Part I. Reading the lines

1. Meaning

Ironing

I used to iron everything:
my iron flying over sheets and towels
like a sledge chased by wolves over snow,

the flex twisting and crinking
until the sheath frayed, exposing
wires like nerves. I stood like a horse

with a smoking hoof,
inviting anyone who dared
to lie on my silver padded board,

to be pressed to the thinness
of dolls cut from paper.
I'd have commandeered a crane

if I could, got the welders at Jarrow
to heat me an iron the size of a tug
to flatten the house.

Then for years I ironed nothing.
I put the iron in a high cupboard.
I converted to crumpledness.

And now I iron again: shaking
dark spots of water onto wrinkled
silk, nosing into sleeves, round

buttons, breathing the sweet heated smell
hot metal draws from newly-washed
cloth, until my blouse dries

to a shining, creaseless blue,
an airy shape with room to push
my arms, breasts, lungs, heart into.

Vicki Feaver

As we read this poem, we probably sense immediately that it can't just be about ironing. Without the feeling that poems often mean more than they seem at first to say, there would not be very much in poetry to ponder and enjoy. But what is it that creates in the reader's mind the feeling that a poem is also, and often even primarily, about something other than its stated or foregrounded subject? Sometimes it will be a conviction that develops only gradually as the poem goes on, but in the case of this one, we already seem to be beyond ironing by the end of the first **stanza**. The two opening lines are a literal comment on doing the ironing – they could be dropped into casual conversation without sounding too odd – but the third line would sound strange in a chat with a friend about domestic routines. For the line 'like a sledge chased by wolves over snow' is fundamentally different in vividness and intensity from any formulation which might be used in casual conversation – yes, we can still see in that phrase the ironing board with a white sheet on it, and the iron sliding up and down along it, but it has been metaphorically transformed, the sliding iron into a sledge, and the white sheet into a snowy landscape. In many poems, the transformative use of **metaphor** marks the transition point, the moment when the act or object being described gathers new associations or **connotations** and starts to mean something else, or, more often, something else as well.

For instance, there are added elements, such as the chasing wolves, which don't seem to be the metaphorical equivalent of anything we can immediately see in the simple domestic scene of the iron and the ironing board. But with the mention of wolves, the hint of an alien, feral world has broken into the domestic calm, and the ironing begins to seem linked into some kind of compulsive obsession. The implication is that the familiar domestic activity is driven by fear of some imagined (perhaps even imaginary) external force. So now it is impossible to iron fast enough to stay ahead of the baying wolf-pack, no matter how desperately the sledge-pulling huskies are whipped in an effort to make them go faster. We are so frantic now that the harnesses are twisted and frayed, like the flex of the iron, and the nerves exposed and jangling. Then the ironing seems to become even more fraught, and the iron becomes the iron-shod hoof of a snorting horse which will trample anyone who gets in its way – now *everything* is going to be flattened, the whole house, even, if there is an iron as big as a tug boat to do it. So this seems now a 'macho' form of ironing, ironing on an industrial scale, which amounts to a kind of frenzied climax in which the

whole world is to be steam-ironed into submission. And then the grip of the addictive compulsion is suddenly broken, and now the only way to stay sane is to do no ironing at all – to iron nothing, to put the very implement beyond use in a high cupboard, and to convert 'to crumpledness', as the only cure for the opposing addiction to flattenedness. But the obsessive ironer, who now irons nothing, rather than just ironing a few selected things, fearful that the mere taste of ironing will be enough to bring back the addiction, must still be an obsessive ironer at heart. So evidence that the addiction is cured arrives only at the final stage, when the speaker comes *back* to ironing, but now in a different mood – relaxed, sensuous, appreciative – with the external, alien, pressurising force gone. Rather than being driven and frantic, the activity is now enjoyed for what it is, and the result is fulfilling, giving a sense of air, space and self-realisation.

So have we 'paraphrased' the poem here? In a way, yes, of course, for the frequently encountered view that poems are by nature unparaphrasable is a poetry-reading shibboleth which needs to be broken. But it's not *exactly* paraphrasing, of course, for what we have been doing is more like a process of talking to oneself about the poem, talking oneself through the poem, or alongside it, and putting it into 'our own' words as we go. I don't know of any substitute for this, and I often start doing it before I'm sure I understand the poem. Then I find that, as I do, I am drifting into understanding as the 'talk back' process goes on. It is valuable, and recommended, because it makes the reader active rather than passive in the reading process, as poetry readers need to be. Here, we have certainly 're-said' the poem or 're-played' it, into a kind of blend of our own and the poet's words. It is a way of groping towards what we think the poem might mean, and perhaps, more than anything, a way of slowing the poem down in order to make its meanings and effects observable. And yet, we haven't said what the other activity is (or other activities are) that the poet is speaking about – could it be sex, or writing, or home-making, or teaching, or thinking? That list pretty well comprises the usual broad-scale interpretive suspects in poetry – but more of that later. At first, this implied, but unnamed activity, whatever it is, does *us*, because we are so eager to do it right, or do it best, or do it as much as possible. Then we rebel against the forces that are pushing us, and, eventually, we *find* ourselves in the activity which had previously consumed us, and then *we* start doing *it*. So in the end we are speaking the language which hitherto was speaking us. Likewise, we too, as readers, must

find room for ourselves in the poem, room 'to push/[our] arms, breasts, lungs, heart into', so that the poem makes its meanings by a combination of saying and not saying. The 'concreteness' of the poetic material, we realise, must also have a certain openness attached to it: nothing could be more mundane and familiar than ironing – but we might wonder whether a poet ever *could* iron without irony. So the much-proclaimed 'rightness', 'inevitability' and 'precision' of the poet's words – that merciless flattening of the unruly medium of language – have to allow a degree of elasticity and vagueness too, and we have to be able to stretch the words of the poem to cover more meaning than is at first apparent. It is essentially in that elasticity – that vagueness, even – that a poem expresses its meaning.

In the case of this Vicki Feaver poem, the interpretive strategy of the reader, if it can be so grandly named, involves standing back from the particular, so that something specific – the mundane business of ironing – comes to be seen in a generalised way, as representing (or connecting with) our inevitably changing attitudes to life in general as life goes on. But the poem, of course, doesn't overtly declare that ironing is to be seen as 'representative' in some way, though it might be argued that it does do so implicitly when it opens with the bold statement 'I used to iron everything'. Since this statement cannot *literally* be true, we are prompted to think of ways in which it might be *metaphorically* so, so that the act of obsessively ironing clothes into neatly pressed stacks suggests an urge and a determination to control every aspect of life, till eventually there is not enough room to push 'arms, breasts, lungs, heart into', and life is forced into a kind of straitjacket of predictability. Being a poem, however, it cannot *just* tell us things directly, but must show things which seem to have implications of the kind I have tried to tease out in 'Ironing'.

Note that we are leaving this poem now without seeking to wrap it up conclusively and exit with a feeling of 'closure', having pinned down exactly all the implied overtones of the ironing activity described in the poem. The roomy, 'airy shape' mentioned at the end suggests the attainment of a more easy-going lifestyle, one which is less hidebound by routine, but the poem does not give any literal detail about it, and confines itself to presenting this concluding image of the unrestricting 'creaseless blue' garment.

In general, then, poets value **mimesis** (the 'enactment' or 'embodiment' or 'showing' of an idea or situation) above **diegesis** (the 'mere' description or telling of it). Thus, a large body of criticism has

long insisted that the poem must 'enact' its sense, not simply *assert* it. But the dichotomy between showing and telling is not absolute, and it makes sense to recognise that in poetry we always need both the saying and the showing, just as in grasping an argument most of us require both a proposition (which is usually abstract and generalised) and an example (which is usually concrete and specific) before we can truly comprehend what is being said.

We can develop this idea of the complementarity of showing and telling by looking at another poem, a **sonnet** by Charlotte Smith, a writer now best remembered for her long poem 'Beachy Head'. The poem considered here is about Middleton Church, close to the Sussex coast, where cliff erosion had toppled much of the graveyard into the sea, so that bones were seen on the shore at low tide:

Sonnet 44

Press'd by the moon, mute arbitress of tides,
While the loud equinox its power combines,
The sea no more its swelling surge confines,
But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides.
The wild blast, rising from the western cave,
Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed,
Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,
And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!
With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore,
Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave;
But vain to them the winds and waters rave;
They hear the warring elements no more:
While I am doom'd – by life's long storm opprest,
To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest.

By convention, the first word of each line in **metrical poetry** begins with a capital letter, but that initial capital does not have the same function as the capital letter at the start of a prose sentence, and the danger is that the initial capital at the start of each line may give the misleading impression that every line of poetry is self-contained, like a prose sentence, and will therefore make sense on its own. But no matter how long the opening line of this poem is pondered in isolation, it will never make sense, and reading poems line by line is not the way to understand what they mean. An important secret of reading poetry and making sense of it is to pay more attention to the full stops than the capital letters. We must read sentence by

sentence, not line by line, and I have nothing to say in this book which is more important than that. Thus, 'Press'd by the moon, mute arbitress of tides' has no meaning on its own – it makes sense only as part of the sentence that begins with that line and ends with the full stop that concludes the fourth line. The whole block of four lines is the 'unit of sense', and the full stops, not the ends of lines, are the places to pause and make sure that we have grasped the sense of what is being said. If, as you read a poem, you realise at some point that you have lost the sense of it, then you should go back to the beginning of the sentence in which the loss of sense occurred – sometimes, indeed, it is better still to go back to the start of the sentence before, and then re-trace the sense continuously from there.

This poem exploits the form of the 'English' sonnet, in which the **rhyming couplet** at the end is expected to 'turn', or encapsulate, or finesse the direction of the poem up to that point. The couplet in this case seems to do that, for the first 12 lines seem like a conventionally melancholy meditation on death, showing the buried dead being subjected to the natural process of decay, then disturbed in their graves by the power of storms, so that bones are left scattered along the seashore. As a mode of writing, this 1789 poem very much looks back to the eighteenth century, rather than forward to **Romanticism**, using a not displeasing kind of picturesque 'retro-diction', as seen, for example, in the description of the moon as the 'mute arbitress of tides' (literally, the silent ruler of the tides), making it a personified female figure of destiny. True, the lines which begin the **sestet** (the last six lines in a sonnet) – 'With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore,/Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave' – have almost an eyewitness simplicity and directness, as if the speaker has actually seen this sight, but the whole of that outward scene is immediately dismissed, as the emphasis suddenly turns inward in the final couplet, revealing that the real subject matter is the speaker's own inner turmoil, that is, the storm of restless consciousness within, which is so relentless as to cause the speaker almost to envy the unfeeling dead. Nothing in the main body of the poem quite prepares the way for that dramatic inward turn, so that the final couplet may feel, at least at first, too much of a grafted-on after-thought to work effectively. Essentially, the final couplet merely *says* how the speaker feels – 'doom'd' and 'by life's long storm opprest'. But the previous 12 lines of the poem must be taken as the 'showing' part, for the speaker's morbid fascination with the site of the land-slip, and the bones of the long dead

which are thereby revealed, *implicitly* conveys the state of mind which is made *explicit* in the final couplet. As a bald statement, the final couplet would have no real poetic force on its own, but it acquires force because of the juxtaposition, for we can easily imagine how such thoughts would be brought out by the scene described in the main body of the poem. The thought expressed in the final couplet, taken on its own, is merely a commonplace remark about the burden of consciousness in times of extreme trouble or hardship, but its 're-saying' (or 'pre-saying') in the main body of the poem, by means of a vividly realised scene, gives it poetic force. Conversely, and likewise, the 'showing part' of the poem – the bulk of it in fact – is, in theory, the 'visual' equivalent, or word-picture, of the plain statement made in the end couplet. But it would be wrong to imagine that the plain statement is deducible from what has gone before and doesn't need to be made explicit. This assertion, however, runs counter to a widespread belief about poetry – namely, that the more the poet leaves unstated, the better the poem, as the reader will do the 'work' of bringing the implied meanings to the surface. It isn't so – *both* components are needed, for saying and showing work together in poetry and are natural partners, not natural antagonists.

