days. The lines we recall from the verse of great poets, encountered later when we could practice more mature judgment, may owe their persistence to their rhythm more than to any insight they might have granted us:

Break, Break, Break,
On thy cold gray stones, o sea.

or
How to keep—is there any such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace or latch or catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away?

The psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham maintains that “rhythm produces in the reader the fundamental affect of the entire poem.” Although it is hard to imagine how to demonstrate this (what about other aspects of sound patterning, not to mention the well-documented effect of meaning in generating the impression that a particular sound-pattern is in some way mimetic?), Abraham’s claim at least calls us to focus on rhythm more than criticism has been generally inclined to do.

I have argued elsewhere that lyric aims not to be a representation of an event but to be itself an event, so an account of lyric needs to grant primacy to what happens in and through lyric, the distinctive events of lyric discourse, which make rhythm and repetition central. Quite apart from the historical link of lyric to chanted recitation and the modern usage that emphasizes the close connection with rhythm by calling the words of songs “lyrics,” is it not rhythm above all that makes lyrics attractive, seductive, and memorable? If lyric is pleasurable language, language that gives pleasure, its rhythms and sound patterning may be largely responsible. If lyric is memorable language—language that asks to be learned by heart and repeated, recited—is this not also because of its rhythms? Rhythm gives lyric a somatic quality that novels and other extended forms lack—the visceral experience of rhythm linking it to the body and, often rather dubiously, to the rhythms of various natural processes—and thus contributes to a different sort of pleasure from those promoted by novels and a sense of otherness. Lyrics are language, but language shaped in other ways, as if from elsewhere, which is how Valéry writes about rhythm: “I was suddenly seized by a rhythm that imposed itself on me and soon gave me the impression of a foreign process. As if someone was making use of my machine for living.” Although our body has its own rhythms, of breathing and of heartbeats, our rhythmic competence most often responds to rhythm as something exterior which nonetheless engages us, draws us to beat in time with it, finding or sensing a pattern, in noises, movements, action in the world. When we find rhythm in language, it enlists us in a process in ways that other texts do not. Rhythms make us want to repeat them, generating a different effect from that of novels, for instance, where we recall char-
acters, incidents, and an occasional telling phrase, but seldom desire to recite passages.

Rhythm is one of the major forces through which poems haunt us, just as poems themselves are haunted by rhythms of other poems. The tenacity with which rhythms can lodge in our memory, as the tune of a song might, encourages thoughts of occult forces, as if potent effects must have mysterious absent causes.

If rhythm is fundamental to the appeal of lyric, it is largely neglected by criticism, in part because traditional foot scansion offers only limited access to rhythms. As Derek Attridge has argued, in a devastating discussion that should be conclusive, the traditional account of meter in the Norton Anthology of Poetry (an essay by John Stallworthy that has been reprinted from one edition to another and is indeed typical of introductions to meter) makes it difficult to describe many of the poems in the anthology, beginning with the first of the “Anonymous Lyrics of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, “the section where we first are offered English rather than Anglo-Saxon poems.”

This poem has a clear four-beat rhythm:

Nou goth sonne under wode—
   B  B  B  B
Me reweth, Marie, thi faire rode.
   B  B  B  B
Nou goth sonne under tre—
   B  B  B  B
Me reweth, Marie, thi sone and the.5
   B  B  B  B

As Attridge notes, “Although this metrical form is highly familiar to any reader familiar with the tradition of English verse (and, indeed, many other verse traditions), it is not mentioned in Stallworthy’s essay. The student is left to struggle with the Procrustean task of mapping feet with Greek names onto resistant lines of verse, or manhandling sequences of elementary rhythms” into the iambics and trochees, anapests, dactyls and spondees demanded by foot prosody. How is this rhythm to be described, he asks? “As freely varying iambic meter? As free trochaic meter? As shifting between iambic and trochaic?”6 The difficulties of fitting the lyric to the patterns of foot prosody imply that it is rhythmically highly complex and full of uncertainties. But in fact it has an immediately recognizable rhythm that foot scansion obscures: stanzas of four four-beat lines, with some freedom in the disposition of unstressed syllables (in particular, lines can begin or
end on an off-beat). This is the rhythm of much song and popular verse and also highly rhythmic moments of literary verse. In an amusing survey of other introductions to poetry, Attridge notes how often discussions break down or become excessively elaborate when confronted with poems of this kind, with a pronounced rhythm that is easy for readers to grasp. Take Robert Frost’s “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things”:

The house had gone to bring again
To the midnight sky a sunset glow.
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood,
Like a pistil after the petals go.

