In histories of English versification, the study of what we now call “syllabic” meter has received relatively little attention. By “syllabic” verse I mean verse that, in theory, has no discernable accentual pattern and is measured solely by syllable count; this verse would resemble prose except for the fact that the length of the line is determined by the number of syllables it contains. Robert Beum, a friend and interlocutor to William Carlos Williams, provides a succinct explanation of syllabic meter in his 1957 article “Syllabic Verse in English:”

Syllabic verse is verse which disregards the foot system . . . and instead of being measurable metrically into small regularly recurring units within the line, takes the whole line as its metrical unit, each line (or in the case of a pattern of varying line-lengths, each mating line) containing the same number of syllables, while stress number and stress position are not fixed, and while the lines are end paused.¹

Though Beum discusses syllabic verses of varying line lengths (different numbers of syllables in each line in a repeated pattern) and the most familiar practitioner of the varying line-length syllabic, Marianne Moore, he focuses his inquiry on poets like Dylan Thomas who use the same number of syllables in each line.² In an early edition of Lewis Turco’s ubiquitous The Book of Forms, Turco only spends one sentence on his subsection “Syllabic Prosody” but spends several paragraphs on “isoverbal prosody.”
In "isoverbal" prosody, the poem’s lines are determined by the number of words in each line: “If one were to write stanzas that contained differing numbers of words in each corresponding line in succeeding stanzas, then one would be writing in quantitative isoverbal prosody.” Turco names William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” as “the most famous quantitative isoverbal poem in English.” Turco ends his section on “isoverbal prosody” with Williams’ poem, but gives no hint that “The Red Wheelbarrow” might also be syllabic.

So much depends
upon
the red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Each of the four short stanzas contain three words followed by one word—isoverbal—with the syllabic equation of 4:2, 3:2, 3:2, 4:2; the first and fourth stanzas are “mated,” in Beum’s terms, as are the second and third. The one-word, two-syllable lines are set off visually before a stanza break. The visual image of the words themselves—“upon” “barrow,” “water,” “chickens”—alone above that space might stretch out—a bit—the amount of time it takes us to say them, or at least make us take a short pause. Williams wrote this poem before he elaborated his theory of “triadic verse.” The “upon” rests above the remaining six lines, enacting its prepositional status and the precipice—the hovering between—that we might enact in the space between the short stanzas. Thinking about the poem itself as an image in addition to its status as an imagist poem, I began to think about how syllables were a function of imagism and how images were also a function of syllables. How might syllables produce concentration—like Pound’s “complex”—and how might that complicate our understanding of modernist rhythm?

When we narrate the history of early twentieth-century poetic rhythm, we most often tell the story of the opposing forces of regularized accentual-syllabic verse and free verse. Ezra Pound’s statement “As regarding rhythm . . . compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” and “Don’t chop your stuff into separate iambs” are, as Timothy Steele reports, “part of the narrative of how “20th-century
poetic practice favors rhythm over meter.” Williams famously rejected
Pound’s ideas of bodily rhythm and Anglo-Saxon accents in favor of an
abstract idea of “measure” that he wrote about everywhere but defined
precisely nowhere. Syllabic verse is seldom part of this story, and though
there are many historical moments when counting in poems becomes
either controversial or traditional, syllabic verse at the beginning of the
twentieth century has been particularly neglected by the historical re-
cord. Williams does not do much to help us with this. In his unpublished
1913 essay “English Speech Rhythms” (which Harriet Monroe refused
for Poetry because she thought it was incomprehensible) Williams con-
fusingly insists “Imagination creates an image, point by point, piece by
piece, segment by segment—into a whole, living. But each part . . . exists
naturally in rhythm . . . no work in words that is not regularly rhythmic
[sic] and periodic can be of highest imagination and that workman who
does not weld the rhythm [sic] of his image into his material cannot be
highest of his craft.” Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, in this essay Williams
believes that rhythm is a thing apart from language but upon which lan-
guage rides: “Upon the wordy passions string sounds as they strain to-
ward the perfect image.” And “the rhythm must be maintained perfect,
may continue even when the words scarcely can follow it across a rough-
ness, as in a lullaby when the song halts from sheer weariness the cradle
keeps swaying.” And counting syllables are “the bare makeshift for the
appreciation of elapsing time . . . This makeshift counting of syllables—
only possible because we were not capable of music and because none
has yet been able to count time without it—is now expanded to meet the
true necessity which is that time, not the syllables, must be counted.”
It seems that Williams is aiming toward a theory of quantitative prosody:
“the same rhythm, swift, may be of three syllables or if two are elided, of
one: whereas, slow, it may consist of four or seven or any number that the
sense agrees to. This is the flexibility that the modern requires.” But what
is the real difference, for Williams and other poets, between quantitative
and syllabic prosody? Does syllabic verse have a rhythm? Can we hear it?
Detect it without seeing it on the page?

Beum, Yvor Winters, and other scholars (including the authors of the
“syllabic verse” entry in the most recent edition of the Encyclopedia of Po-
etry and Poetics) trace the beginning of syllabic verse not to the experi-
ments of “modernism” but to the poet Ezra Pound associated most closely
with the Victorian idiom—Robert Bridges. Bridges is best known today
as the editor of Hopkins’ poetry. Poet Laureate of England between 1913
and his death in 1930, he was well respected by his peers as well as by
the younger poets associated with literary modernism, who considered
him the foremost metrist of his day. Bridges’ best-selling 1929 book-length poem *The Testament of Beauty*, critics argue, is the first truly successful experiment in syllabic verse form. Syllabics developed concurrently in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century and were part of a larger reconsideration in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the States of the efficacy of the classical foot-based system for measuring English verse. This essay explores a few forays into syllabics, most notably Bridges’ earlier experiments with Neo-Miltonic syllabic verse, and connects these forays into abstract ideas about speech rhythm. I then move briefly to the perhaps unfamiliar American poet and prosodist Adelaide Crapsey, whose invention and popularization of the “cinquain” around the same time that Bridges was experimenting with syllabics also coincides with her fascinating quantification of syllable length as a potential key to poetic meaning. I conclude with a consideration of how William Carlos Williams, influenced by this discourse, revised and revamped theories of syllables as units of time in his verse line. By looking at alternative histories of early twentieth-century verse culture, I hope to show the importance of prosodic discourse in early twentieth-century literary history—a history that often assumes the importance of image at the expense of rigorous considerations of metrical or sonic experiments. Though scholars have recognized Pound’s devotion to Anglo-Saxon strong-stress lines, or T. S. Eliot’s ghosts of meter, it is only Marianne Moore’s lines that have garnered widespread attention for their syllabic prosody. But what if we saw syllabics in the early twentieth century as a prosodic possibility, for poets like Bridges, Crapsey, and Williams, that might mediate not only between the visual and the aural dimensions of poetry but also between the science and aesthetics of verse form?