Yet Smith's sonnet is a good poem, rather than a brilliant one. For it to be nearer to the 'brilliant' end of the spectrum, we would want a little more integration between the first 12 lines and the last two. It is worth asking whether the next poem achieves a higher degree of that kind of 'through-integration', even though it too has a largely descriptive 'main body', with the poetic point made explicit only in the final two lines. It is by Roy Fisher, whose methods are often oblique and teasingly indirect. For much of his career anything directly autobiographical tended to be excluded from his work, but recently it has become more seemingly direct, so that glimpses of his childhood in 1930s Birmingham have appeared, as in this intriguing poem called 'A Sign Illuminated'. The poem is about a municipal bus, illuminated with hundreds of light bulbs, which toured through the city on celebratory occasions such as coronations or civic anniversaries. 'Brummies' of Fisher's generation share his vivid memories of the illuminated bus, as evidenced by several local-nostalgia websites, but the title of Fisher's poem gives a different starting signal from (for instance) the first line of Vicki Feaver's, for it seems to be an open indication that the bus *is* representative of other things, perhaps even of meaning itself – this, then, is a poem about a sign:

A Sign Illuminated

In honour of something or other – poor
King Bertie's crowning; the Charter Centenary;
1938 as a whole – the city

decreed that on several occasions there should emerge
from the Depot on Kyotts Lake Road an Illuminated
Bus. On a published route

it would slowly glide through every
suburb and slum in turn. Crowds
might turn out. So it came

cruising on summer evenings, before
the little boys went to their beds, its lights
plain in the sun from as much as a mile off;

those lights were its headlamps and certain thin
patterns of domestic bulbs
all over the coachwork. What the city had picked

was one of its own
retired double-deckers. They'd sliced off the top,
blacked the windows, painted out the livery;

it was a vehicle so old
that the shadowy driver sat exposed above the engine
in an open cab. Among the little boys

were many who knew the design and the period
registration plates. In the sunset light
they could take it all in: this emblem

that trundled past all the stops; possessed no
route number, passengers or conductor; was less
than a bus, let alone less than lit up.

The signal given by the word 'sign' in the title is made even more explicit when the bus is referred to near the end of the poem as 'this emblem' – but what is it an emblem of? As often, in Roy Fisher's work especially, and in contemporary poetry generally,

the language of the poem is defiantly relaxed and 'unpoetic' – the bus is brought out, the poet says vaguely, 'In honour of something or other', and the linguistic precision which is in evidence merely concerns place-specifics, like the fact that the illuminated bus is based at 'the Depot on Kyotts Lake Road', a point which will now mean something precise only to locals of a certain age. How, then, can we get some purchase on the question of what the illuminated sign means? One excellent way to do so is to look closely at the tone of the vocabulary, thinking about its nuances and overtones: it is striking, firstly, that though the bus is officially a joyful and celebratory object, it is presented here in a rather sombre way, so that it quickly begins to seem a little sinister. When the city 'decreed', it would 'emerge' from the depot and 'slowly glide' through all its districts: it came 'cruising on summer evenings, before/the little boys went to their beds', which seems to imply that they might dream uneasily about it. This ancient vehicle, with its sliced-off top, blacked-out windows and shadowy driver, is like a revenant, a cluster of absences, which stops at no stops, has no route number, no passengers and no conductor. It seems like an embodiment of the Freudian uncanny – it both is and isn't a bus, and so disturbs our taken-for-granted ways of classifying the familiar world around us, hinting at another world, a parallel universe, a life after death, when this decommissioned and partly dismantled entity from the past rises again from its depot and glides uncannily round the city like a *memento mori*, reminding us of our last end, when we too will be superannuated, with painted-out livery and decommissioned registration plates, and trundling helplessly past all the stops. The illuminated bus, seen with 'its lights/plain in the sun from as much as a mile off', seems to hint at a haunting and premonitory awareness of all this, and, says the poem, 'In the sunset light/they [the little boys] could take it all in'.

But that doesn't seem to be the whole of the poem, for there is a metaphysical sting in the tail (and tale) of the poem, for what they are 'taking in' is this emblem which 'was less/than a bus, let alone less than lit up'. We can understand fairly easily what is meant by 'less than a bus', since the poem lists several ways in which the illuminated bus isn't really a bus at all, since it lacks a number, does not take passengers and so on. But in what sense is it 'less than lit up'? Well, if the bus is a sign, and if it is less than lit up, this may suggest that its meaning remains to some extent obscure. We cannot know what the intentions might be of its 'shadowy driver', or what goes on behind those blacked-out windows. What gives the emblem its

force, in fact, are those aspects of it which are 'less than lit up', less than spelled out and nailable-down, as is often the case in poetry. We can only go so far in explaining what the emblem in a poem might mean (as I have done above, 'talking-through' the poem in quasi-paraphrase, as I did with 'Ironing'), but we can never *quite* go all the way (to the terminus in Kyotts Lake Road). Indeed, if we felt that we had rounded up all the meaning that resides within a particular poetic emblem, then the poem would lose its force and we would never want (or need) to re-read it. Fisher presents us with a vehicle of public transportation, but we have an uneasiness when it is at large and gliding round the city, and perhaps we will sleep more peacefully in our beds when we know that it is safely back in its depot. In the case of Charon's ferry across the Styx, for which the fare to the driver-conductor is one obol, the homely notion of the 'ferry' only serves to make its life-terminating function seem all the more disturbing. Similarly, the fact that this haunting emblem is a 'bus' – an object which seems the very epitome of the mundane – makes it all the more haunting. In that sense, then, Fisher's bus is like Charon's ferry.

We have looked at Feaver's 'Ironing', Smith's 'Middleton Church' sonnet and Fisher's 'Sign Illuminated', trying to say something specific about poetic meaning: what the three poems have in common is that they all spend most of their time describing a procedure (ironing), a natural process (coastal erosion), or an object (the illuminated bus), but the thing described gathers implicit connotations as the poem goes on, and in all three cases these become more explicit at the end. That is a fairly common pattern in poetry, and the success of the poem as a whole depends upon the complementary fusion of the 'showing' part in the main body and the 'telling' part towards the end. The extent of the reader's enjoyment and grasp of the poem will have a lot to do with appreciating the means and skilfulness of that fusion. The two aspects (telling and showing) are equally important to the construction of the overall **poetic effect**, even though (as often) they are not of equal length. The poetic effect as a whole is tightly shaped and crafted by the poet, and it is natural for poetry readers to be curious about how that process works. An important aspect of how it does so is the poet's use of imagery, which is the topic of the next chapter.

2. Imagery

A considerable mystique has gathered around the notion of the image in poetry, but the idea of the image is not in itself complex. A basic definition of the poetic image would be that it is an evoked object (in the broadest sense) which is used to suggest an idea (in the broadest sense). In his book *How to Read a Poem* Terry Eagleton considers the famous image which (after an un-translated Italian epigraph from Dante) opens 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the first poem in T. S. Eliot's first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* of 1917. Eagleton sees this image as typifying the impact of **modernism**:

> How, the reader wonders, can the evening look like an anaesthetised body? Yet the point surely lies as much in the force of this bizarre image as in its meaning. We are in a modern world in which settled correspondences or traditional affinities between things have broken down.[1]

The use in poetry of a long-standing tradition of 'settled correspondences or traditional affinities between things', which Eagleton mentions, might be exemplified by the opening of Robert Herrick's seventeenth-century poem 'To Daffodils':

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon

It seems natural to the poet to begin his poem by citing an affinity between beautiful flowers and beautiful women, imagining these short-lived, early spring flowers as young women hastening away from a party before 'we' have seen enough of them. For Eagleton, responding to Eliot's opening metaphor (and one sees his point), no such 'traditional affinity' could be said to exist between the evening sky and a patient stretched out on an operating table. The more conventional poetry readers of the day would probably have expected a poetic depiction of the evening sky to contain something

1 Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Blackwell, 2007), p. 93.

touching, romantic and aesthetically pleasing, perhaps something like this description in W. B. Yeats's poem 'Adam's Curse' (1902):

We saw the last embers of daylight die
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon moon-worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

This is a recognisably 'poetic' description in Yeats's earlier 'romantic' or 'Celtic twilight' style, full of gently soothing imagery – the day dies in a picturesque way, like the glowing late embers of a fire, the colours are rendered with some precision (the 'trembling blue-green'), and the waters of time lapping at earth's shore and the delicate shell-like moon are typical aesthetic touches. But the readers of 'Prufrock', not many years later, get none of this lush verbal scene-painting, and instead they are given this:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky,
Like a patient etherized upon a table

Eagleton holds that the modernist force of the image lies in the deliberate incongruity between the object being evoked (the evening sky) and the idea used to represent it (the etherised patient). Of course, he is right that the image deliberately jars expectations. Yet the juxtaposition is not completely random either, for object and idea share what might be called a common horizontality – the long streaks of light and cloud often seen across the evening sky might suggest, to a rather morbid sensibility, a patient lying horizontally on the table of an operating theatre. The clouds Prufrock imagines must be stratus clouds, which are characterized by horizontal layering, and as flat, featureless clouds of low altitude, so in that sense the image works as a kind of visual pun. But notice that it is a **subjective image**, not an objective one. In other words, its aim is not (or not primarily) to tell us how the sky *looks*, but, rather, to indicate how it *seems* or *feels* to a certain kind of sensibility. That shift of primary emphasis from the objective to the subjective is typical of modernism, and, in the same way, Vincent Van Gogh's *Café Terrace* painting doesn't show how the stars *look* at night, for he shows some of them looking as big as flying saucers. Rather, it tries to suggest how it can *feel* to look at them in a certain

mood – exhilarating, overwhelming, baffling, and so on. It should not be assumed, though, that subjective imagery is exclusively the product of the modernist period of the early twentieth century. For instance, in the 1990s the poet Eleanor Brown, in her collection *Maiden Speech* (1996), uses an evening-sky image which is similar in tone and effect to Eliot's. It occurs in 'What Song the Syrens Sang':

On the knife horizon, the evening sun
Slit his own throat and bled into the sea

The overwrought, end-of-one's-tether feel of the image conveys (primarily) a state of mind, not a visual impression of a maritime scene of sea and sky, even though the image does contain visual elements, such as a reference to the redness of the evening sky, which suggests the notion of bleeding. The subjective image, then, tells us more about the perceiver than about the thing perceived. Prufrock's walk in Eliot's poem takes him through the drab and sordid streets of a city, 'Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent'. The streets, that is to say, meander aimlessly and with no apparent purpose or direction, and this is another subjective image, with the 'wandering' streets as the object, and Prufrock's life as the idea, expressing how he feels unsure of his direction in life, unable to make sense of things, and trapped within the pointless twists and turns of his own life, as if in a labyrinth. Here again, the visual element is minimal, though it is undeniably present somewhere within the image, and was probably its initial trigger in the poet's mind.

All this, however, should alert us to the fact that the word 'image' is actually something of a misnomer, for though a visual element of some kind is often present in imagery, it is seldom the core of the image. Think, for instance, of a commonplace poetic expression from the time of Herrick, such as 'Her lips were like cherries': clearly, both cherries and lips are red (sort of), and that is what 'cues' the image, but lips don't actually look like cherries, and if any did they would be somewhat grotesque. Rather, what gives the image some degree of 'settled correspondence' between object (cherries) and idea (lips) is that cherries and lips can share a range of sensuously suggestive non-visual attributes – that both are soft, moist and sweet, for instance.