Here we have a strong four-beat rhythm with a variable number of unstressed syllables between stressed syllables. As the final stanza illustrates, lines may begin with either a stressed or unstressed syllable, without causing any difficulties for readers:

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.

What Frost called “loose iambics” Attridge proposes we call by the established Russian term, *dolnik*, and he notes that a considerable range of important poems in English use this meter. For instance, Milton’s “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” whose meter gives foot-prosodists great difficulty, comes easily to readers:

But, hail, thou Goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose Saintly visage is too bright
To hit the Sense of human sight;
And therefore to our weaker view,
Ore laid with black staid Wisdoms hue.
Black, but such as in esteem,
Prince *Mennons* sister might beseem,
Or that starr’d *Ethiope* Queen that strove
To set her beautys praise above
The Sea Nymphs, and their powers offended,
Yet thou art higher far descended.

More strikingly, Blake’s “The Tyger,” where readers cannot escape the driving four-beat rhythm is taken to be complicated and anomalous by foot-prosodists.
Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

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

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

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

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

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

In his refreshingly down-to-earth introduction to writing poetry, *The Ode Less Travelled*, Stephen Fry asks, “Are the odd lines out really iambic, or are they trochees with an extra weak syllable at the beginning?” Since every line ends in a stressed syllable, foot-prosodists are tempted to treat the poem’s meter as iambic tetrameter (with a truncated [catalytic] initial foot in most cases), although only five lines begin with an unstressed syllable, but this would obscure the vigorous dominant rhythm of initially-stressed lines. Hence, the inclination to call the rhythm trochaic is strong. Such hesitations, whether conducted publically or privately, suggest that the rhythm is complicated, requiring analysis and reflection, but it is so only for critics seeking feet. For readers the rhythm is entirely clear—indeed inescapable.

Blake’s is a lyric that has generated a substantial literature of interpretation, most of which passes by its rhythmic structure, but what is most
salient, what makes it a striking poem, rather than a prose reflection on
the power of creation, or on the threat of the French revolution, or any-
thing else, is its rhythm: the four-beat rhythm, with strong initial stress in
all but five lines, the rhythm of nursery rhymes and counting songs. “It is
the rhythm of song-verse,” Andrew Welsh writes, “in which the one-two-
three-four of the steady beat is far more important in determining the
movement of the language than the consistently repeated patterns and
counted syllables of foot-prosody.” Accompanying this steady beat of the
song-rhythm is the patterning of the syntax, with short questions con-
trasting with those verse lines that are not broken up syntactically. Other
rhythmical effects—taking this larger view of rhythm—are created by
repeated sounds: the alliterations, assonances, rhymes, and other sound
echoes woven through “The Tyger.” Along with burning bright, Tyger
bright, and frame fearful, we have the hammering repetition of the twelve
whats. This is a charm-rhythm, the language of incantation, invocation.
In addition to the meter, Welsh writes, “we also hear in it the questioning
of the rhythms of speech-melos and the sound echoes of charm-melos
caught up and carried along on the steady beats of a children’s song. And
in such songs the deeper powers of this old rhythm persist.”

This rhythm is the dominant aspect of the poem. What we make of
the poem when we apply interpretive pressure, place it in one or another
thematic or mythic or historical context in order to derive a meaning, is
relevant, certainly, but one might wonder whether these interpretive ef-
forts are not in some measure the product of a desire to justify the hold
that such strange, yet deeply familiar rhythmic sequences have on us.
Such verses have a power to insert themselves in mechanical memory
independently of any attempt to remember them, and rather than con-
sider ourselves victims of some jejeune susceptibility to rhythm indepen-
dent of meaning, victims of its “fearful symmetry,” we devote ourselves to
intricate thematic explorations, which count for us as a response to the
poem but in fact leave the rhythmical power unexplained.