2

Syllabics verse is not the same as quantitative verse. Put simply, the first counts syllables and the second counts the amount of time it takes to say those syllables. They are related, and both rely on the complicated matter of pronunciation. In 1903, T. S. Omond published *A Study of Metre*, which posited replacing foot-based scansion with measure by “time spaces.” Omond traced prosodists’ obsession with time through the musical notation theories of Joshua Steele (1755) to American prosodist Sidney Lanier, who theorized in his 1880 *Science of English Verse* that metrical and musical time were the same. Steele, Lanier, and a number of other prosodists attempted to solve the problem of (temporal) metrical notation by adopting musical notation. And yet Coventry Patmore, by far the most influ-
ential prosodist of the late nineteenth century, believed that the (English) mind could imagine these abstract spaces—what he called “isochronous intervals” between accents without any sort of visual mark. How much time did it take to pronounce each syllable in English, a language with no common pronunciation? Patmore, Hopkins, and Bridges argued about these issues and, spurred by their conversations, Bridges devoted himself to correcting English pronunciation in order to eliminate ambiguity in pronunciation and therefore eliminate the need for metrical notation (a problem that had always dogged Hopkins). For Bridges, the problem of quantity in English was primarily a problem of how we see syllables on the page and how what we see tells us how to pronounce.

Nearly all of the prosodic discourse at the turn of the twentieth century was concerned with the problem of the visual versus aural perception of verse form. Prosodists and linguists did not agree—and still do not agree—about how to measure and mark equivalent spaces of perceived time in a verse line. Because English spelling is not phonetic, problems of measuring the length of time it takes to say a line (much less a word)—whether or not to elide syllables, and how or when to stress certain syllables became issues of notation. As Jason Hall argues, the scientific study of verse attempted to solve the problems of defining accent, pitch, and tone by using mechanical measurements that relied on the supposed objectivity of machine recording. These measurements, however, conducted in laboratories and scrutinized by linguists in Russia, Germany, the United States, and France, simply confirmed the bias of the examiner and did not definitively solve the issue of how to measure accent in English in all its variety. Despite the lack of agreement, linguists held out hope that science and even mathematics could rescue study of prosody from the abstraction of the literary disciplines. The increased attention to syllables by Bridges, Crapsey, and Williams overlaps with the discussion of the phonemic unit in linguistics first discussed in France in 1876 and explored more fully by Saussure in the decades after. Though controversial, phonemes were essentially a thing by the 1920s. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that may cause a change in meaning within language but doesn’t have meaning in itself—the “t” phoneme containing all of the sounds a “t” can make phonetically for instance. It is an indivisible unit of sound or, how we might decide to measure the borders of a string of letters that makes up a syllable. The desire for scientific precision in measuring prosody and the resurgent interest in syllabic counting as a model for versification correspond with new and controversial ways of thinking about sound in language in the nascent field of linguistics.
The modernist salvo, found in William Carlos Williams’s poem “A Sort of Song”: “no ideas but in things” might be understood differently if we remember that phonemes become things at the beginning of the twentieth century. I simply want to mark this concurrence to think about how sound-units were being measured in ever more minute ways. For Bridges, reforming spelling to make it phonetic—and corresponding with *OED* editor Henry Bradley to beg that he adopt phonetic spelling in the dictionary—was crucially related to his interest in inventing a syllabic verse form that could accommodate a variety of different kinds of speech.

French verse-lines, with their strict rules for the number of syllables per line, caesura, and excluded words, were largely understood to be syllabic—so much so that the types of French verse were understood by number of syllables allowed in each line (twelve, or the alexandrine, ten, eight, seven, and six). This ideal, of a purely syllabic non-accentual French versification, offered a structure for thinking about English prosody freed from accent and pronunciation that could then accommodate a variety of speech rhythms along the same lines as “free verse.” So, too did the rise of French “vers libre” and the idea of “symbolism” influence sonic and visual experiments in English verse form. The twin movements of literary decadence and literary jingoism in England were interwoven into competing ideas about literary form in the early decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, French literary decadence manifested itself in France as a break away from regular alexandrines and toward freer sonic play. On the other hand, literary jingoism (patriotic and flamboyant in a different way) promoted the idea of an all-natural accent, a beat that was integral to the properly functioning national body. This turn of the century concept of “rhythm,” derived earlier in the nineteenth century but brought to prominence by Frances Barton Gummere, promoted new ethnographically supported narratives of primitive throngs and primitive songs as natural history in order to justify and naturalize the marching rhythm of military drills in service of the nation. We might, then, recontextualize the varieties of experiment that we blur into “free verse” and, among those varieties of experiment, see syllabic verse form as an escape—a new direction away from both decadence and jingoism and toward a more controlled verse that might bring something like an idealized objectivity of poetic form to modern poems, for both poets and for ever more discerning readers of poems.