And even when an image seems at first to be building primarily upon a series of visual links, those links, on reflection, often turn out to be predominantly conceptual. Consider, for instance,

the following sonnet by Thomas Wyatt, in which the poet seems (in the **persona** of the unrequited lover who is also an unrewarded diplomatic servant) to give us a step-by-step demonstration of how to build a poetic image. Wyatt was the first English poet to make extensive use of the sonnet form, which he had encountered as a youthful aristocratic traveller in Italy. In the beginning, the sonnet was almost exclusively used for love poetry, but the range of possible subject matter quickly expanded, so that the 'love' in question might be the love of God, with the speaker debating the ups and downs of religious experience, or it might be a more generalised introspection concerning nature, or the self:

Like to these immeasurable mountains
Is my painful life, the burden of ire:
For of great height be they and high is my desire,
And I of tears and they be full of fountains.
Under craggy rocks they have full barren plains;
Hard thoughts in me my woeful mind doth tire.
Small fruit and many leaves their tops do attire;
Small effect with great trust in me remains.
The boisterous winds oft their high boughs do blast;
Hot sighs from me continually be shed.
Cattle in them and in me love is fed.
Immovable am I and they are full steadfast.
Of the restless birds they have the tune and note,
And I always plaints that pass through my throat.

Wyatt, like Prufrock, feels that his life is going nowhere, and he compares himself to a barren mountainous landscape: the mountains are infinitely high, and so are his frustrations; they are full of streams and waterfalls, and he is full of tears; they are rocky and barren, and his mind is worn out with thinking and longing; no fruit grows on the mountains, and nothing he undertakes comes to fruition; the mountains are blasted by winds, and he is racked by sighs and agonised regrets; the mountains are immovable, and his love never changes; the birds on the mountains call for a mate, and he sighs and laments endlessly, probably for more or less the same reason. Though the poem begins with the linking word 'like', the lack of any real, deep-down 'likeness' between object and idea, point for point, is only highlighted by making such a list of the juxtapositions and correspondences which he enumerates. Waterfalls, for instance, are, in reality, hardly 'like' tears in any way at

all except that both are wet. And yet, by 'holding' the image of the mountains, and working it through, Wyatt does convince us and move us; as (we may surmise) he passes through mountainous terrain on one of his diplomatic missions, he looks around him and feels that he is going further and further away from what he really desires: he looks at the dreary mountains and thinks 'Yes, that's me, that's what I'm like – isolated, buffeted, useless, forgotten'. Though the poem offers a catalogue of *de*notations, the imagery works chiefly through its *con*notations: thus, the poet directly denotes how he feels, telling us in so many words that his life is painful, his desire 'high', his thoughts hard, and his mind woeful and tired. But each denotation of feeling is linked to an image which connotes the feeling concerned in a pictorial way: thus, the pain is beyond measure, like the seemingly endless succession of mountains he passes on his journey; his desire is 'high', perhaps suggesting that he desires an exalted person who is above his station (he was suspected of adultery with Anne Boleyn and imprisoned in the Tower); his thoughts are hard, like the craggy rocks looming above, and his mind exhausted and unproductive, like the barren terrain he is traversing. The connotations of all these bleak scenic elements embody the main force of the poem, for the plain statements of denoted feeling are unimpressive in themselves, like pieces of scenery in a theatre, which have hardly any effects on their own, and require the connotative accompaniment of stage-lighting and perspective. The overall effect of all the scenic elements mentioned in the poem is to produce a vivid impression of a man trapped within his own unrelieved masculinity, and within the relentless and unproductive treadmill of his own thoughts. So Wyatt works a single 'scenic' image though the whole poem, not just *touching* it and quickly moving on, but *holding* it, and developing a series of underlying, subsidiary correspondences: this too is a distinction worth noting, that between the touched **image** and the held image, the latter being one which is sustained and explored across a whole stretch of poetic discourse.

All the images in Wyatt's poem are readily comprehensible because they keep the object and the idea so rigorously separate. Sometimes the word 'like' itself separates **idea and object**, as in the opening statement 'Like to these immeasurable mountains / Is my painful life', which we can re-order as 'My painful life [the idea] is like these immeasurable mountains [the object]'. At other times, idea and object are linked to each other by placing 'and' between them: 'For of great height be they [the object] and high is

my desire [the idea]'; and sometimes they are merely juxtaposed, one against the other, with no conjunction to link them explicitly: 'Under craggy rocks they have full barren plains [the object];/Hard thoughts in me my woeful mind doth tire [the idea]'. So the reader is invited to think about resemblances between the two juxtaposed elements in each case, but the underlying structure is reassuringly based on **simile**, in the sense that, in each case, A is *like* B, a formulation which recognises the essential separateness of A and B. A metaphorical formulation, by contrast, sees an essential fusion of A and B, as the metaphor is a rhetorical figure which edges closer to the assertion that A *is* B. Thus, in the clichéd metaphor 'the ship ploughed the waves', sailing *becomes* ploughing, so that ship and plough, and the passage of each through its characteristic medium, are fused into a single imaginative entity.

This kind of 'metaphorical', rather than 'simileic', image is used by Shakespeare as a kind of curtain-closer at the end of the first scene of *Hamlet*, as dawn approaches and Horatio says to his fellow-watchers on the Elsinore battlements, 'But, look, the dawn, in russet mantle clad/Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill'. He doesn't say that the sun is appearing over the hill *like* a traveller in a red cloak coming into view over the summit of a hill, but that the sun *is* such a red-cloaked traveller. Of course, in the context of the play, it is obvious that this is a poetic image, not a literal indication of what the speaker has just seen. This image, too, is visually 'triggered', even though (as Ezra Pound says of it in 'A Retrospect') it 'presents something which the painter does not present. There is in this line of his nothing that one can call description; he [Shakespeare] presents.'[2] This distinction between describing and presenting is in line with Pound's definition of the poetic image given earlier in the same piece, where he says that it is a device which 'presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'. An image, he says, isn't a description but a presentation, which I take to mean that an image is a *re*-making or *re*-presentation of something. In almost every imaginable way, in other words, dawn is *not* like a person in a red cloak.

Let's now consider a more complex example of the kind of image which has suppressed the word 'like' between object and idea. In the Wyatt example, as we saw, the development of a single image is sustained through a whole poem, and the structure is one of simple,

2 Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (Faber, 1960), p. 6.

cumulative linearity. But that simplicity of structure would become a little monotonous if the poem were longer, and the more common pattern is to 'braid' or intertwine multiple strands of imagery.[3] This is what we see in a contemporary poem called 'The Forked Tree', by Marion Lomax (now known as Robyn Bolam). Here is the complete poem:

I killed two hares last night in the heart of the garden.
Long ears in moonlight, mimicking the shape of the tree.
I crept round the side of the house before they sensed me
And when they heard the gun clear its throat it was too late.
I hit the buck first, then the doe – stupidly standing
To stare at me. Her powerful hindquarters refusing
To kick and run, though I knew she could have bounded up
The lane in an instant, back to her young. I can cope
With hares: they are easy to cook. I feel no remorse.
Now I'll wait for the vixen who raids the chicken house.

I feed my chickens. Gather and sort the eggs. I wipe
The dirt and straw collage from the shells of those I sell.
I have the dogs too. My husband trained them, but I was
Surprised how quickly they obeyed me. I talked to them –
More easily than I talked to the children. Could share
The shadow with its dark gun lurking by our house wall
And the silent bullet lodged inside before we knew
That it was growing. His coming out of hospital,
Then the sniper's second strike when he was off his guard.
In the end I could only stand stupidly and stare –

Even with warning, could not believe such treachery.
The children were swinging from the tree in the garden
With no one to catch them. Darkness made the ground tremble
With hooves which left the grass trampled and the roses spoiled.
I guard this warren – small rooms and scattered outbuildings.
Not even chickens shall live in fear of predators.
My children shall feed better than before. Lonely nights
Are not without fear, but I cope with darkness now that
I have seen it bring young deer down from the wood to play.
Jumping in an out in the moonlight, through the forked tree.

3 I am indebted to Dr William Welstead for the notion of 'braided' imagery.

After reading the poem a couple of times, we can talk our way through it reflectively, as we did with 'Ironing', so that we situate ourselves 'in dialogue' with it by getting a general sense of its tone, feel, pace, method, range of interests, and so on. The poem seems to concern a family living in a country cottage, the wife being the speaker, while the husband, as we gather from the second stanza, has died from an illness which sounds like cancer, leaving the speaker – determined and resourceful though she seems to be – with a permanent sense of the vulnerability of herself and her children. The feeling of insecurity and underlying anxiety is strongly conveyed throughout, but, on the whole, what emerges as the poem goes on is a sense of resilience and recovery of confidence – 'I can cope', 'I cope' the voice says (in 8 and 28), and while the forked tree of the title seems to have distinct connotations of danger, the poem ends with the vivid little moonlit glimpse of the young deer jumping playfully through it. The previous two sentences are roughly the content of my own 'talk through' of the poem, and, again, I began to write it down as a way of thinking through the poem, not knowing, when I started, exactly where it was leading. As a distinct stage of the 'reading' process in poetry, this kind of open-ended reflective writing seems potentially valuable, and is highly recommended. I find this 'writing back' technique particularly useful when I still feel distanced from a poem and have not yet formed any distinct impression of what it generally seems to be about, what patterns and structures feature in it, and where it is heading.

But the unravelling of a poem's imagery will often require a serious and sustained 'second look', after the initial mapping out, attempting to trace the 'braiding' or intertwining of images round which the poem is built. In this case, firstly, there is an obvious reversal pattern between the first two stanzas. In the first, the speaker with her gun is lurking outside the cottage and is the sudden killer of buck and doe: the latter is left 'stupidly standing' (5) and their young are now unprotected. In the second stanza, the lurking shadow by the house wall 'with its dark gun' (16) twice fires its 'silent bullet' (17) and the speaker can 'only stand stupidly and stare' (20). That reversal motif linking the first two stanzas is one element of the braided patterning. Another pattern – overlaid on the first – is that the forked tree introduced at the start of the first stanza returns at the start of the third (in line 22), where the children are using the forked tree as a swing, but 'With no one to catch them' (23). The hooves which have trampled the grass and spoiled the roses (24) are a source of imagined danger, and a pervading anxiety

is palpable, seen, for instance, in the phrase 'Darkness made the ground tremble' (23). The speaker seems to be developing a siege mentality ('I guard this warren…/Not even chickens shall live in fear of predators', 25–6), as if the lesson of the second verse is that the husband was hit 'when he was off his guard' (19), making the wife determined never to be off guard at all. But the ending seems to modulate that extreme stance; the loneliness, fear and darkness mentioned in the last four lines of the poem are real, but the sight of the young deer at play brings back some sense of balance and alleviation. The moonlit image of the young at play seems to suggest that having 'no one to catch them' is a necessary part of their development, beyond the stage of mere 'coping'.

A third element of the 'braiding' structure I have been discussing would divide the poem into two more or less even parts: in lines 1–15, the female speaker almost seems to endeavour to become stereotypically masculine: she is the cold-blooded killer 'in the heart of the garden' (1) who claims to 'feel no remorse' (9), and is immediately planning her next kill ('Now I'll wait for the vixen', 10). The husband's dogs recognise her as their new master and obey her, and they become the recipients of her locked-in emotions ('I talked to them –/More easily than I talked to the children', 14–15). Then in lines 16–30 she seems to be re-feminised, or even 're-mothered', as if empathising with the frozen disbelief of the doe (in line 5) at the loss of her mate, and though the sentry role ('I guard this warren', 25) is not relinquished, it is tempered by the acquisition of a broader perspective which enables some relaxation of the defensive stance which had threatened to become almost an obsessive mania.