Most discussions of rhythm in fact focus on meter, and that may well
seem the place to start, since the most salient feature of this rhythm is
the vigorous four-beat line of these quatrains. The problem of the re-
lation between rhythm and meter is long standing: among the Greeks
there was already a division between the rhythmikoi and the metrikoi;
the former saw poetic rhythm as related to music, a temporal art, and
the latter treated it as a structure of types of syllable. But the vast body of
work on the verse line focuses on meter, which has long been seen as the
basis of rhythm, and for most of the history of lyric, poems were writ-
ten in relation to particular metrical frames, specific patterns of syllables
of particular types. Metrics, or the study of prosody,\textsuperscript{10} has been an extremely contentious field, with different systems of notation and conceptions of meter and vigorous struggle between the proponents of different approaches. T. V. F. Brogan concludes the 1993 Princeton Encyclopedia’s article on Prosody by noting,

> Over the past century there has been a general perception that prosody is a desiccated subject, a stony little patch of ground frequented only by eccentrics, fanatics, and pedants. The indictments are easy to finger: verse theory took nearly two millennia to free itself from the detritus of Classical prosody; it has never been able to give even an adequate theory of meter; it has been unable to agree on not merely concepts and terms but underlying assumptions about the nature of poetry itself (text, performance, experience). . . . It has been too willing to base theory on whatever versions of linguistics have been current; it has too often failed to distinguish linguistic processes from artistic conventions. . . . Yet the failure to give final answers is not proof that the questions are trivial; quite the contrary . . . verse structure lies at the very core of our understanding of poetry.\textsuperscript{11}

Put most simply, traditional prosody describes English meters, in terms taken from Greek, by the dominant type of foot (iambic, trochaic, anapaestic, dactylic) and by the number of feet per line, but the artifact of the foot does not correspond to units of modern languages, and analysts must multiply variations, in endless small-scale tinkering, to capture the actual pattern of stresses in accentual-syllabic verse. Traditional descriptions of English stress meters analyze rhythms as involving the substitution of classical feet, such as trochees, spondees, or anapests, for the expected iamb, and, as Natalie Gerber notes in a compelling article exploring the strengths and weaknesses of foot prosody and generative metrics, lines with more substitutions are said to be more complex than lines with fewer substitutions.\textsuperscript{12} Critics who scan the lines try to explain the semantic or thematic appropriateness of such substitutions.\textsuperscript{13} Although it is scarcely clear that these alleged substitutions are the rhythmic features that require attention (they certainly do not in Blake’s “Tyger,” where the salient feature is the vital energy of that relentless four beat rhythm), the strategies for thematically recuperating metrical structures are in any case fairly limited—speeding up, slowing down and emphasis are the most common effects cited by interpreters—and since these are not particularly compelling, this induces a neglect of rhythm. As Gerber writes, when documenting such feeble interpretive sallies, “the potential for rhythm as compositional energy is largely overlooked, as well as the possibility that
rhythm—among other sonic features of a text, can be contradistinctive to, or prioritized independent of meaning.”

The ad hoc attempts to justify foot substitutions distract from more fundamental questions about what sort of principles actually govern the rhythmic practices of English verse. Gerber notes that one problem with the traditional metrical approach to rhythm is its assumption that English verse should be treated as a succession of syllables, bracketing off other features of the language that affect rhythms and metricality. She pairs a line from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 19 with a variant displaying the same succession of stressed and unstressed syllables but which clearly differs from it both rhythmically and metrically:

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/ _ / / _ _ / / _ /
Pluck the / keen teeth / from the / fierce tiger’s jaws
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/ _ / / _ _ / / _ /
Pluck immense teeth / from enraged tiger’s jaws
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Traditional foot prosody assigns both lines the same description, with the same series of foot substitutions: iambic replaced by a trochee in the first foot, a spondee in the second and fourth, and a pyrrhic in the third. This apparatus offers no resources to explain why the first is deemed metrically well-formed and is regularly attested in practice, and why the second is much less so. Generative metrics, Gerber argues, is better able to do so, since it looks at word and phrase boundaries in theorizing rhythmic phrasing. The description in terms of feet creates problems and points away from needed insights about principles governing rhythmic organization.

“Rhythm and meter actualize two completely different principles, which should never be confused,” writes Clive Scott. “Crudely put, meter is linguistic, objective, quantitative, mono-dimensional, and repeatable/discontinuous; rhythm, on the other hand, is paralinguistic, subjective, heterogeneous, qualitative multi-dimensional, and irreversible/non-repeatable.” This is indeed crude for often the most noticeable, most palpable aspects of rhythm come from a metrical frame, as in “The Tyger.” But study of rhythm is especially difficult because, on the one hand, rhythm is something as utterly familiar as our tapping a foot in time to the music or as the regular strides with which we walk most comfortably. It is near to hand yet a phenomenon observed throughout nature, wherever there is periodicity. It appears to be a property of systems yet it is above all an experience: dependent upon the frames and expectations with which we approach phenomena (as we make the ticking of a clock into a duple rhythm, tick, tock). And the notion of rhythm encompasses
both the regularity of a musical beat or higher-level forms of symmetry and various forms of irregularity, from the syncopation that is tied in with beats it answers, to higher-level asymmetrical structures where prominences diversely signaled create differing temporal periodicities, as phrases become rhythmic units.