The idea seemed to be, at the outset of the twentieth century, that if “modern” verse could be truly syllabic—counted by syllables only—then any language could fall into a syllabic rhythm, irrespective of pronunciation, emphasis, tone, pitch, or stress. And the precision of a strict syllable
count mapped expressively onto the precision of imagism—the idea in a thing and the precise description of that thing distilled into an exactly counted verse line. Not only did syllabic verse avoid the patriotism and easy ideology of a national past, it also provided a kind of freedom to define its formal terms—not dissimilar to the fascination, for Pound, with Chinese and Japanese forms (often rendered syllabically in English). Since true syllabics seemed nearly impossible, they allowed for a fantasy of poetic form that might avoid the dissolution into the boring regularity of the accentual-syllabic drum beat. Because syllabic verse demanded only speech stress as modulation it fit perfectly into the democratic ideologies of the “free verse” project as opposed to the necessity of understanding quantity or relying on an understanding of the correct placement of an accent to scan a line properly. It seemed to be at once natural and perfectly strange—a constructed poetic form that would always draw attention to its constructedness. It could at once bear the mark of each individual poet and allow that poet to freely import quotations as long as these quotations could fit the syllable count. It wasn’t that accentual meter needed to be actively suppressed, but because particular accentual-syllabic meters had become so ideologically weighted, syllabic verse could provide an alternative.

For Bridges, syllabic verse meant he could codify what he felt to be the “freest of free verse,” and invent a verse line that could accommodate a variety of speech rhythms. Though he had failed in his attempts to convince the New English Dictionary editor Henry Bradley to help him reform English spelling, he continued to push for a clearer way to direct readers toward the correct pronunciation of his verses in his poetic experiments. Between 1912 and 1913, he began publishing in a new verse form he first called syllabic alexandrines (in an obvious reference to French verse but also referring to hexameters); he settled on the name “Neo-Miltonic syllabics.” Bridges’ first published foray into syllabic verse form occurred in the same year that he became Poet Laureate, 1913 (a year before Des Imagistes was published). Bridges felt keenly that he had discovered a spontaneous new way to write his thoughts as freely as possible in a new verse form:

Seeing then that to free the last foot it was only needed to forbid the terminal extrametrical syllable, and that Milton had, with so great effect, excluded it from every other place in his syllabic verse; it seemed to me that the next step that he would have taken (had he continued his work) would have been to forbid it also in the last place.

I naturally wondered what the effect would be, and determined to experiment on it. One cannot originate a poem in an unknown
metre, for it is familiarity with the frame-work which invites the words into their places, and this dilemma I happily remembered that I had had for many years a poem in my head which had absolutely refused to take any metrical form. Whenever I had tried to put it into words the meter had ruined it. The whole poem was, so far as feeling and picturing went, complete in my imagination, and I set to work very readily on it, and with intense interest to see what would come. I was delighted to find the old difficulty of metering it had vanished, and it ran off quite spontaneously to its old title The Flowering Tree.

What is important here is that Bridges feels that there was a poem he could feel and picture but that meter ruined it; the form he found counted only syllables. He signals the six syllable syllabic by indenting each alternate line, in case we miss the end rhyme that further emphasizes the six syllable lineation. Do we have to see this poem to understand where and how to pause, how to count the syllables in each line? Here are the first few stanzas of “The Flowering Tree”:

```
What Fairy fann’d my dreams
while I slept in the sun?
As if a flowering tree
were standing over me:
Its young stem strong and lithe
went branching overhead
And willowy sprays around
fell tasseling to the ground
All with wild blossom gay
As is the cherry in May
When her fresh flaunt of leaf
gives crowns of golden green.

The sunlight was enmesh’d
in the shifting splendor
And I saw through on high
to soft lakes of blue sky:
```

Though the syntax seems to be entirely archaic (“fann’d,” “enmesh’d”), for Bridges, these apostrophed words were subtle directions intended to teach a reader how to both see and hear his new “unknown metre.” How would a reader know how to read this? Bridges uses mostly monosyllabic words that could be ambiguously accented so as to avoid any regular pattern. “Its young stem strong and lithe,” is audibly the same count (six) as
“went branching overhead,” and the visible line break between these help us see the parallel metrical structure so that the visual form of the syllabic line becomes a rhythmic guide (count to six) for the rest of the poem. And here we have the question of what counts as rhythm. Counting syllables hardly seems spontaneous, but if I heard enough syllabic lines, just as if I heard enough iambic pentameter lines, I might be able to “count” them seemingly spontaneously. That is the issue for Bridges—he works deeply inside of a form until it is not artificial to him (like he did with classical quantity) and then, even the fact that this line seems iambic becomes invisible to him. Could we read these lines without hearing them as iambic alexandrines? Almost every line is enjambed, so seeing and then perhaps hearing that these lines are written in six syllables as the rule might spur a reader to move—as one might in French verse—from “cher-ry in” to “cherryin” in order to keep the count of six syllables. And freed from a heavy stress (as on “cherry”) since stress is not the rule, the verse might elide quite a few sounds: “Flowering” could become “flowring,” “tasseling” could become “tassling,” and “willowy” could become “willwy.” Again, we might not know how to elide these sounds—we still might not know—but we are directed by our eyes to see that each line can only accommodate six syllables, and so we perhaps accommodate only six syllables on our pronunciation as well. This is, I think, what Bridges wanted to achieve.

The third syllabic experiment, “The West Front,” is less rhythmically legible at first:

No country know I so well
as this landscape of hell.
Why bring you to my pain
these shadow’d effigys
Of barb’d wire, riven trees,
the corpse-strewn blasted plain?