The past few pages have illustrated the kind of detail, and the nature of the sustained pursuit of the nuances of imagery, which may be needed in the process of reflectively 'talking through' or 'talking back to' a poem. But it may be useful, finally, to look more closely at one of the most striking images in the poem in order to spell out exactly what makes us identify it *as* an image, rather than as a literal element (that is, as a phrase which means precisely what it literally says), for though the middle stanza mentions a gun (16) and a sniper (19), no actual gun or sniper is present. In fact, 'The shadow with its dark gun lurking by our house wall' (16) designates the husband's illness, and the 'shadow' is probably on a scan or an X-ray which reveals the condition that eventually kills him, as a hidden sniper kills a victim. But how exactly do we know that gun and sniper are metaphorical rather than literal? Well, firstly, the most obvious indication that the bullet is metaphorical is that it is given

attributes that a real bullet doesn't possess; the poem says that the bullet 'lodged inside before we knew / That it was growing' (17–18), but real bullets don't grow, and this is the clue which shows that it is an image, not a literal object. It is, rather, a metaphorical 'object', conveying the 'idea' of a fatal illness which has already entered the body. This kind of interpretive move (that is, reading specific details metaphorically rather than literally) is fundamental to the reading of poetry, and unpicking the mechanism of the image, as we have been doing here, shows how the process works.

The final example is a composite one – two linked short poems by the same author. The points raised by this example open out to larger issues which are taken up in Part II of this book and are not so easily confined within the topic of imagery alone. Both parts of this composite example are poems by William Carlos Williams, and they first appeared in his 1923 poetry-and-prose collection *Spring and All*. The first poem is usually referred to as 'The Red Wheelbarrow', though in the book it is simply headed 'XXII', indicating its position in the sequence of poems the book contains. It reads in full as follows:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

This seems at first to exemplify the most basic form of imagery a poem could have, since it merely presents a set of 'objects' (the wheelbarrow and chickens in the rain), and leaves it to speak for itself. We are not told what the image means or what it stands for, the diction is stripped down and stark and therefore gives few pointers, and the poet seems to be striving to present the object to us simply 'as itself', unmediated through language. I mean by this that the words used are the simplest kind of verbal labels – 'red wheel barrow', 'white chickens', 'rain' – and they seem to hold back from any kind of slanting of significance and are given no kind

of embellishment at all. Indeed, commentators sometimes say that the poem exemplifies Williams's influential poetic dictum 'No ideas but in things', and they see this poem as embodying the advice to poets (urging them to be simple, direct and denotative) which is implicitly put forward in that proposition.

This view contains some truth, of course, but, again, it is not the whole truth, for the image isn't *quite* left to speak for itself: firstly, if the title really is 'The Red Wheelbarrow', then our attention is being directed more to one element in the scene than to others, making the wheelbarrow central, and the chickens and rain less so. On the other hand, if 'XXII' is taken as the title, then the 'object' depicted in this poem is not a stand-alone, epiphanic icon, but a single element within a sequence of many other (presumably not randomly chosen or randomly ordered) items. Also, the opening couplet ('so much depends/upon') explicitly directs attention to the claimed *significance* of the object, whereas an implicitly trusted object might be expected to radiate its own iconic authority, without the need for any such 'pointer'. So if it were truly to represent a strict embodiment of the ideal of 'No ideas but in things', the poem would need to be presented untitled and without its opening couplet, thus:

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

But I am pretty sure that nearly all readers would agree that in this form the effect of the poem is quite different. With its opening removed, it is no longer a metaphysical pronouncement, and the 'pointing' element is now entirely implicit, merely consisting of the fact that choosing to make the image of the wheelbarrow, chickens and rain the entire content of a poem imputes significance and cultural authority to this simple combination of objects and features, thereby inviting the reader to ponder what that significance might be. This brings us to the second poem in the composite.

The phrase 'No ideas but in things' occurs (among other places) in Williams's poem 'A Sort of a Song', but in the context of the whole of that poem it seems less uncompromisingly clear-cut than

when it is quoted (as it usually is) in isolation. The poem reads complete:

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
– through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

So, firstly, the couplet containing the famous phrase reads: 'Compose. (No ideas/but in things) Invent!' Far from 'merely' presenting a 'thing' and having done with it, this poem seems full of 'ideas' about how to write, including, of course, the actually quite complex idea 'No ideas/but in things'. The 'ideas' slogan is sandwiched between two imperatives which emphasise the shaping-and-making role of the writer ('Compose', 'Invent!'), and the writing must 'be of words', which can mean both 'made of' words and 'about' words. The writing waits like a snake to 'strike' reality, doing so 'through metaphor', which is an idea 'of' words – again meaning both 'made of' words and 'about' words. Though words might seem to be a 'soft' medium, the ending seems to suggest that they have the power to transform the real, and that, ultimately, is what a poetic image does. So the pronouncement which is usually taken to mean something very basic and uncompromising (that poetry must always be concrete and specific in its choice of methods and materials) turns out to be rather less clear-cut. The poetic image is never just an object lifted out of our common environment and into the poem, for it is always constituted by the verbal craft of the poet, and always occurs within the context of the poet's key activities, which are to 'Compose' and 'Invent'. We could, indeed, turn the famous formula inside out and say that in poetry there can be 'No things but in ideas'. And if in pedantic mood, we might even expand this to 'No things but in *verbal* ideas'.

This perhaps suggests a way of encapsulating what has been said in this chapter about the nature of poetic imagery: firstly, it is

always made of an 'object' which is the expression or embodiment of an idea; but secondly, it is often developed throughout the course of a poem, and requires that detailed and sustained response on the reader's part which we have been calling 'talking back' or 'talking through' the material; and thirdly, the image cannot speak for itself, but has to be combined with the 'shaping' and 'composing' activity of the poet, which gives it voice and form, and thereby makes it expressive of meaning. In turning to the topic of diction in the next chapter, we now move our specific attention to the verbal art and craft that poets use in shaping their ideas.

3. Diction

I Am!

I am! yet what I am none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of my woes,
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;
And yet I am! and live with shadows tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And e'en the dearest – that I loved the best –
Are strange – nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod;
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;
There to abide with my creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

John Clare[1]

John Clare's poem is sombre and impressive in tone, and gains extra poignancy when we know that it was written in the 1840s during his long confinement in the Northampton Asylum, where he felt himself long forgotten, indeed, almost buried alive. In reading this and the other poems considered in the present chapter, I will make use of what I see as the fundamental aspects of poetic diction, which are: *register* (which means something similar to style); *cohesion* (which refers to how phrases are linked to what

1 This version of the poem is downloaded from University of Toronto, Representative Poetry Online, at http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/i-am.

comes immediately before and immediately after); *tone* (which designates the 'verbal colouring' that produces the mood of the poem); *sequencing* (the ordering of phrases within the lines and sentences of the poem); *pace* (which concerns how the poem gives the impression of acceleration or deceleration); and *collocation* (the patterns/combinations of words expected in ordinary language usage). These six elements cannot always be rigorously separated out and entirely distinguished from each other, but they do seem to provide a way of breaking the overarching notion of diction into identifiable 'working parts'. I will not attempt to use them in any set order, or to an equal extent with every poem, and with this poem the notion of pace is a good place to begin.

Pace in poetry is a crucial element, for whereas prose can usually be read at a brisk pace, good poetry readers are usually slow readers, at least of poetry. If farce is tragedy speeded up, then poetry speeded up is often hardly anything at all. When a poem is not read out (or **sub-vocalised**) slowly, then its chances of making an impact are much reduced. In front of an audience, professionals say, it is almost impossible to read out a poem too slowly. For the poet, one way of enforcing, or at least encouraging, a slow-paced mental performance of the poem within the mind of the reader is to use very short sentences, like this poem's opening self-assertion 'I am'. I would call this stark proclamation a sentence, but punctuation is always an editorial problem with Clare. He made his early living as an agricultural labourer, and his editors always felt free to tidy up his grammar and punctuation. Editions of his poetry are full of textual variations, and there are major academic disagreements about how exactly his poems should be presented. So you may find a colon, a dash, a full stop or an exclamation mark after 'I am', depending upon which edition you consult, but all these suggest a strong pause in performance. Beginning with a statement of such extreme and uncompromising brevity means that the poem starts and then immediately seems to stop, perhaps giving it the feel of someone groping their way through a tortuous inner argument. The 'argument' continues with the thought that nobody knows or cares what the speaker is. That thought is **end-stopped**, meaning that it is completed with the end of the line, and the next line ('My friends forsake me like a memory lost') begins another thought, so that though the two lines are in sequence, they are not joined together by any linking word, and hence have a **disjunctive** effect, rather than suggesting a continuous flow or cohesion of thought. Of course, this line has *implicit* continuity with the opening, in the

sense that if nobody cares about the speaker it probably follows that any friends he may once have had have now forsaken him. But cohesion means having an *explicit* form of connection – as, for instance, when statements are linked with a conjunction such as 'and'. The third and fourth lines repeat the pattern of the first two, beginning with another complete-in-itself statement, appropriately so, perhaps, since the statement is 'I am the self-consumer of my woes'. In the fourth line, 'They rise and vanish in oblivious host', 'They' refers to the woes mentioned in line 3, but that makes a less cohesive link than 'which', since 'which' would have fused the two sentences into one. So the disjointed effect of using a series of brief, self-contained, cohesion-free statements is very marked, and prevents the poem from developing any feeling of easy 'run' or fluency. This, again, is a direct result of the nature of the diction, which seems to heighten the reader's sense of being engaged with a troubled and self-doubting mind. And if each line appears isolated from every other, the effect is to build a model of the speaker himself, who is swept with the desolating feeling that he doesn't 'join up' in any way at all with the rest of humanity.

The description of woes in line 4 that 'rise and vanish in oblivious host' uses the image of a fire, so the woes rise and vanish into the air, like the smoke rising and dispersing as the fire consumes itself. Again, the image is complete in one line, but a kind of addendum or coda to the thought is added in the next line by the cohesive word 'like' – 'Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost'. This is the most difficult line in the poem, and any interpretation of it must be approximate; its tone of wistful longing and regret is unmistakable, and emerges strongly, in spite of (and perhaps even to some extent because of) the difficulty of the sense. If pressed to construe it, I would offer 'Like the spirits of past loved ones, now lost in the oblivion of death'. The final line of the stanza repeats the opening ('And yet I am!'), and then confronts the paradox or contradiction that though undoubtedly 'I am' (meaning 'I am here, and now, and living') the speaker has also become a shade or shadow of himself, like those lost in the oblivion of death, so that he is tossed into a kind of hell, as described in the second stanza.

The two lines beginning with 'Into' launch stanza 2 with strong rhetorical momentum – the pace now seems to quicken and this stanza runs as a single sentence. The two noun phrases ('Into the nothingness of scorn and noise' and 'Into the living sea of waking dreams') have an air of epic vastness, embodying a sense of mind-threatening loneliness. The next line has another epic-scale

image – 'the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems' – and conveys the same aura of psychic breakdown. Then the epic scale is abruptly abandoned for the would-be homeliness of 'And e'en the dearest – that I loved the best', and their strangeness is all the stranger to him because he can suggest no reason for it. Abruptly at that point, at the start of the last stanza, all hope of earthly solace is abandoned, and he expresses the deep desire to pass beyond the human world which has abandoned him ('I long for scenes where man has never trod;/A place where woman never smil'd or wept'). The final four lines accept that his release from his acute sense of isolation can only be through death:

There to abide with my creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

Here the word 'abide' (used instead of the more homely 'live') has unmistakeably religious overtones, so that we seem to cross into the register or style of hymn-singing, where high religious and metaphysical sentiments are often combined with images of longed-for child-like security (as in the Victorian hymn 'Abide With Me', composed around the same time). Here the speaker longs for a place where he will be safe, and the concluding image is a reference to somewhere where he will be 'Untroubling and untroubled', a place envisaged not as the 'sleep' of the grave, but as the innocent outdoor sleep of the child on summer grassland, with no fear of danger, and with the grass below him (rather than above him, as it would be if this were an image of burial) and the 'vaulted sky' above. That last line – 'The grass below – above the vaulted sky' – is worth dwelling on, from the viewpoint of all the sub-categories of diction: the *register* seems very formal, partly because of the balanced symmetry between the two halves of the line, giving a tone which feels biblical or liturgical, like the formal language of a church service, or else rhetorical, like a great public speech; there is no explicit *cohesive* word between the two halves (as would be the case if it read 'The grass below *and* the vaulted sky above'); rather, they are simply juxtaposed, and that slows the *pace*, and thereby increases the solemnity of the *tone*. The *sequencing* of the two halves of the line is significant, for the grass connotes the earthy, familiar world, while the sky is described in such a way as to evoke a culminating opening out of perspective to take in a world beyond. Finally,

the *collocation* pattern gives a pleasing sense of closure, with 'grass' paired with 'sky' and 'below' with 'above'.