While it would be very desirable to find a successful way of describing rhythm, a crucial first step is to recognize its centrality to the lyric: to the construction of the lyric and the experience of lyric. Focusing on rhythm rather than meter allows us to give weight to other sorts of patterning—phonological and syntactic above all—that contribute to the experience of verse as rhythmical. Rhythm is more than variation upon the norm of meter.

An alternative to foot-scansion, championed above all by Derek Attridge, maintains that the foundation of English verse is four-beat line. Even young children who may have trouble with the pronunciation of words can easily get the rhythm right for nursery rhymes. “There is nothing remarkable, therefore, about a two-year-old chanting the following rhyme with perfect metrical placing of the syllables,”

Star light star bright,
The first star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight.

This is despite the fact it requires “knowing”—I put the word in quotation marks—that each word in the first line takes a stress, whereas in the third line only every second word is stressed. It is upon this edifice of shared ability, a rhythmic competence, that is built the whole English poetic tradition, he argues. The four-by-four formation, four groups of four beats, “is the basis of most modern popular music, including rock and rap, of most folk, broadside, and industrial ballads from the middle ages to the 20th century, of most hymns, most nursery rhymes, and a great deal of printed poetry.”

In fact, lyrics that seem to use other meters may actually have the underlying rhythmical structure of the 4x4 stanza. Attridge notes that various popular stanza forms include a silent or virtual beat at the end of a line, making a three-beat line in effect a four-beat line, where the last beat is realized as a pause in reading or reciting. Notoriously, limericks, which are printed in five-line stanzas, have three four-beat lines, each with a virtual (silent) beat at the end, and two short lines which add up to a four-beat line with internal rhyme, so they are a version of the fundamental 4x4 form, the version sometimes called “short meter”:
A canner, exceedingly canny [beat],
One morning remarked to his granny, [beat],
“A canner can can / Anything that he can;
But a canner can’t can a can, can he?” [beat].

Many of Emily Dickinson’s poems are written in common measure, frequent in hymns, which is described as a stanza of alternating four and three-beat lines but is actually a stanza of four four-beat lines in which the final beat of the second and fourth lines is virtual, expressed as a pause:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room [beat]
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—[beat]

So far I have considered cases where the metrical pattern does much to generate the rhythm, but in many cases rhythmically salient effects are not at all accounted for by the meter: similar meters can have quite different rhythmic effects, depending on other factors. Richard Cureton notes that Blake’s “The Sick Rose” has a meter similar to that of many nursery rhymes, with two four-line stanzas, two strong beats per line, alternating with one or two unstressed syllables, and a rhyme scheme of abcb, but rhythmically it is very different from something like “Rock-a-bye Baby”:

Rock-a-bye baby,
On the treetop,
When the wind blows,
The cradle will rock.

Like this nursery rhyme, which attributes to nature a catastrophic possibility that the rhythm renders benign, Blake’s poem has an engaging rhythmic pulse and regular rhyme scheme, but, writes Cureton, “the real rhythmic action in the poem is something that develops more against and within this controlled [metrical] structure than because of its presence.”21 That is to say, the very different syntactic organization of Blake’s poem gives it quite a different rhythm from the metrically-similar nursery rhyme.

O Rose, thou art sick!
Th’ invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

The first line, a complete sentence, becomes one complete rhythmic unit, set against the other sentence that comprises the rest of the poem, where the predicate is postponed into the second stanza. Cureton offers a detailed analysis of the way in which the complex second sentence begins with unimpeded duple units in lines 2-4 (invisible / worm, flies / night, howling / storm), accelerates rhythmically, riding over the stanza break, to its “dramatic structural arrival and extension in lines 5 and 6, and a muted, concentrated climax in lines 7 and 8.” The syntactic relations and intonational contours produce a highly effective rhythm, and “a rhythmic theory that overlooks this other rhythmic patterning,” Cureton concludes, “overlooks the better part of verse rhythm.”