The elision of “know I” to make six syllables is hardly evident at the outset and it feels awkward to blur them. That odd grammar and the staccato of syllables of “corpse-strewn blasted plain” might alert a careful reader to the fact that Bridges is working hard to suppress what seems like an insistent accentual regularity. There is the obvious expressive meaning of the lost ability and will to count—the countless dead, the landscape that is only marked by “blast” and no order or, at least, not the old order. The first four lines seem faintly iambic according to the classical system (and indeed, he experimented quite a bit with the iambic hexameter in his translations of classical verse before moving on to the syllabic alexandrine) but by line five those monosyllables signal that we ought to perhaps
be counting rather than stressing. What some careful readers might see as simply the influence of his collaboration with Gerard Manley Hopkins (a shadow of sprung rhythm, accents not separated by unstressed syllables), I see an evening out of accent across the lines. So that “barb’d wire, riven trees” and “corpse-strewn blasted plain” have a parallel rhythmic structure of five syllables, each one stressed but the penultimate. For this belabored reason, as well as the rhyme at the end of each line, the poem avoids simply devolving into broken alexandrines. Bridges calls these poems “sixes,” and sets them off typographically in his books so we know that he’s experimenting.

By the time he writes _The Testament of Beauty_ in the late 1920s, he has worked out an explanation of the form and writes it in a phonetic spelling that normalizes his elision along the lines of what he argues Milton would have used. By 1929, that is, Bridges has enough clout to use his poem (which became a best-seller) to promote his system of phonetic spelling, thereby solving the problem of where and how to elide certain syllables so that the syllables in each line add up. Bridges’ publisher explains the new approach to spelling in an introduction he appended to the first edition, making sure that it was understood to be intentional—a guide to reading as well as an active attempt to normalize the author’s hopes for reformed spelling. Bridges had been working on spelling reform since the turn of the century and he approached in a variety of official ways, most notably as a member and convener of the Society for Pure English before and during the First World War, and, also in 1929, as the author of the B.B.C.’s _Recommendations for Pronouncing Doubtful Words_. The publisher’s note on the text states:

"The slight approach to a simplified spelling in this book is copied from the author’s MS, which the printer was instructed to follow. The simplification, as will be seen, is mainly confined to two particulars, namely the final e and the doubled consonant. Since this e is invariable mute he would reserve it to distinguish heavy from light syllables: thus hav, not have, and liv, distinguished from live; and all the -ate, -ile, -ive, and -ite words can have their speech-values shown, as steril and pueril; and thus ther is no confusion there."

Indeed, ther is no confusion there. Bridges has built his syllabic meter and its proper pronunciation into the very spelling of his poem. He uses a “doubled consonant, which following the short vowel denotes its accentuation,” stops rhyming (more or less) and uses far more multi-syllabic words, eliminating, also, most of the obvious caesurae. This final syllabic experiment is, I have been arguing, a combination of his few syllabic
poems and his longer classical experiments like “Wintry Delights.” That is, more than fifteen years after his more simple “sixes” were published, Bridges has advanced his understanding of syllabics into an entirely new domain. In order to read them clearly as “syllabics” at all, you must train yourself to master his rules of elision and pronunciation not unlike a poet translating from classical quantities must try to train him or herself to “hear” an imaginary equivalent quantity between Latin and English. The ability to “hear” the amount of time it would take to pronounce a syllable, by 1929, has become so complicated for Bridges that even looking at the first few lines of the poem it is not evident that the lines are “syllabic”—as in, have the same number of syllables in each line—at all.

'Twas late in my long journey, when I had clomb to where the path was narrowing and the company few, a glow of childlike wonder enthral'd me, as if my sense had come to a new birth purified, my mind enrapt re-awakening to a fresh initiation of life; with like surprise of joy as any man may know who rambling wide hath turn'd, resting on some hill-top to view the plain he has left, and see'th it now out-spredd mapp'd at his feet, a landscape so by beauty estranged he scarce wil ken familiar haunts, nor his own home, maybe, where far it lieth, small as a faded thought.

Though Bridges’ “Poor Poll” appeared in 1923 (the same year as Eliot’s *The Waste Land*) and was a more successful and less archaically constructed experiment in Neo-Miltonic syllabics, it is *The Testament of Beauty*’s 5,000 lines of sustained, subtle, controlled irregularity that have captured the attention of twentieth-century metrical historians. Yvor Winters, in *Primitivism and Decadence* calls *The Testament of Beauty* an attempt at a “carryall form” that could accommodate a variety of speech patterns. Winters, usually an admirer of Bridges, declares these lines as syllabic verses and good poetry a failure:

The form is unrhymed duodecasyllables, dependent for their existence as such upon a definite and reasonably workable system of elision . . . whether one attempts to scan the line accentually, or whether one follows Bridges and scans it syllabically (by all odds the preferable procedure, it successfully avoids the accentual-syllabic, avoids, that is, any pattern or norm underlying every syllable, so that, though one has constant change of movement from moment to moment, one has no variation, no precision of intention.
Winters is, frankly, bored by the poem and believes it to be a failed attempt to combat the accentual fervor of Ezra Pound. What is lacking here in the long, four-book poem is “precision of intention.” Though *The Testament of Beauty* has long been recognized as both the establishing and culminating poem in syllabic meter, it is, I think, the fact that we cannot all pronounce the poem in the same way that has prevented other poets from taking up the “Neo-Miltonic Syllabic” as a viable verse form. Mastering Bridges’ rules for elision ends up complicating what is supposed to be a simplified scheme for pronunciation. Bridges merely adds to the long history of discourse about syllabic elision that begins as far back as the very first poet’s handbooks.