In considering this poem, then, we have taken a broad view of diction, have considered the pace of the poem, and thought about how the phrasing and the grammar contribute to this, and noted as well its various shifts of tone. The notion of 'diction' is about words in action, so to speak, within phrases, sentences, stanzas and whole poems, rather than words as individual verbal items in isolation. And, as with so many aspects of poetry, it is best appreciated by standing back from the detail and considering the effect of a larger unit of sense, rather than zooming in, with spotlight and scalpel, on isolated fragments.

Of course, diction on the page takes on a different quality if we have heard the lines read in person by the poet (whether 'live' or on radio or CD). Even if we have not heard a particular poem read aloud, some exposure to the poet's reading style in general can help us to get a feel for the tone and pace required for the oral performance (if only to the 'inner ear') of particular lines. A year or two before he died, W. H. Auden read at the 'Poetry International' event I attended at the Royal Festival Hall in London, and the measured pace of the reading, in a voice roughened by years of old-fashioned smoking and drinking, was unforgettable. The poem I particularly recall became the title-piece of Auden's last (and posthumously published) book, *Thank You, Fog* (1974). It is about a Christmas weekend he spent with friends at a country house in Wiltshire, and it celebrates the kind of sociability and 'support' (as we now call it) of lifelong friends, the lack of which was so painfully felt, and so powerfully expressed, by John Clare in the previous poem. Auden thanks the fog for keeping his party of friends housebound for a couple of days over Christmas, thereby enabling him to rediscover the feel of his own country and people. He had lived much of his adult life abroad, especially in America, and had only recently returned. In the summer of 1972, this was a new poem: he had written it in May, having spent the Christmas of 1971 in England, the first time he had been in England for Christmas since 1937:

Grown used to New York weather,
all too familiar with Smog,
You, Her unsullied Sister,
I'd quite forgotten and what
You bring to British winters:
Now native knowledge returns.

Sworn foe to festination,
daunter of drivers and planes,
volants, of course, will curse You,
but how delighted I am
that You've been lured to visit
Wiltshire's witching countryside
for a whole week at Christmas,
that no one can scurry where
my cosmos is contracted
to an ancient manor-house
and four Selves, joined in friendship,
Jimmy, Tania, Sonia, Me.

Outdoors a shapeless silence,
for even those birds whose blood
is brisk enough to bid them
abide here all the year round,
like the merle and the mavis,
at Your cajoling refrain
their jocund interjections,
no cock considers a scream,
vaguely visible, tree-tops
rustle not but stay there, so
efficiently condensing
Your damp to definite drops.

Indoors specific spaces,
cosy, accommodate to
reminiscence and reading,
crosswords, affinities, fun:
refected by a sapid
supper and regaled by wine,
we sit in a glad circle,
each unaware of our own
nose but alert to the others,
making the most of it, for
how soon we must re-enter,
when lenient days are done,
the world of work and money
and minding our p's and q's.

No summer sun will ever
dismantle the global gloom
cast by the Daily Papers,
vomiting in slip-shod prose

the facts of filth and violence
that we're too dumb to prevent: 50
our earth's a sorry spot, but
for this special interim,
so restful yet so festive,
Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Fog.

It will strike many readers of this modern poem that its diction is a little strange, for it incorporates many archaic elements, which, in combination, seem to conjure up the tone and register of pre-Romantic poetry. For instance, words are frequently linked up into alliterative pairs and chains, including 'unsullied Sister' (3), 'Now native knowledge' (6), 'foe to festination' (7), 'daunter of drivers' (8), 'the merle and the mavis' (23), and many others. Nouns and pronouns are often given initial capitals, as in eighteenth-century printing practice, such as 'Smog' (2), 'Sister' (3), 'You' (11), 'Selves' (17). Many words and phrases have a Latinate or antique tone, reviving obsolete senses or usages of words – for example, 'festination' (7), from Latin *festinare*, meaning 'haste'; 'volants' (9), meaning those flying or in a hurry; 'the merle and the mavis' (23), meaning the blackbird and the thrush;[2] and 'refected by a sapid/supper' (35–6), meaning 'fed by an appetising supper'. In combination, these verbal features give the poem a certain air of whimsical, antiquarian pedantry which is deliberately suggestive of a vanished age, before mass communications and modern transport systems existed. The effect of the fog is to bring about a temporary close-down of the modern world, and hence a brief suspension of modern sensibilities, and that notion seems deliberately reflected in the poem's diction.

The fog, then, has the effect of slowing down the modern world, an effect incorporated into the very shape of the sentences used in the poem. For instance, the opening sentence (addressed to the fog itself) changes the order in which this sequence of phrases would occur in ordinary talk, which would probably be something like this (with the poem's actual line numbers indicated):

I'd quite forgotten you, fog, 4
smog's unsullied Sister, 3
and what you bring to British winters, 5

2 See John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 544.

having grown used to New York weather, 1
and become all too familiar with smog. 2
But now native knowledge returns. 6

The re-ordering of these clauses in Auden's poem *seems* to make us wait a longer time for the main point ('Now native knowledge returns'), so that the 'braking' effect which pervades the lines is marked. It also makes the tone and register feel more formal, as an informal statement about oneself usually begins with 'I', rather than with a dependent clause (such as 'Grown used to New York weather'). Within the poem, there is also an element of playful pastiche: as often, Auden revives or modifies a traditional form, in this case the **ode**, which in English usage since the Romantics had become a fairly loose, reflective format in which the addressee is a non-human entity (as in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Skylark', 'Ode to Joy', etc.). The archaism allows throw-backs to a pre-Romantic style, as when Auden refers to the fog as the country-bred 'unsullied Sister' of the smutty urban smog. Considered outside the notion of self-conscious pastiche, the reference to the 'unsullied Sister' is composed in accordance with a poetic convention worn out long ago, and even within the context of an intended effect of 'quaintness', the idea may seem a little weak. But the phrase isn't designed to withstand close forensic scrutiny, and its role is really just to keep the stanza moving towards the delayed end-phrase 'Now native knowledge returns'. A poem, in other words, is a *sequence* of words, always scrolling onwards towards its cumulating effect, and all poems, whether they are 'narrative' poems or not, have to be going somewhere. Thus, the overall momentum and dynamic of a medium-length poem of some 50 or so lines (like this one) may be eclipsed or overshadowed by something too verbally 'arresting' within it, that is, by something which will tend to bring the *flow* of words to a halt, and make us fix too much of our attention on a single phrase. So poetry of this length or greater requires a peculiar discipline in a writer, to ensure that its verbal energies are fairly evenly spread throughout, rather than 'clotted' or concentrated at particular points within the poem. The whole thing needs (so to speak) a suffusing phosphorescence, rather than unexpected, localised concentrations of bright flashes and sudden flares. If we could imagine ourselves as poets, we could probably imagine choosing brilliant words which stand out because of their vividness, aptness, or precision, gaining us admiration as dazzling 'word-smiths'. But in actuality, poets writing longer pieces

often need words which hardly draw any attention to themselves at all. And that kind of self-effacing overall control, which is an important aspect of the art of diction, is largely a matter of knowing when *not* to strive for an attention-getting verbal effect. Such 'dictional restraint', such avoidance of arresting local display, is part of the 'secret discipline' (Yeats's phrase) of poetry writing.

Auden's 'Thank You, Fog' is a poem that certainly has that discipline in abundance, and the lines which constitute its main body do their job by keeping a fairly low profile, and slowing the reader's arrival at the final statement, using means similar to those I have illustrated in the opening lines of the poem. When we reach it, the poem ends by formally thanking the fog for having closed in at Christmas-time around the country house at which he has been staying with friends, and for giving them all time to savour the human gifts of friendship and peacefulness:

> … but
> for this special interim,
> so restful yet so festive,
> Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Fog.

As with the opening, the reversing effect which forces us to wait is evident – the expected prose order would be something like 'But thank you, thank you, thank you, fog, for this special interim, [which is] so restful yet so festive'. Two lines intervene in the actual poem between the 'but' and the culminating statement to which it applies, and the sense of thoughtful arrest and self-interruption is enhanced by the sub-clause 'so restful yet so festive', which is like an interruption within an interruption, or a parenthesis within a parenthesis. The weight then falls on the final statement of gratitude, using a simple double repetition of some very commonplace words. So whereas in Clare the disjointedness produced by brief statements was very noticeable, Auden uses longer sentences, so managed as to produce a relaxed evenness of tone, and an archaic turn of phrase producing an evocative verbal pastiche which is suggestive of a more leisurely age.

Let us look now at two examples of 'counter-intuitive' diction in recent poetry, that is, at cases where the poet avoids a familiar pattern of words and instead supplies a word which is unexpected, and perhaps seems at first bizarre. Notice that this is a counter-balancing principle to the one just discussed: we have been

emphasising that the word or phrase which stands out as brilliantly 'right' may have disadvantages within a poem if it detracts from the overall effect by drawing too much attention to itself. What we are about to consider is how the word or phrase which at first seems odd, or inappropriate, or even wrong, may actually be advantageous. It will be seen that the effect is not precisely the same in any two of these cases, even though all of them implicitly juxtapose the more obvious (and hence unchosen) word with the less predictable one actually used by the poet. An example which shows a poet's instinct for verbal counter-intuition occurs at the start of Michael Donaghy's poem 'Liverpool', which was written as a BBC commission to celebrate St Valentine's Day, and focuses on the romantic tattoos with which lovers sometimes decorate themselves.

Ever been tattooed? It takes a whim of iron,
takes sweating in the antiseptic-stinking parlour,
nothing to read but motorcycle magazines
before the blood-sopped cotton, and, of course, the needle,
all for – at best – some Chinese dragon.
But mostly they do hearts,

hearts skewered, blurry, spurting like the Sacred Heart
on the arms of bikers and sailors.
Even in prison they get by with biro ink and broken glass,
carving hearts into their arms and shoulders.
But women's are more intimate. They hide theirs,
under shirts and jeans, in order to bestow them.

Like Tracy, who confessed she'd had hers done
one legless weekend with her ex.
Heart. Arrow. Even the bastard's initials, R. J. L.
somewhere where it hurt, she said,
and when I asked her where, snapped 'Liverpool'.

Wherever it was, she'd had it sliced away
leaving a scar, she said, pink and glassy
but small, and better than having his mark on her,

that self-same mark of Valentinus,
who was flayed for love, but who never
– so the cardinals now say – existed.
Desanctified, apocryphal, like Christopher,

like the scar you never showed me, Trace, 25
your ( ), your ex, your 'Liverpool'.
Still, when I unwrap the odd anonymous note
I let myself believe that it's from you.

All poems seem to juggle with elements of surprise and expectation, and this one illustrates the most skilful handling of those two elements. After the title, the nature of the poem itself is something of a surprise, because it really seems to be about tattooing, we might conclude, as we get to the end of the first stanza. Then, in line 13, it starts to be a poem about 'Tracy', on whom the speaker seems to have something of a fixation. Finally, almost at the end (line 26) it reverts to Liverpool, seeming to look back again to the beginning in a way which signals that the poem is pretty well over. But it isn't quite, and it then risks the anti-climax of a wistful coda, where the verb 'unwrap' seems to hint at the understated eroticism, and we realise that 'Still' combines two meanings, suggesting both 'even now, after all this time', and 'all the same', implying something like 'in spite of your apparent lack of interest in me'.