If foot-substitution scansion often fails to capture dimensions of verse that are relevant to the rhythm, one could make a case for attempting to bypass the quarrels of metriæ, old and new, and turn to the work of those modern rhythmici who have attempted to theorize rhythm directly. Although Henri Meschonnic has, in numerous books, developed an account of rhythm that is said to encompass everything, from meaning to history, his theory is notoriously difficult for others to deploy, though it has the virtue of instructing us to consider other kinds of sound patterning as essential to the rhythm. The boldest account of rhythm that I have encountered is Amittai Aviram’s Telling Rhythms: Body and Meaning in Poetry. He claims that there are three possible relations between rhythm and meaning: (1) rhythm is a rhetorical device subordinated to meaning, to which it can contribute, the most common view; (2) there is no significant relation between rhythm and meaning; and (3) meaning is subordinate to and refers to rhythm. Bravely opting for number 3, he argues that seeing content as a representation of the form is the only way of relating the two without reducing form to content. He views meaning in poetry as representing, allegorically, “aspects of the power of the poem’s own rhythm to bring about a physical response, to engage the readers or listener’s body and thus to disrupt the orderly process of meaning.” Thus, for example, in “Tyger! Tyger! burning bright/ In the forests of the night,”

Much of the power and thrill of the poem comes from the insistent repetitiveness and parallelism that gives the poem a strong, relentless beat. It makes sense, then, to see the Tyger himself as a local habitation and a name for the powerful rhythm that comes into existence at the same moment as the language and images but with which the
language of the poem is also trying to come to terms—and failing in the effort. The result is a feeling of the awesome ineffability of reality itself—of God’s creation.\textsuperscript{27}

In fact, most poems come to be about what he calls the sublime power of their rhythm—sublime in that it resists or lies beyond efforts of representation and can only be experienced, not comprehended. If the term “sublime” seems excessive for what one might also call the “catchiness” of poetic rhythms, it certainly is not exorbitant to think of rhythm as a force that works on us but lies beyond our immediate comprehension. The poem tells, allegorically, about how its rhythm escapes representation.

This is not very satisfactory hermeneutically, as Aviram recognizes, because poems end up with much the same meaning. In fact, it becomes a matter of definition, of stipulation, that the poem’s meaning is an allegory of the sublime power of rhythm: either the thematic material can be construed as an allegory of the power of rhythm, or, the meaning’s failure to represent the rhythm itself makes the poem mean that the sublime power of rhythm escapes representation. But Aviram has created difficulties for himself. By emphasizing the idea that the meaning of a poem is an allegory of its rhythm he effectively accepts the hermeneutical presumption: that the task of literary study is the production of interpretations and that the test of a theory is whether it can generate new and plausible interpretations. By leading readers to imagine that attending to the rhythm will allow them to come up with an interesting new interpretation as a result of taking the meaning of the poem to be an allegory of its rhythm, he sets them up for disappointment, which may, unfortunately, lead them to stop attending to rhythm.\textsuperscript{28}

The test of the theory should be, rather, the vision it gives us of the lyric. Its virtue is to direct attention to the problem of grasping the action of the rhythm, a problem we have neglected, though it is a mystery of the first order. What makes a rhythm work on us? What do these lyric rhythms accomplish? Experientially, it is often the case that meaning is subordinate to rhythm: what attracts us to a poem is its rhythm, not its meaning, which may be rather banal. Poems have the power to make us remember bits of language that concern us not at all. Why do I remember “Little boy blue, come blow your horn”? It is certainly not because it makes sense or even because it was drummed into me as a child. Or why has “Les sanglots long / Des violons / De l’automne / Blessent mon cœur / D’une langueur/ Monotone,” inscribed itself in mechanical memory, when this meaning is of no possible consequence to me? This power of rhythm, whether we choose to call it “sublime” or not, is certainly something we
should acknowledge and try to factor into our dealings with poetry. I have suggested that critics conceal this power of rhythm to seduce by undertaking complex interpretative operations for poems that attract us. Such efforts cannot be satisfied with the idea that this poem allegorizes the sublime power of its rhythm to attract and enthrall us. They require a deeper distinctive meaning to compensate for our being easily seduced by a haunting rhythm.