The same years that Bridges was first experimenting with syllabics (1912–1913), the reputation of a now little known poet named Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914) was on the rise. Crapsey was teaching at Smith College and perfecting the syllabic verse form called “the cinquain” that she had been working on since 1901. Crapsey’s two books, *A Study in English Metrics* (Knopf, 1918) and a collection of poetry titled *Verse* (Mansas, 1915; Knopf, 1922), were published posthumously. *Verse* was in its fourth edition by 1929, and Crapsey was the subject of a scholarly book by Llewellyn Jones in 1923. One of very few women to write a metrical treatise, Crapsey’s interest in English metrics, like Bridges’ interest, focused on the problem of pronunciation in print—the problem, in other words, of how to understand the history and future of English metrics without a stable system of pronunciation for the English language. She begins *A Study in English Metrics* with a series of questions reminiscent of Bridges’ concerns:

> In the first place, even admitting it to be theoretically desirable, do we possess to-day a pronunciation sufficiently standardized to make possible the analysis of vocabularies on anything like the scale suggested? Variations in pronunciation are notorious. How can we be assured that a classification of the words in any given poem will represent the pronunciation of the poet who wrote? Is it not, rather, certain, that the analysis will depend upon the pronunciation of the critic who dissects, and that the results of the analysis will, consequently, vary with each new critic? And further, will not the difficulties be hopelessly increased when different historic periods are to be considered? No
attempt is made to minimize these difficulties, nor, for the present, to meet them in detail.  

If everyone understood the English language to be pronounced the same way, then there would be no controversy as to how to pronounce a poem. Whereas Bridges wanted to provide a verse form flexible enough to accommodate a variety of speech rhythms while still adhering to a general rule, Crapsey wanted to think about syllables in the context of early linguistic science. Influenced by Paul Verrier, a French linguist and theorist of rhythm and meter, and E. W. Scripture, an American psychologist with a side interest in poetry and rhythm, Crapsey’s obsession with syllables forms part of the new school of linguistic prosody emerging in the wake of Alexander Ellis, Daniel Jones, Henry Sweet, and their work on the study of phonetics. Crapsey’s scientific investigations, then, are a crucial part of her development of the cinquain; a syllabic form that I see as a specimen and example of how the idea of counting syllables (however imprecise) harkened toward a more direct and scientific treatment of the thing at the same time as it attempted to avoid the potential pathos (and variety) of accentual verse.

Though Crapsey’s treatise was unfinished, her initial examination consisted of quantifying the number of mono-syllabic, disyllabic, and multi-syllabic words in nursery rhymes and poems. By examining words and counting the number of syllables based on her own estimate of their pronunciation, Crapsey argues that there are three types of verse ranging in structural complexity from mono-syllabic to poly-syllabic. Her main thesis was that “an important application of phonetics to metrical problems lies in the study of phonetic word-structure.” Crapsey presents her data in the form of 125 nursery rhymes (she calls this “experimental testing”), and analysis of poetry by Milton, Pope, Tennyson, Swinburne, Francis Thompson, and Maurice Hewlett. Though she is careful to avoid claims her data cannot support, Crapsey nonetheless presents her results in a series of tables that seem to argue for themselves. That is, we can clearly see from the table shown in Figure 1 that Milton uses a higher preponderance of polysyllables than does Pope. Bridges’ failure to establish a new verse form via phonetic spelling as guidance becomes, to Crapsey’s next generation, the attempt to fulfill the fantasy of objective reading, or a dream of pure analytics. And yet this pure analytics might be just as ideologically bound as the fantasy of a pure instinctually felt rhythm that pervades turn-of-the-century prosodic theories like those of George Saintsbury and Gummere. It is Crapsey who is doing the counting, after all.

But she knows that her own subjectivity is the problem with her
### Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milton</th>
<th>Total No. of words</th>
<th>Per cent Mono-</th>
<th>Per cent Poly-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paradise Lost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>5,960</td>
<td>91.67</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>7,917</td>
<td>92.24</td>
<td>7.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>5,566</td>
<td>92.07</td>
<td>7.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>92.74</td>
<td>7.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>6,804</td>
<td>92.01</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>6,773</td>
<td>90.95</td>
<td>9.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>4,774</td>
<td>91.40</td>
<td>8.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>4,921</td>
<td>91.45</td>
<td>8.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>9,010</td>
<td>93.01</td>
<td>6.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>8,370</td>
<td>91.74</td>
<td>8.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>6,859</td>
<td>92.48</td>
<td>7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII</td>
<td>4,930</td>
<td>91.78</td>
<td>8.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>79,584</td>
<td>92.03</td>
<td>7.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson Agonistes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>9,465</td>
<td>92.04</td>
<td>7.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choruses</td>
<td>3,427</td>
<td>90.92</td>
<td>9.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>12,892</td>
<td>91.75</td>
<td>8.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table II.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pope</th>
<th>Total No. of words</th>
<th>Per cent Mono-</th>
<th>Per cent Poly-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay on Criticism</td>
<td>5,744</td>
<td>94.91</td>
<td>5.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rape of the Lock</td>
<td>6,490</td>
<td>94.71</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elegy—Unfortunate Lady</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>95.86</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay on Man I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>2,288</td>
<td>94.32</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>2,251</td>
<td>94.32</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>2,481</td>
<td>94.43</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>3,141</td>
<td>95.54</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>10,161</td>
<td>94.72</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot</td>
<td>3,353</td>
<td>95.91</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Table from Adelaide Crapsey's *A Study in English Metrics*, 1918.
method. As in almost all other prosodic manuals, Crapsey spends time going through her main prosodic predecessors (George Saintsbury, T. S. Omond) before asserting “what has now become apparent is that we soon reach . . . the limits of possible analysis based on simple observation ‘by ear’ or by our ‘sense’ of rhythm. The delicate and accurate study of the rhythmic groups of verse must, it is seen, be carried on by means of laboratory experiment.”  Would Crapsey have seen her own syllabic “cinquains” as a rhythmic group or were they resistant to being read “by ear” or by a “sense” of rhythm?