In terms of diction, the play between what is surprising and what is expected often turns on the element of collocation. In all verbal structures, some words are more expected than others: in an expression that begins 'Let's take another …' there is a high expectation that the missing word will be 'look', even though this is not a fixed and unvarying idiomatic string like 'Nothing succeeds like success'. If you stop reading for a moment and Google the phrase 'Let's take another' you can prove to yourself that this is true. It is, of course, perfectly possible to say (for example) 'Let's take another glance', but the odds would be stacked against winning any bet on that. In the collocational patterns characteristic of contemporary English, 'Let's take another look' is frequently heard, and 'Let's take another glance' isn't, and the occurrence of 'glance' in that combination therefore has an element of the counter-intuitive about it. Similarly, in the poem's opening line 'Ever been tattooed? It takes a whim of iron' the counter-intuitive word is 'whim', behind which we perceive the ghost or echo of the more familiar collocation 'It takes a *will* of iron': thus, the word 'will' is *almost* present in the poem, since there is only the slightest phonetic variation between 'whim' and 'will'. Yet the rightness of 'whim' is immediately apparent to the reader of the poem, for people often decide on a whim to get tattooed, as the poem says, 'Like Tracy, who confessed she'd had hers done / one legless weekend with her ex.' But then the

inebriated whim has to face the sordid reality of being tattooed, and still hold firm, for in reality it:

takes sweating in the antiseptic-stinking parlour,
nothing to read but motorcycle magazines
before the blood-sopped cotton, and, of course, the needle,

So 'whim of iron' has a powerfully compressed precision and wit, though at a poetry reading an audience might easily miss the aural distinction between 'whim' and 'will', so we might therefore regard it as a 'page' effect, rather than a 'performance' effect.

The poem goes on to suggest that women's tattoos are often 'more intimate' than men's, hidden 'under shirts and jeans', but Tracy refuses to say where she had hers done (except by rebuffing the question with the reply 'Liverpool'). So the speaker in the poem never sees the scar left by its removal. The tattoo, therefore, is gone, like St Christopher, who was removed from the Catholic Church's official list of saints (on the grounds that there is no proof he ever existed), just as the speaker can never be sure whether Tracy's tattoo ever existed or not:

like the scar you never showed me, Trace,
your ( ), your ex, your 'Liverpool'.

Here again, in spite of the often-repeated assertion that poetry should always be 'read aloud' for full appreciation, we have effects which will work only on the page, or, at best, may work one way in performance and another way on the page. In performing the poem, Donaghy left a slight pause after the first 'your', to indicate a word left unsaid or unspoken: the usual way of doing this in print or hand-writing is to insert a short horizontal line, but Donaghy chooses the pair of spaced parentheses, which seem to make a more suggestive shape, though that effect cannot easily be conveyed in performance. 'Ex' in the same line will be understood as 'ex-husband' (or partner), as this is its second occurrence in the poem, rather than as an 'X', which might imply a deleted or excised tattoo, while the ironic inverted commas around 'Liverpool' can be conveyed orally by an ironic tone or inflection, but no precisely equivalent effect is obtainable in print. The poem, then, exemplifies verbal counter-intuition in at least two different forms: firstly, by substituting the unexpected word for the expected one, thereby breaking the more usual collocational pattern, though highlighting that unexpectedness by the closeness of the phonic near-match of

'whim' and 'will'; and secondly, by putting no word at all where a word needs to be, so that the reader is obliged, like the poem, to fill the gap mentally and (probably) pruriently.

In broader terms of register, the poem continues the theme of being teasingly counter-intuitive, for it mixes together language which has a strongly contemporary urban feel, such as 'antiseptic-stinking parlour' (2), 'motorcycle magazines' (3), 'bikers and sailors' (8), 'shirts and jeans' (12) and 'legless weekend' (14), with a lurid vocabulary that has sado-masochistic overtones, such as 'blood-sopped cotton' (4), 'broken glass' (9), 'carving' (10), 'she'd had it sliced away' (18), 'pink and glassy' (19), with a religious register which seems to combine the two, as in 'hearts skewered, blurry, spurting like the Sacred Heart' (7), 'Valentinus,/who was flayed for love' (21–2) and 'Desanctified, apocryphal' (24). Thus, Donaghy's poem vividly evokes the world of pious Catholic iconography, with its extravagant and extreme images of love both human and divine, such as the statue of the Sacred Heart, in which Christ points to the burning heart in his breast, and St Thomas asks to see the traces of Christ's wounds, and put his hand into the scar in his side, before he will believe him risen. This is the world of feeling that Tracy's scar evokes, and her profession of her love for her 'ex' has the same quality of melodramatic excess.

The second example of counter-intuitive diction is from Ciaran Carson, whose 1989 book *Belfast Confetti* gives a series of disturbingly intimate insights into life in Belfast at the height of the 'Troubles' during the 1970s. In his poem 'Bloody Hand' we 'overhear' what seems to be the planning of a sectarian murder, though the process consists mainly of miming hand-gestures rather than explicit verbal instructions. It's a chilling poem, all the more so because the hand-play used to enact the required murder recalls the kind of childhood game in which animal shadows are cast onto a wall by a hand held in front of a lamp or candle and formed into different shapes:

Your man, says the Man, *will walk into the bar like this* – here his fingers
Mimic a pair of legs, one stiff at the knee – *so you'll know exactly*
What to do. He sticks a finger to his head. Pretend it's child's play –
The hand might be a horse's mouth, a rabbit or a dog. Five handclaps.
Walls have ears: the shadows you throw are the shadows you try to throw off.

I snuffed out the candle between finger and thumb. Was it the left hand
Hacked off at the wrist and thrown to the shores of Ulster? Did Ulster
Exist? Or the Right Hand of God, saying *Stop* to this and *No* to that?
My thumb is the hammer of a gun. The thumb goes up. The thumb goes down.

The most obvious feature of this poem when looked at on the page is the length of the lines, all of which have more than 20 syllables. All these long lines have two or more breaks within them, where either a new sentence begins, or where there is a new 'phase' of an utterance, giving about the same weight of pause as a sentence break, and indicated by a dash or a colon. The effect is to make the pace seem slower and more deliberate, thereby heightening the impression of the cold-bloodedness of the killing. In terms of register, we notice the use of familiar, everyday phrases or clichés – such as 'child's play', 'horse's mouth', 'walls have ears' – which convey an impression of mundane, day-to-day normality. But the use of this 'innocent' kind of language heightens the reader's realisation of the extent to which such killings had become part of a mundane, everyday world. The words actually spoken by the man issuing the orders are in italics, and the remainder indicates the reactions of the auditor to whom these instructions are being given. The title of the poem refers to the symbol of the Red Hand, historically denoting the Irish province of Ulster, but used by both sides of the sectarian divide, with one side mostly using a left hand and the other a right. In some versions the thumb is stretched out at an angle to the palm of the hand, and in others not. In Irish myth and legend it is connected with the story of the boat race between two brothers for the kingship of Ulster – whoever's hand first touched the shore would receive the crown. As the race neared its climax, the brother in the boat which had fallen behind cut off one his hands and threw it ashore ahead of the other's boat. The incident is linked to the recurrent refusals by both sides in the modern Troubles to seek a political compromise, an intransigence which lay at the roots of the conflict (as seen in the revived slogan 'Ulster Says No', the rallying cry of the Unionists in response to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985).

The final line of the poem has a number of details which at first seem wrong – because they deviate from the expected collocational patterns – and then seem right. 'The thumb goes up', for instance, is a complete grammatical sentence, but it is not a 'unit of sense', for the 'sentence', which actually has no sense, will be completed only when the gun is fired. Secondly, there is surely a strong expectation that if the first half of the line says 'The thumb *goes* up' (my italics), then the second half will say 'The thumb *comes* down', that is, with 'comes' rather than 'goes'. The expectation of this 'natural' contrastive pairing is reinforced by the existence of everyday phrases in English like 'coming and going', 'going out and coming back', and so on. Carson's straight repetition of 'goes' seems to emphasise the

coldness and starkness of the words, and also the inevitable continuation of the chain of events which will be initiated by the action of firing the gun. 'Comes' is the natural obverse of 'goes', so using both in tandem suggests an action which is rounded and complete. But, of course, this isn't so, for one killing will lead to another, and then another, and another, as each murder by one faction is met with its inevitable reprisal from the other.[3] Also, the poem chooses the most ordinary of words – there is no hankering by the poet after a fancy, jewel-like ***mot juste***: a teacher 'correcting' the line might suggest that the poet choose 'more precise' terms than 'goes up' and 'goes down', such as 'The thumb rises. The thumb falls.' But this, of course, would change the feel of a poem that seems deliberately to be made, not from the hand-crafted bricks of traditional poetic effects, but from the breeze blocks and wire mesh of a more brutal time and place. Carson's line, then, does not give us the neatly contrastive verbal interlock which might satisfy our aesthetic sense. It gives us instead something which is drab and dreary and repetitive, just like the scene it depicts.

This chapter has considered diction in poetry from several points of view, beginning with a consideration of overall effects, rather than localised instances or phrases, using notions like 'pace', 'mood' and 'cohesion', and then going on to look at how grammatical and syntactical means can be used to slow the reader's arrival at a culminating phrase by re-ordering the way the words would probably occur in ordinary speech. We also noted how the momentum of a poem will often require the verbal effects to be strictly controlled and disciplined, so that the risk of distracting the reader from the sum of sense is minimised. Finally, the poet's tendency to avoid providing the expected word or phrase was exemplified, and we illustrated poets' frequent preference for the apparently incongruous lexical item. However, while poets frequently avoid predictable diction, until recent times they mostly used predictable rhythmic and metrical structures. So the next chapter discusses the topic of metre in poetry.

3 In discussion of the poem, it was suggested to me that the repetition of 'goes' seems to emphasise agency, stressing that the killing is a willed act, not an inevitable consequence of something which has gone before. Think, for instance, of a common sequence of actions – I throw a ball up into the air, so that first it *goes* up, and then it *comes* down. It *goes* up because of the impetus I apply to it, but it *comes* down automatically, merely as a consequence of the law of gravity, once the impetus of the force applied to it is spent.

4. Metre

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.

These are the opening lines of *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth's epic poem about the development of his own mind and poetic sensibility. The poem is revolutionary in many ways, being essentially a poetic autobiography, but nothing about the opening lines hints at that, for they are quietly reflective and unhurried. The reflective tone of the opening partly derives from the measured and stately pace of his chosen verse form – the lines are in **iambic pentameter**, which is the backbone of traditional English poetry, being the metre of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, most of Shakespeare's plays, of his sonnets and those of many others poets, and of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and much more. Poetry written in iambic pentameter uses lines of a fixed length of 10 syllables, each line having five main stresses and five 'feet' (the Greek root 'pent' denotes 'five', so the word 'pentameter' means having five feet). Lines in iambic pentameter can be either rhymed (in various formats) or **blank verse** (meaning unrhymed), as in the case of *The Prelude.* The stress patterns in the lines just quoted are as indicated below, with the stressed syllables in italics:

Oh there / is *bless* / ing *in* / this *gen* / tle *breeze* / ,
A *vis* / i*tant* / that *while* / it *fans* / my *cheek* /
Doth *seem* / half-*con* / scious *of* / the *joy* / it *brings* /
From the / *green fields* / , and *from* / yon *az* / ure *sky* / .