I maintain that, as Natalie Gerber suggests, we can and should think of rhythm as functioning quite independently of the meaning, but in the case of Blake’s “Tyger” it seems not inappropriate to say that the image of the tiger and the questions about what forces brought it into being reinforce the effect of the powerful rhythm of this tetrameter verse, which engages readers but which we don't know how to account for, whether we want to link this mysterious power to that of God or not. Still, rather than stipulate that the poem’s meaning is an allegory of its rhythm, it might be better to allow that rhythm functions independently of meaning, though of course from time to time the very independence of that mysterious power becomes a meaning that can be integrated in an interpretation of the poem.

The independence of rhythm is a possibility also asserted by Mutlu Blasing in her account of the lyric: a lyric, “far from being a text where sound and sense, form and meaning, are indissolubly one, is a text where we witness the distinct operation of the two systems. We can always yield to the seductive call to ‘stop making sense’ and attend to the patterning of the non-sense. Or we can choose to switch to the symbolic and make sense. We cannot do both at once.” For her, rhythm is especially important as the crux of language acquisition: children learn by imitating speech rhythms: “Training in vocal rhythmization, in the prosody of human speech,. . . precedes speech, which could not happen without it.” While biological and environmental rhythms may be given, social rhythms are learned, and verbal rhythm is social, part of what she calls the “intentionalization” of language. “Rhythm has no symbolic value, and is distinct from meter, insofar as meter is an abstract representation of the sound shape of a language and can be represented as an abstract scheme. Rhythm is experienced in and as time, as a persuasive movement of the voice. It does not represent and is not representable.”

While she agrees with Aviram in seeing rhythm as neither representa-
tional nor representable, she accuses him of conflating rhythm and meter, which she sees as a formal system, a norm, against which the rhythm of the poem marks the intending of the subject. Much of what Aviram calls the pulsational rhythm of Blake's Tyger would for Blasing be meter,
against which the syntactic contours of English embody a social, signify-
ing subject.  

It is tempting to pick up on Blasing’s contention as the basis of a dis-
tinction; on the one hand, there would be poems where metrical beating
dominate and which characteristically do not project a speaker, such as
limericks, nursery rhymes, and a range of other poems, from “The Tyger”
to Hopkins’ “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves.” On the other hand, there would
be poems where the rhythmic movement of phrasing, working against
the pulse of meter, produces the image of voice, the idea of a speaking
subject. Anthony Easthope, notoriously, links iambic pentameter with
hearing a “voice,” and thus the representation of the speaking subject as
individual, and associates tetrameter with a position of enunciation not
marked as that of an individual subject and thus impersonal or potentially
collective. Four-stress popular meters make available a collective subject
position, and one joins that position as one chants or repeats: “Pease por-
ridge hot, / Pease porridge cold, / Pease porridge in the pot, / Nine days
old,” or even “A gentleman dining at Crewe / Found a rather large mouse
in his stew.” We are not inclined to ask who is speaking here or to try to
posit a person from the image of voice, and much of the pleasure comes
from participating in that implicitly collective position. The same is argu-
ably true of “Tyger, Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night,”
but not of the pentameter “That time of year thou mayest in me behold . . . ”
Certainly four-stress meter can impose an impersonality, even in a poem
like Auden’s “Lullaby,” (“Lay your sleeping head, my love / Human, on my
faithless arm,”) where a personal situation is thematically invoked but
qualified by the ritualistic aura of the meter, as in popular songs. The role
of meter and especially rhythm in promoting the impersonality of poetry
seems to me incontrovertible.

But Blasing seems to be operating at a level above or prior to distinc-
tions between types of poems or different meters. Rhythm “belongs nei-
ther to the systems of meter and rhyme nor to the discursive organization
of figure and meaning, but it intentionalizes both systems. The indexical
function of rhythm renders both language and speech meaningful and
sounds a metaphysically groundless, and historically grounding, inten-
tion to mean.” Rhythm “both renders language sensible and reveals the
experienced temporality of an intending ‘I’ to be a necessary condition of
meaningful language.” That is, it is rhythm that makes language utter-
ance that can mean, makes it more than phonemes or words. If one sort
of poem projects an “I,” offers the image of a voice, and another does not,
that is a subsequent discrimination within the general poetic system she
is describing.
Aviram’s metrical rhythm is linked to the body and seen as disruptive of meaning, whereas for Blasing rhythm belongs to a social body:

The rhythmic body is the “socially-constructed body”; rhythmization is socialization, and it secures meaning. And it is difficult to tell apart bodily responses to poetic rhythm from our total memory of verbal rhythm. Our sensory experience of the materials of words is already emotionally and historically charged, and we cannot experience verbal rhythm in a way that is distinguishable from a mental experience.