Crapsey presents an undeniably scientific study of prosody by eschewing entirely the instinctual rhythmic discourse that pervades, say, Alice Meynell’s 1893 *The Rhythm of Life*, in which Meynell elaborates a theory of rhythm relating to the periodicity of the planets, the tides, “a sun’s revolutions and the rhythmic pangs of maternity.” If, for Meynell, rhythm is natural and embodied and for Bridges, syllabic verse—and any verse form—can be studied long enough so as to become easily evident to the practitioner and reader, for Crapsey rhythm must be considered as part of a more rigorous science. The posthumous introductions to her poems are careful to walk the line between the discourse of mere over-feeling poetess and an accomplished metrist conversant and participating in the broader (largely male) prosodic discourse of the age. Jean Webster describes Crapsey’s poems in the preface to *Verse* as “of gossamer delicacy and finish, [and] are the stronger for the technical knowledge behind them. Likewise, her technical work possessed the more vigor because it was not the result of mere theoretical analysis, but also of the first-hand knowledge gained through her own creative achievement.” Webster describes Crapsey’s study in metrics as “astoundingly objective and coldly unreflective of any emotional mood, so her own poems were at the other extreme, astoundingly subjective and descriptive of a mental state that found expression in no other form.” Despite the incomprehensibility of her metrical theories, “the verse form which she calls “Cinquain” [that] she originated herself” Webster concludes, was incredibly comprehensible to the lay reader. Carl Sandburg, for one, championed the form of the cinquain—a five line syllabic form defined as having two, four, six, eight, and two syllables as a rule. Though overshadowed in literary history by Pound’s experiments with Chinese ideograms or the poetry emerging out of imagism and its various schools (from Pound to Amy Lowell to William Carlos Williams), Crapsey’s syllabic form was nonetheless a prescient example for many of the main tenets of imagism. Beginning in the 1920s, a number of scholars began to trace her cinquains directly to Japanese sources. Webster writes, “she reduces an idea to its very lowest
terms—and presents it in a single sharp impression.” Though Crapsey passed away the same year that *Des Imagistes* was published, it is clear that her interest in linguistic prosody in which words can and should be analyzed by constituent parts, and the idea that syllables themselves could convey an idea with a kind of simplicity all led to her development of her singular syllabic verse form.

Louis Untermeyer recognized Crapsey’s debt to Japanese poetics; he published three of her poems in his 1919 *Modern American Poetry*.

Two of them were cinquains and one, “On Seeing Weather Beaten Trees,” was a two-line poem in ten-syllable meter:

Is it as plainly in our living shown,
By slant and twist, which way the wind hath blown?

In all three poems she shows both her interest in and her mastery of syllabic meters; Untermeyer mythologizes that Crapsey began to write after a breakdown (contrary to the dating that Jean Webster provides for her cinquains in the *Miscellany*). “[T]hough she became instructor in Poetics at Smith College in 1911, the burden was too great for her. Prior to this time she had written little verse, her chief work being an analysis of English metrics . . . . In 1913, after her breakdown, she began to write those brief lines which, like some of Emily Dickinson’s, are so precise and poignant. She was particularly happy in her ‘Cinquains,’ a form that she originated. These five-line stanzas in the strictest possible structure . . . doubtless owe something to the Japanese *hokku*, but Adelaide Crapsey saturated them with her own fragile loveliness.”

Here is one of her most well known cinquains, published in 1915 and 1922 but supposedly written in 1901.

Niagara

*Seen on a night in November*

How frail
Above the bulk
Of crashing water hangs,
Autumnal, evanescent, wan,
The moon.

As we can see, the verse form as Crapsey first used it was not simply syllabic but also iambic. We have to see it (just as we are reading the record of “seeing” Niagara at a particular time) to apprehend the form. Two and four and six and eight and two syllable lines provide a variation on the quintain stanza (another quintain stanza of variable line length is the lim-
erick, for example). The poems (without the title) are twenty-two precise syllables long. Like most imagist poetry the cinquain is clear and concise, but, like Williams’s control in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” the mastery of this poem is in its line breaks. “Frail,” “bulk,” “hangs,” “wan,” “moon”: these are words that make an image of a waterfall in a nearly concrete example, cascading down the increasing syllable count with the moon impossibly still below—a reflection in a pool. (The “above” in line two is another prepositional pun.) The poem captures both movement and stillness, action and pause. And the poem displays the conflict between stillness and action; the crashing water “hangs” expressively in the middlemost line as if the waterfall were frozen by a trick of inverted syntax. It would be easy to rattle these off like so much bad haiku and, indeed, schoolchildren today do just that. But Crapsey, like Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams, was paying attention to the control of a poem’s movement across a line of variable syllable length: a new way of counting and a new way of figuring stillness and action at once in a poem.

4

Paul Ramsay, in 1971, characterized William Carlos Williams’s metrical practice as dividing his language into “bright small bundles, or fragments, as a way of saying ‘Look! At what is here to be seen (felt, heard).’” The cinquain is certainly a bright small bundle of concision. Robert Beum, the theorist of syllabic verse I quoted at the beginning of this essay, corresponded with Williams for years; Mariani writes that “what Williams stressed in [his] letters to Beum was the need for American poetry to move decisively away from a prosody of stress and toward a ‘prosody of the measurement of time,’ (i.e., toward the qualitative sonorities of a Robert Bridges as demonstrated in The Testament of Beauty and away from what he called the vulgarities of Hopkins’ “constipated” sprung rhythms).” Natalie Gerber’s recent work shows the veracity with which he rejected the “rigidity of the poetic foot” and Mariani’s important essay on metrical innovation before and around Paterson shows how Williams presented his poetics in his poems more effectively than in his discourse about his poetry. Nonetheless Williams mentions syllables in a few key places. In 1954, he published “On Measure: An Essay of Cid Corman” in Origin magazine and states: “Verse—we’d better not speak of poetry lest we become confused—verse has always been associated in men’s minds with ‘measure,’ i.e. with mathematics. In scanning any piece of verse, you ‘count’ the syllables. Let’s not speak either of rhythm, an aimless sort of thing without precise meaning of any sort. But measure
implies something that can be measured.” Later in the essay, he closes by saying “Without measure we are lost. But we have lost even the ability to count.” His discussion of the “variable foot” in this essay and elsewhere has long puzzled scholars; I will not attempt to tease it out here. What I will argue, however, is that the math of Williams’ poetry, in 1922, should be considered as part of the trajectory of syllabic prosody I have outlined in England and America, despite Williams’ own equivocation about counting by syllables between 1913 and 1935.