The oblique strokes mark the five 'feet' of each line, a poetic **foot** being the basic rhythmic unit on which the piece moves forward, like an army marching to the tap of a drum. I say 'tap' rather than 'beat' to suggest that metre often functions more as a subliminal, background presence in the reader's mind, working subtly with other aspects of the verse, rather than pushing its way to the forefront of our attention. Each 'foot' in iambic pentameter has two

beats or taps linked together into a rhythmic unit, mostly consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, that is, the stress pattern is 'di-*dum* / di-*dum* / di-*dum*', with each foot having the pattern heard in such words as 'be*gin*', 'a*void*', 're*turn*'. We don't say '*bee*-gin' or '*ay*-void', or '*ree*-turn', and the stress pattern within the lines has to follow the usual stress pattern of English words. However, the divisions between metrical feet do not have to correspond to divisions between words, and, indeed, if they did the effect would probably seem too monotonous and predictable. Hence, the art of metrical composition lies significantly in contriving to make the metrical feet *not* correspond exactly to the word divisions most of the time. So the breaks between metrical feet may, and often do, occur within words of more than one syllable, as in the case of the words 'blessing', 'gentle', 'visitant', 'conscious' and 'azure' in the Wordsworth lines just quoted. But it is said that English (or, at least, English English) has a naturally iambic rhythm, in the sense that common two-syllable English words usually have the main stress on the second syllable rather than the first, as in: be*gin*, a*void*, de*cline*, de*ceive*, pro*claim*, and so on. Stressing the first syllable rather than the second in these words produces a pattern which most speakers instinctively hear as wrong – as in *dee*-ceive, *ay*-void, *bee*-gin. When a **content word**, such as a noun, verb, adjective or adverb, has just one syllable, then that syllable is usually stressed. So in the lines above, 'breeze', 'fans', 'cheek', 'seem', 'joy', 'brings', 'green' and 'fields' have to be stressed syllables. Many unstressed vowels in English words of more than one syllable tend to be neutralised to an 'uh' sound, which technically is called the ***schwa* vowel**, and is represented in the phonetic alphabet by an inverted lower-case 'e', like this: 'ə'; thus, the second vowel in the place-name 'Oxford' is pronounced like the '*schwa* vowel', that is, as a neutral 'uh', and if you hear somebody saying *Ox-ford*, with two equally stressed syllables, and the 'ford' part having exactly the same sound as the 'ford' of 'to ford a stream', then you know immediately that the person is probably not a native British speaker of English. That is why, in my discussion above, I have represented the vowel in the wrongly stressed version of the listed words as '*dee*-ceive', '*ay*-void', and so on, since it is nearly impossible for a stressed vowel to have the neutralised 'uh' sound.

But you will have noticed that in my transcription of the opening lines from *The Prelude* the first foot of the first line ('*Oh* there/') reverses the unstress/stress iambic pattern, as does the first foot ('*From* the/') of the final line. You may wonder whether

you would have recognised this unaided, but if you feel that you might not have done so, then simply remember that poetic metre, wherever possible, follows the natural stress patterns of English words – it just isn't possible to say 'Oh' without stressing it – what could be the point of doing so, since the locution 'Oh' is meant to draw the attention of a hearer? A two-syllable metrical foot in which the stressed syllable comes before the unstressed one is called a **trochee**, and if this were the case in the majority of the feet in a passage, then the rhythm would be called 'trochaic'. There is another trochee at the start of the fourth line, which is easy to identify, since if it were an iambic foot it would force an unnatural pronunciation like 'Fr'm *thee*'. The foot which comes next has a single-syllable adjective ('green') followed by a single-syllable noun ('fields'), so it follows (see above) that both syllables are stressed, giving a foot which is called a **spondee**, and the rhythm created, when such feet predominate (which isn't very common), is called 'spondaic'. The repeating 'off/on' pattern of the iambic metre would become monotonous if it never varied, and, in practice, variations like those just described are common in extended passages of iambic pentameter. It should be emphasised, too, that the counting of the metrical pattern within lines of traditional poetry is not a precise art – sometimes the basic rhythm seems clear, but there are occasional reversals, like those just mentioned, as well as lines which seem to have an extra syllable. The tradition of the 'poetic licence', as is well known, allowed poets some leeway in the representation of factual matters in poetry, but it also permitted a degree of flexibility in metrical patterning, allowing minor deviations from strict form without censure. This flexibility made good sense, as the rules of metrics had originally been devised for the classical languages of Greek and Latin, so that the fit with English was never quite exact.

Poets other than Wordsworth often used iambic pentameter in the format known as **heroic couplets**, in which each pair of lines is rhymed, as we can see in Alexander Pope's philosophical poem *An Essay on Man* (1732–34), written in heroic couplets throughout, as exemplified in these lines:

Two principles in human nature reign;
Self-love, to urge, and reason, to restrain;
Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call,
Each works its end, to move or govern all:
And to their proper operation still
Ascribe all Good, to their improper, ill.

The end-rhymes bind each pair of lines so tightly together into a compressed **aphoristic unit** that they seem almost independent of the whole and unaware of the rest of the poem. Each pair boldly makes a composite, self-contained assertion which the first line states and the second then exemplifies, explains, expands, refines, or in some way tweaks. The effect is impressive, but oddly tiring to read in bulk, for the regularity of the structure arguably becomes somewhat monotonous when reading at length from the work. Many of the lines are built on **antithesis**, meaning that they use contrastive pairings of words, as in 'Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call', in which 'this' is contrasted with 'that' and 'good' with 'bad'. In such lines, the metrical tap becomes quite a heavy beat, and the metrical variation of the first foot (as in the first, second and fourth lines quoted) is a welcome relief: this is the metrical pattern, shown again with the stressed syllables italicised:

Two prin / ci*ples* / in *hum* / an *na* / ture *reign*; /
Self-love / to *urge* / , and *rea* / son, *to* / re*strain*; /
Nor *this* / a *good* / , nor *that* / a *bad* / we *call*, /
Each works / its *end*, / to *move* / or *gov* / ern *all*: /
And to / their *prop* / er *op* / er *a* / tion *still* /
A*scribe* / all *Good*, / to *their* / im*prop* / er, *ill*. /

The second couplet (with the exception of the word 'govern') is almost entirely monosyllabic, and the full rhyme of 'call' with 'all' perhaps seems to tie up the thought a little too tightly. By contrast, the first couplet is slightly loosened by the rhythmic variation of rhyming the monosyllable 'reign' with the two-syllable word 'restrain'. In this line, the stress pattern begins with the spondaic foot '*Self-love*', in which both syllables are stressed. The whole line works through antithesis – self-love versus reason, the one pushing us on ('to urge') and the other pulling us back ('to restrain'). The balanced dignity of the couplets goes on and on in this elegant way, and the effect is perhaps rather like that of walking down a long street of perfectly proportioned Georgian terraced houses of the type characteristic of the eighteenth-century period in which this work was written. Well, the walk may be very pleasant, but you cannot help noticing that it is also a very long street.

A poem written in iambics, but with lines of four feet rather than five, is said to be in iambic tetrameter ('tetra' means four, so 'tetrameter' means 'having four feet'). This is the metre of Tennyson's elegiac sequence *In Memoriam* (1849), and in Poem 123

the poet meditates in sombre fashion on the new Victorian knowledge about the age of the earth and the on-going changes in the forms of continents and oceans which have taken place over aeons of time:

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

But in my spirit will I dwell,
And dream my dream, and hold it true;
For tho' my lips may breathe adieu,
I cannot think the thing farewell.

Here the 'long street' along which the traffic roars may be one of the Georgian kind just mentioned, emblematic in this poem of the familiar urban environment which has come to seem almost natural, as if it has always been there. Tone and pace are slow and stately, the beat of the rhythm sure and steady. No word in the whole three-stanza poem is longer than two syllables, and all but 11 are monosyllabic. The feeling of strength and solidity in these rugged, square-built lines is almost palpable, and this heavy, craftsman-made frame seems to focus and concentrate the force of the imagery as a lens gathers and focuses the light. The lines of the second stanza describe the hills, which look as solid as eternity, but are actually flowing gradually all the time from one form to another, just like mist, or clouds, only not as fast. This is the metrical pattern, indicated as before:

The *hills* / are *shad* / ows, *and* / they *flow* /
From *form* / to *form*, / and *noth* / ing *stands*; /
They *melt* / like *mist*, / the *sol* / id *lands*, /
Like *clouds* / they *shape* / them*selves* / and *go*. /

The rugged solidity of the lines is achieved by alliterative and rhythmic binding, as seen in 'they flow / From form to form', in which the words 'flow', 'from' and 'form' have a triple emphasis, first by

alliteration, second by all being monosyllabic, and thereby stressed, and third by their receiving the beat of the metrical patterning. Similar effects of pattern and emphasis are seen in 'They melt like mist, the solid lands'. This patterning shapes their pace and rhythm into a firm and predictable frame, and the firmness is reinforced by the alliterative binding of '*m*elt like *m*ist' and 'the so*l*id *l*ands'. Notice here (in the light of what was said about alliteration in the introduction) that I am saying that the alliteration is contributing to the *form* and tone of the utterance, rather than to its *content*. The rugged verbal solidity of the lines seems to emphasise by contrast the transience and evanescence of the land masses being described. But, like Alexander Pope, I would say no more than 'seems'.

The ballad metre, also called the **ballad measure**, is another traditional English metrical form which has the iambic foot as its basis, using short lines in **quatrains** (that is, four-line stanzas) with iambic tetrameter lines alternating with iambic trimeter ('trimeter' means having three feet), with a rhyme pattern that links lines 2 and 4 in each stanza. This pattern can be illustrated with the following stanza from Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner':

The *ice* / was *here*, / the *ice* / was *there* / ,
The *ice* / was *all* / a*round*: /
It *cracked* / and *growled*, / and *roared* / and *howled*, /
Like *noi* / ses *in* / a *swound*! /

In skilled performance (as in the recorded reading of this poem by Richard Burton[1]), the effect can be dramatic, and capable of subtle variations in pace and tone. Coleridge and Wordsworth, in their joint collection *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, revived the ballad form, and it was revived again in the twentieth century by poets such as W. H. Auden and Charles Causley. Indeed, this became a familiar pattern in the history of English poetry, as young poets who felt oppressed by the work of the older generation have tended to go back to an earlier period still for their inspiration, just as T. S. Eliot was to do in the modernist period with his rediscovery of the work of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

The ballad metre, as seen in popular verse narrative, might be regarded as a looser system of metrics than the other forms so far considered, because it combines lines of two different lengths to produce its characteristic running rhythm. In the approach to the

1 Included in the re-release on CD of *The Richard Burton Poetry Collection* (Saland Publishing, 2010).

twentieth century, poets seemed to be looking for more flexible formats, as if they were losing faith in the rigid discipline of the more traditional forms. The priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance, identified what he called **sprung rhythm** as providing the rhythmic basis of his own work. He links it in his 'Author's Preface' with the frequently seen reversals of stress at the beginning of lines in iambic pentameter, and also within the main body of such lines 'after a strong pause'.[2] He says that it is also 'the rhythm of common speech and of written prose, when rhythm is perceived in them' (pp. 48–9), and that it is found in 'nursery rhymes, weather saws and so on' (p. 49). The essential difference between sprung rhythm and the more traditional metrical patterns we have been discussing is that whereas metrical verse has a fixed number of stresses *and* a fixed number of syllables, in sprung rhythm the number of *syllables* can vary but the number of *stresses* is fixed. Hopkins himself, in his Notebooks, sees sprung rhythm as the basis of nursery rhyme, as in these well known opening lines:

Ding / *Dong* / *Bell* /
*Pus*sy's / *in* the / *well* /
Who / *put* him / *in* /
*Lit*tle / *Tom*my / *Thin* /

Each of these lines has three stresses, but the number of syllables varies from line to line (3, 5, 4, 5, respectively). The 'feet' (marked by the oblique strokes) all begin with a stressed syllable, and each foot has only one stress (indicated in italics). When he claims that sprung rhythm is closer to the rhythms of 'common speech', Hopkins must mean speech of a certain urgent and emotive kind, for that, surely, is when 'rhythm is perceived' in it. Thus, Hopkins aims for an overall effect which is what we might call a 'heightened', 'intensified', or 'rapt' form of utterance, as in the opening of his sonnet 'Harry Ploughman', in which he gives a vivid physical and emotive portrait of the ploughman's strength and skill:

Hard as hurdle arms, with a broth of goldish flue
Breathed round; the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank
Rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barrelled shank –
Head and foot, shoulder and shank –
By a grey eye's heed steered well, one crew, fall to;

2 W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (eds), *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edition (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 46.