It is the metrical segmentation of the sonic flow that opposes or resists meaning, not a rhythmical engagement. And she firmly denies that poetry presents an irrational resistance to linguistic meaning, or a primal irrationality, since to do so would be to accept a rational norm for language. On the contrary, lyric deploys formal, non-rational orders as the ground against which the complex thought processes and figurative logic of lyric can play out. She might thus regard appeals to tapping in time to music or swaying to a beat as marginal to questions of poetic rhythm, for it is through rhythm that the inhuman orders of language are intentionalized as meaningful.

Such disagreements are difficult to adjudicate and might seem to confirm Brogan’s claim that rhythm is the vaguest term in criticism. But the disagreements are quite understandable. On the one hand, given the link of the notion of rhythm to bodily response, it is tempting to associate rhythm with forces that counteract the usual movement of language and enforce a different order. On the other hand, if one takes meter as the name for non-meaningful pulsation, the sort of sound pattern associated with reading a line of pentameter without intonation contours, stressing each beat equally—

The quality of mercy is not strained

then one could associate rhythm in turn—as theorists such as Meschonnic and Cureton are inclined to do—with higher level functions that mark language as embodying the intention to mean.

Young children generally like poetry: they are engaged by its rhythms, entranced by its repetitions, and perhaps at some level deeply pleased by a regime of adult language so full of nonsensical rhyming and chiming. By the time they leave school, they have generally come to avoid it, perhaps because it has been linked to a practice of interpretation, even though their attraction to rhythmic language has not diminished. Their attention has shifted to music but, strikingly, songs with lyrics are vastly
more popular among the young than music without lyrics—testimony to the enduring attraction of rhythmic language, even when its formulations are banal.

Historically, of course, lyric is linked to singing, dancing, chanting, though classicists disagree about the importance of instrumental music to the Greek lyric and about what sort of vocalization—singing, chanting, reciting—was most common for early lyric genres. It seems very plausible that the frequent references in Latin lyrics to singing and to lyres mark an affinity for rhythm rather than for melody. In its rhythmical character, however, lyric is in touch with fundamental bodily rhythms: the timing of heartbeats, of breathing, of walking, of marching, of dancing. And the bodily, experiential dimension of rhythm itself—our bodily participation in rhythm—seems to achieve two distinguishable though closely-related effects. Paul Valéry writes, “it is almost only 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.” At a basic level rhythm seems not so much a matter of interpretation as a direct experience, the result of a rhythmical competence, though mediated by culture; it thus offers a somatic experience that seems to have a different status than the comprehension of a poem. Bringing someone to hear or feel a rhythm is procedurally different from trying to explain the meaning of a poem, though people’s ability to hear some rhythms is highly dependent on past experience. Even though we know that rhythms are constructed (we hear the ticking of a clock as a two beat rhythm, tick, tock, even though the two sounds are identical), this visceral experience seems to give rhythms an exteriority to the mind, as if they were an external force. The words of the poem may be signs for which we have to supply the signifieds, but the rhythm seems independent of us. “The pleasure of the text,” Roland Barthes writes, “is the moment when my body begins to follow its own ideas, for my body does not have the same ideas as I do.” Rhythm appeals to the body’s own ideas.

This brings us to the second effect: in its somatic dimensions, rhythm is a source of pleasure—a topic not much discussed in the critical literature, but not easily deniable. Barthes was not a lover of poetry, except haiku, and does not write of pleasure in verse rhythms, but in Le Plaisir du texte, he offers an observation that seems promisingly pertinent: when he tries to analyze a text that has given him pleasure, he reports, what he finds is not his subjectivity: “It is my bliss-body that I encounter. And this bliss-body is also my historical subject, for it is as the product of a very subtle combination of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic etc.
elements that I organize the contradictory play of pleasure (cultural) and bliss (non-cultural).” The body and its history, which is also of course cultural, is entrammeled in scenarios of pleasure.