In 1922, Williams published *Spring and All* and in it, that ubiquitous poem about the red wheelbarrow. I wondered what would happen if this poem were an experiment in syllabics rather than the quintessential imagist poem. Recall that the syllables are 4/2, 3/2, 3/2, and 4/2. That, in itself, seems enough to show that Williams is counting and showing us how to count, participating in and continuous with the discourse about syllables as particular units of poetic rhythm as opposed to syllables as bearers of accent. Williams is known for setting up a formal expectation and then riffing on it; here, he sets up his syllabic stanza, retreats from it, repeats the retreat, and then repeats the initial syllabic stanza again in the end. We could read this as two “sixes” divided by two “fives,” in any number of mathematical combinations:

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Williams uses line breaks and spacing to direct the reader to pause just as Bridges used line breaks and elision to do the same. But what if the poem could be restructured even more severely? The total number of syllables was twenty-two. I found the original version of the poem in the facsimile edition “Spring and All,” before editors—and Williams, retitled the poem to simply “The Red Wheelbarrow.” There was no denying the math there—the poem appears in the twenty-second section, as if XXII were its title. Just as Crapsey’s system for syllables reaches for pure analytics, so, too, does Williams’s title “XXII” reach toward the fantasy of prosody as mathematics; the mathematical function becomes the title,
the figure of meter at once a move back to the Roman numeral while simultaneously letting go of certain ambitions and toward other, more precise metrical ambitions. Williams may indeed have had occasion to come across Crapsey’s 1915 volume *Verse*, or had seen them in Untermeyer’s 1919 anthology, in *The Century Magazine* (which printed a cinquain in 1916), or any of a wide number of anthologies that reprinted her poems and thought about the form, or, even more likely, tracked her down after seeing her name again and again in a wide array of reviews. Crapsey’s literary celebrity between 1914 and 1922 by far exceeded Williams’, and the “cinquain” was a popular form for imitations. Indeed, “XXII,” convinces me to think more capacious about how Williams’ hope for prosody “as a measurement of time” was part of the same concern that Bridges and Crapsey brought to their experiments. The only way I could believe in an alternate syllabic form for “XXII,” then, was to see it:

```
So much
depends upon
a red wheel barrow glazed
with rain water beside the white
chickens
```

I’d like to close with that poem, equally, in my mind, sacrilegious and curious, but I’d also quickly like to gesture to what we lose in this visual transformation; we lose what Hugh Kenner calls the words “disassociated to their molecules” in the original poem, or what John Hollander describes as the cutting of “wheel barrow” and “rain water” into constituents. That is, “with the implication that they are phenomenological constituents as well. The wheel plus the barrow equals the wheelbarrow, and in the freshness of light after the rain (it is this kind of light which the poem is about, although never mentioned directly), things seem to lose their compounded properties.” Williams “etymologizes” his compounds into their prior phenomena.” But Williams does more than etymologize the compounded images; he makes the words into visible, countable syllables. Williams created a rhythmic picture for the ear and the eye made of these phenomenological constituents that, due to our focus on other stories about modernist form, we have, as Williams himself laments, lost our ability to count.

Notes
2. See the following for other relevant work on Williams’ meter.: Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure*; New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univer-


4. Ibid.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Aside from some debatable Renaissance examples, the practice is a modern one, pioneered by Robert Bridges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bridges wrote nearly 5,000 lines of syllabic alexandrines, especially for *New Verse* (1925) and *The Testament of Beauty* (1929), the longest syllabic-verse poem in the language. In the 1910s, Adelaide Crapsey invented the cinquain. Beginning in the same decade Marianne Moore, the American poet best known for the practice, wrote poems in elaborate syllabic stanzas featuring wide variations in line length, complex patterns of rhyme or half rhyme, and conspicuous use of prose rhythms.


14. For a detailed account of the impact of scientific machinery on the study of prosody, see Jason David Hall, "Materializing Meter: Physiology, Psychology, Prosody," *Victorian Poetics* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 179–97.

15. William Carlos Williams himself recognized the historical nature of the issue, citing Campion and Chapman in his 1958 essay "Measure—a loosely assembled essay on poetic measure."

16. Saussure was lecturing in Geneva between 1906 and 1911 though the *cours de linguistic générale* was not published until 1916. *OED*: The first use of the term *phonème* is normally attributed to the French linguist Dufriche-Desgenettes (1873); it was subsequently used by F. de Saussure (*Mémoire [1878/1879]*) and, hence (as German Phonem) by M. Kruszewski (*Über die Lautabwechslung [1881]*) (14–15). Daniel Jones acknowledges that between 1914 and 1922 "much attention has been given recently to the grouping of sounds into phonemes" (preface, *An Outline of English Phonetics* [Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1922]). My larger project examines the cross-currents between linguistic theories of phonemic sound groups, anthropological theories of rhythm, and historical prosody in Anglo-American verse.

17. "There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant. Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy." This is on the same page as "A Sort of Song" in his introduction to the 1944 *The Wedge*, and reprinted in *Paterson. The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 2, 1939–1962 (New York: New Directions, 1988).


23. Donald Stanford notes “‘The West Front’ was first published in *October and Other Poems*, 1920. The other eleven poems in neo-Miltonic syllabics, all of which appeared in *The Tapestry*, privately printed in London in 1925, with dates of composition are: ‘The Flowering Tree’ (1913), ’Noel: Christmas Eve’ (1913), ‘In der Fremde’ (1913), ’Epitaph: Hubert Hastings Parry’ (1920), ‘The Tapestry’ (1921), ’Kate’s Mother’ (1921), ’The College Garden’ (1921), ’The Psalm’ (1921) and ’Como se Quando’ (1921).” Stanford *In the Classic Mode: The Achievement of Robert Bridges* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1978), 319.