The unexpected rise of rap, a form of heavily rhythmical language that relies on rhythm and wordplay, and its enormous persisting popularity among the young of all social strata, suggests a hunger for rhythmic language that might find some satisfaction in lyric. In the case of pop music our sense of the success, of the catchiness, the memorability of a song, (we need a theory of catchiness) is at least as much dependent on rhythm as on meaning, since words of songs we repeat and those we love (not necessarily the same—such is the seduction of rhythm) can be wholly banal or even unintelligible. The words are often misheard but they invariably have the correct rhythm when they are repeated. People grasp and repeat the rhythm even when words and meaning escape them. A greater foregrounding of rhythm as central to lyric might enable the teaching of poetry to regain some of the ground lost in recent years and also might lead to a different sort of poetics. One could imagine an approach more connected with evaluation, which has not been central to literary studies recently: what works and what doesn’t? What engages our attention, our corps de jouissance—to use Barthes’ term—and what does not? For such a poetics, an important part of the teaching of poetry would be accustoming students to hearing and experiencing the rhythms of traditional verse, so that these rhythms come to have some of the bodily appeal of the other forms of repetition that so manifestly work to structure their experience of the world.

Notes
1. W. B. Yeats, “Four Lectures by W. B. Yeats, 1902–4,” Yeats Annual 8 (1991): 89. This is an historical moment when regularity may be deemed anti-poetic.
6. Ibid., 7, 5.
9. Ibid., 196.
10. The term *prosody* has become a possible source of confusion. Long the name for the science of versification, including meter, sound-patterning, stanza forms, rhyme, etc., in twentieth century linguistics it has become the study of the rhythmic ordering of a language in general, including word and phrasal stress, intonation. The two uses are of course closely related, which only increases possibilities of confusion.
13. Part of the problem, of course, is that criticism tends to assume that the goal of literary study is to produce interpretations, which generates a disposition to discover thematic effects for features that are noted, and thus to take note only of such features as seem susceptible to being assigned thematic implications. But if what makes a poem attractive is its rhythm, then one risks passing over its particularly salient features.
14. Ibid., 137–38. Gerber generously concedes that in such an endeavor critics may achieve “interpretive elegance rarely equaled by proponents of generative metrics,” but because of its *ad hoc* character, “it must be recognized as a skill of interpretation and not of analysis.”
15. Ibid., 141–42. She does note that Donne allows lines with this sort of structure.
16. For discussion of Generative Metrics’ approach to this question, too complex to attempt to summarize here, see ibid., 143–62.
19. Ibid., 54–55.
20. Ibid., 58–61.
22. Ibid., 5.
23. Ibid., 81. Paul Fussell, a distinguished prosodist, reads the same poem in terms of foot-substitution. He gives the poem “an iambic-anapestic base” and argues that “the whole poem depends on one crucial substitution.” In line 7, “the cause that extinguishes hope is a spondaic substitution, the only one in the poem: ‘And his dárk sécret lóve’ . . . . The meter conducts the argument. The meter is the poem.” *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, 1979), 103–4. Of course, as Cureton rightly says, the meter is not the poem; the rhythm is the product of many other elements. But the strategy of trying to explain rhythmic effects by foot-substitution leads to a bizarre result, where Fussell distorts the fundamental two beat rhythm of the poem by scanning the line - - / -´/-`/ [And his / dárk sé / cret lóve ], inventing a third foot for this two-beat line.
26. Ibid., 5.
27. Ibid., 22.
28. As far as I know, Aviram’s proposal has not really been taken up by anyone, and I think the reason is obvious: most criticism is hermeneutic in orientation. Critics want theories to help them discover hidden meanings and are rather less interested in theories that set out to account for how poems have the effects that they do.
30. Ibid., 53.
31. Ibid., 55.
32. Ibid., 57.
33. Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983). I imagine that it is his treating iambic pentameter as a *bourgeois* form that has prompted criticism, for the general point seems to me eminently defensible.
35. Ibid., 58.
36. Michele Lowrie, in *Writing, Performance and Authority in Augustan Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), surveys the use of terms such as *cano* and *carmen*.
38. “Verse is that language in which the sonority and the linking of words, their signifying effect and their psychological responses, the rhythms, the syntactic arrangements are so tightly bound that our memory is necessarily cleansed of them, and the words form an object which appears as if it were *natural*, as if it were born out of real life.” Paul Valéry, *Cahiers* (Paris: CNRS, 1958), vol. 8, 586.
40. “C’est mon corps de jouissance que je retrouve. Et ce corps de jouissance est aussi mon sujet historique; car c’est au terme d’une combinatoire très fine d’éléments biographiques, historiques, sociologiques, névrotiques, que je règle le jeu contradictoire du plaisir (culturel) et de la jouissance (inculturelle).” Ibid., 99.