25. Bridges often used indentation, smaller typesetting, or various fonts to indicate metrical experiments in his published work.


27. The Publisher’s Note continues: “Inconsistencies (except for possible oversights such as shear for sheer in IV. 241 and ethic for ethick in IV. 353) are intentional, any rule being stayed at the point where it would needlessly distract the reader: thus nature appears in two spellings, of which the explanation is that the final syllable (whether the word be pronounced as may be indicated by the spelling nat-ur, or by nacher as recognized by our Southern-English authorities) is always light and unaccented; but since the syllable tur has an uncertain value and is very offensive to the eye, the common full spelling, ture, is always maintaind, except in those places where it suffers liquid synaloepha in the prosody, where the omission of the e guides the eye to the easy reading of the rhythm: and the author would explain that the use of –eth for the 3rd per. sing. of verbs is not an archaic fancy, but a practical advantage, indispensable to him, not only for its syllabic lightness, but because by distinguishing verbs from the identical substantives, it sharpens the rhetoric and often liberates the syntax.”

28. Winters continues: “It has certain advantages, possibly, for the purpose to which it is put in the *Testament of Beauty* over the heavily accented meter of Pound: its very monotony gives it a certain coherence, the coherence, however, merely of undefined intention, yet its freedom from the constant recurrence of the heavy measuring ac-
cent does not commit it so closely to a particular range of feeling; but if Pound’s best
*Cantos*, the first six or seven, are considered, the meter of Bridges is far less interesting
in itself. This is curious, for Bridges, in general, is incomparably the better metrist.”
He goes on to praise Bridges’ daughter, Elizabeth Daryush, for a far subtler and more
successful execution of syllabics in her poem “Still-Life.” Yvor Winters, *Primitivism
and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (New York: Arrow Editions,
1937), 139–40.

30. And he does this *explicitly* in “Poor Poll,” in which his macaronic verse in Neo-
Miltonic syllabics shows that he can use Greek, Latin, Italian, German, French, and

31. Though her writing style in this treatise is not part of my argument, her prose
avoids any discussion of aesthetics, nor does it repeat any of the broad naturalizing or
patriotic claims about rhythm that were conventional in many prosody handbooks.
Crapsey expands in as detached and objective a tone as she can, marshaling pure
statistics: “purely, or mainly, mono-dyssyllabic, *i.e.*, showing a characteristic occur-
rence of polysyllables running from 0 to 2%”; “a type of medium structural complexity
*i.e.* showing a characteristic occurrence of polysyllables running from about 3% to
about 5.5%, with a tendency to drop towards 2% and to rise towards 6%”; and “a type of
extreme structural complexity, *i.e.*, showing a characteristic occurrence of polysyllables
running from about 7% to about 8.5%, with a tendency to drop towards 6% and to rise
toward 9.5% (or 10%).” *Note:* The term “polysyllable is used to include all words over
two syllables in length” (7–8).

33. Meynell elaborates: “Nevertheless, before it is too late, let me assert that though
nature is not always clearly and obviously made to man’s measure, he is yet the unit by
which she is measurable. The proportion may be far to seek at times, but the propor-
tion is there.” Alice Meynell, *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays* (Copeland and Day:
Boston, 1896), 6.

34. Jean Webster, preface to Adelaide Crapsey’s *Verse* (Rochester, N.Y., Manas, 1915).
35. Webster dates her cinquains, including “Niagara,” to 1901. “The Witch” appeared
in *Century Magazine*.

70–72; Royall Snow, “Marriage with the East,” *New Republic* 27 (1921): 138–40; Josef
Washington Hall, “The Pacific-Asian Influence on the Poets of the United States,”
Literature,” in *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell* (1926; repr., New York: Russell,
1967). I am grateful to David Ewick’s invaluable website *Japonisme, Orientalism, Mod-
ernism: A Bibliography of Japan in English Language Verse of the Early 20th Century*; for
this invaluable reference, see http://themargins.net/bibliography.html.

37. Triad

These be
Three silent things:
The falling snow . . . the hour
Before the dawn . . . the mouth of one
Just dead.
The Warning

Just now,
Out of the strange
Still dusk . . . as strange, as still . . .
A white moth flew. Why am I grown
So cold?

40. Paul Mariani, William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1981), 598. Williams: "In the work of the poem, the joining of phrases, the trimming away of connectives, the joining of stone to stone, as a Greek column was joined, as the Incans joined their great wall—there is virtue. [Pound] calls it virtue, excellence—and continues to say that virtue is timely. It pays off in life in behavior, in poems—as it would pay off in many another thing, if we could learn from our poets." Mariani notes that Williams named a poem inspired by Robert Bridges's Testament of Beauty the "Testament to Perpetual Action" (597).
42. Paul Mariani, "The Poem as a Field of Action: Guerilla Tactics in Paterson," The Iowa Review 7, no. 4 (Fall 1976).
44. Ibid., 340.
45. Crapsey's poems appeared posthumously in William Stanley Braithwaite's Anthology of Magazine Verse (1916), and Poetic Year for 1916: A Critical Anthology; Alfred Kreymborg's Others, An Anthology of New Verse (1916); and Selections from American Literature, part 2, ed. Leonidas Warren Payne. The 1915 Verse was reviewed in The Century 91: 511; Publisher's Weekly 95, part 1, 300, The Others 1, no. 6, and 3, no. 6: 166; The Independent 86–87:144; Harper's Weekly 62: 62; the second edition (1922) was reviewed in The New Republic 33: 258; and Crapsey appeared in Jay Broadus Hubbell's An Introduction to Poetry (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 194.