This doesn't really sound much like 'common speech', but nor does it seem like any other kind of poetry, mainly because all the elements of rhythm, emphasis, alliteration and assonance are packed so densely into every line. Here the alliterative beat is strong and expressive ('*Hard* as/*hur*dle/*arms*' … 'the *rack*/of *ribs*' … '*knee*-/*nave*'), and the entwining of words through assonance and internal rhyme gives a texture of great strength and originality. In a letter of 11 October 1887, Hopkins described it as '*very heavily loaded* sprung rhythm' (my italics), and said that the poem was 'for recital, and not for perusal', meaning that it is designed to be performed aloud rather than read silently.[3] Though it sounds anything but 'free', it is a step in the direction of the **free verse** of the twentieth century, in the sense that only the stressed syllables are counted and 'rationed' by the system, while the unstressed ones ('slack' syllables as Hopkins called them) can vary in number.

So, Hopkins's practice points towards the twentieth century, which saw the progressive abandonment by many poets of the strict metrical rules which had largely determined the shape of poetry since the Middle Ages. These rules had fixed both the number of syllables in the line and the number and arrangement of stresses. Hopkins's idea of 'sprung rhythm' kept the notion of fixing the number of stresses, but allowed the line length itself (as determined by syllable count) to vary, so in that sense it dispensed with one of the two major patterning elements of metrical verse, and paved the way towards 'free verse', in which both line length and stress patterns became variable elements. This is true even though no other poet subsequently took up the term 'sprung rhythm', or tried to follow Hopkins's practice exactly. Rather, poets who experimented with metrics in the twentieth century usually invented their own terminology, though none explained what they were doing as lucidly as Hopkins did in his (posthumously published) 'Author's Preface' and in his letters and notebooks.[4]

A major twentieth-century poet whose thinking is reminiscent of Hopkins's is William Carlos Williams, whom we encountered earlier. He too wanted to loosen the strictness of traditional metrics while still retaining a degree of regularity in the 'beat' or 'measure' of

3 Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 263.

4 The best and most convenient selection of all this material is W. H. Gardner (ed.), *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics: New Impression edition, 2008).

the poetic line. Like Hopkins, his solution was to allow variations in the total number of syllables per line, while controlling the number of beats or stresses. He calls his system the 'variable foot', and this too is a term which was never really taken up by other poets. And just as Hopkins linked sprung rhythm to 'common speech', so, as Alice Fulton reminds us, 'Williams's variable foot arose from his observation that "the iamb is not the normal measure of American speech."'[5] In an interview for the *Paris Review*, Williams says that he discovered his 'new measure' in his poem 'The Descent', and his main reason for placing such a high valuation on this idea is that it is a better verse medium than iambic pentameter for the American voice. The theorising of the 'variable foot' is not such as to provide a precise technical specification for Williams's metrical practice – rather, it indicates the aspirations which lie behind the formulation. These are the lines of his own poetry that Williams referred to as an example of the variable foot:

The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned.
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places
inhabited by hoards
heretofore unrealized
of new kinds
since their movements
are toward new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned)

In a letter to the American poet Richard Eberhart, Williams indicates that the structure is **triadic** – the lines are grouped in threes, each one stepping inwards from the margin, each line representing a 'foot' with a single strong beat, but a varying number of syllables (hence the term 'variable foot'). The extreme variation in line length (as between lines 6 and 7, for instance) seems to make it evident that the 'beat' he has in mind is more like an indication of

5 Alice Fulton, 'Fractal Amplifications: Writing in Three Dimensions', *Thumbscrew*, 12, winter, 1998–99; available at www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12199.

duration, as in musical notation, rather than a 'stress'. No critic has fully explicated all the technicalities of Williams's concept, but its aspiration is clear – he wants a modern, twentieth-century poetic line which can be stretched and varied, just like the rhythms of jazz music, while still retaining a degree of fixity, so that the verse is neither entirely free, nor entirely fixed. Just as notions of time and space themselves became relative in the twentieth-century's scientific discoveries, so the poetic measure too acquired a degree of 'relativity'.

It is evident, then, that for some American poets, the acceptance of the older fixed metrical verse patterns seemed to involve the acceptance of a kind of anachronistic form of cultural colonialism: as Ezra Pound said, in his Canto LXXXI, looking back on the poetic revolution of the early part of the twentieth century, 'To break the pentameter, that was the first heave'.[6] In other words, he tells his fellow poets of the modern age, and especially his fellow Americans, that they must find their own voices and forms to express the distinctive experience of their epoch. This does not mean, of course, that British poets have been content to go on using the traditional forms, and it would be true to say that the bulk of verse being written in Britain now, in the twenty-first century, tends to be, as we might call it, 'post-metrical'. Using without modification the rhyme schemes, verse forms and fixed metrical patterns of the past is now the exception rather than the rule.

It is worth adding in conclusion that there is no particular virtue, when reading poetry, in merely identifying a metrical pattern if we cannot go on to use that identification to some purpose in the elucidation of a poetic effect. As suggested earlier, when a reader becomes very conscious of *any* technical aspect of a poem (of its rhyme scheme, its rhythm, its diction, its patterning, or whatever), it is probably safe to say that those elements have ceased to do their job properly, for that job is always to make a *supporting* contribution to the creation of a particular effect, rather than becoming the focal point of the reader's attention. Most of us, when fully engaged with a poem, will not be directly conscious of any of these rhythmic and metrical elements as such, just as, when we listen to an engaging speaker, we are not directly conscious of the grammatical structures of the sentences being composed and delivered. All the same, a rudimentary knowledge of metrical patterns and their variations is

6 See Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (Faber, 1975), Canto LXXXI, p. 518.

conducive to the enjoyment and appreciation of poetry, and spelling out to oneself exactly what the metre is doing in lines which we find striking and memorable can be a good way of increasing our sense of intimacy with the poetic medium. The apparent precision of the various systems of metrical description can be attractive and satisfying to learn, or learn about; but we should always be aware that such precision is necessarily to some extent theoretical, and can exist in its 'pure' state only prior to our own (and probably the poet's) encounters with the intricacies of particular poems. Indeed, the theory of metrics is always compromised by the presence of any actual poem, since no poem worth reading ever works entirely by the book, or merely follows a formulaic prescription set out in advance. Likewise, poets inherited a range of set poetic formats, but often bent the rules for those too, as discussed in the next chapter.

5. Form

Some years ago, in a second-hand bookshop, I happened upon a book about 'orthometry', a quaint and obsolete term defined in the book's full title, which is *The Art of Versification and the Technicalities of Poetry* (published by J. Grant of Edinburgh, revised edition, 1923). The second chapter is called 'Kinds of Poetry', of which there are seven (the book claims), the first being 'Lyric Poetry', which is subdivided into sections on 'The Ode', 'The Ballad', 'The Hymn and Song' and 'The Elegy'. Surprisingly, the sonnet is the sixth of the seven 'Kinds of Poetry', rather than being just one of the sub-types of **lyric poetry**. But the book is not without merit. For instance, a later chapter is called 'Poetic Trifles', and there are seven of these too, including the **sestina**, a verse form first used by the medieval Italian poets Dante and Petrarch, and consisting of six six-line stanzas plus a final stanza of three lines. The sestina has what might be called a 'verse cousin' known as the **villanelle**, this being an even older French form, with five three-line stanzas, plus one of four. The family likeness between these two forms is most evident in the fact that both make use of just two rhyme sounds, alternating all the way through. Whatever may be the case in Italian and French, in English the risk of aural monotony is high when the rhyme pattern is so restricted and repetitive. In both forms, too, the monotony is compounded by an extra twist: in the sestina, the six end-words of the lines in each stanza are the same all the way through, but they are used in a different order from one stanza to the next. In the case of the villanelle, there are two refrain lines, which alternate as the end-line in stanzas 1 to 5, and are then *both* used to conclude the final stanza (thus accounting for its extra line). The effect of all this echoic sound patterning is to produce an irritating form of jangly poetic tinnitus. The sestina and the villanelle are different from (say) the **clerihew** and the **limerick**, which are both very short, and in any case are intended simply to amuse. Sestinas and villanelles, by contrast, are longer (39 and 19 lines respectively), and are meant to be poetic vehicles which can carry any kind of subject matter. But they seem incapacitated by their cumbersome weight of over-elaborated technical specification, which makes them pretty well incapable of expressing anything

but themselves. Unsurprisingly, they never properly 'caught on' in English poetry, and I think they are rightly categorised as trifles by the orthometrist author of *The Art of Versification*. So for the purposes of this chapter I have (from here on) ignored them. The ode, by contrast, is a major imported poetic form which lent itself very well to adoption, adaptation, Anglicisation and development over its long and fruitful history, and most of this chapter on form is devoted to this highly flexible and successful verse form.

In its origins, the ode is much more ancient than any other form of verse, since it has a double ancestry which goes back to classical Greece and Rome. The Greek model is called the **Pindaric ode**, because it was perfected by the lyric poet Pindar, who lived from around 518 to around 438 BC. Pindaric odes were written in praise of the victors in the various athletics contests held during the games and festivals that were a feature of ancient Greek life (the best-known being the Olympic games, at Olympia, and the Pythian games, held at Delphi). The prescribed content of the Pindaric ode may at first seem somewhat limited, but in practice the themes chosen were wide-ranging, taking in the myths and legends associated with the victor's home region, and many other aspects of Greek religion, outlook and history. The tone and treatment were highly elevated and formal, and the whole composition was designed to be sung and chanted with dance and choric accompaniment. The basic structure of these compositions was triadic, with the first verse called the **strophe** (pronounced *stroh-fee*), the second the **antistrophe** and the third the **epode**. A strophe is literally a 'turn', and it means the same thing as a verse. The antistrophe mirrors the form of the strophe, while the epode introduces a new formal variation into the composition. The shortest Pindaric ode goes through this triadic structure just once, and the longest nine times.

The other model is the **Horatian ode**, which is based on the forms used by the Roman poet Horace (65–8 BC). These usually have stanzas of two or four lines, and the whole ethos of the poem is more reflective, private-seeming and informal than the public, elevated, rhetorical tone and treatment which characterise the Pindaric kind. In English, both Pindaric and Horatian odes are only quite loosely based on the form of the Greek and Roman originals, for it isn't possible to reproduce those forms exactly in English. The reasons for this are manifold; for instance, the metrical basis of the rhythms of Greek poetry is **quantitative**, meaning that the metre is based upon alternating patterns of long and short syllables, rather than stressed and unstressed syllables: thus, a 'long' syllable, like

the 'a' sound in 'hate', supposedly takes longer to say than a 'short' syllable, like the 'a' sound in 'hat'. By contrast, the metrical patterns of English verse are **qualitative**, meaning that they are based on the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, as in 'He *went* to *work*', where 'went' and work' are stressed syllables, whereas 'he' and 'to' are unstressed, even though both are 'long' syllables, rather than 'short' ones (as the same vowels would be in the words 'help' and 'top'). Similarly, in Latin, the grammar and syntax are different from English, with consequent effects on word order: thus, the Latin phrase which expresses the legal right of the accused to remain silent is '*Accusare nemo se debet*', which literally means 'Nobody is obliged to accuse himself'. But the equivalent word order in English of the four Latin words is: (1) to accuse, (2) nobody, (3) himself, (4) is obliged. In that order, the words do not make sense in English. So both the Pindaric and Horatian forms of the ode, which began to be used in English poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are actually loose 'adaptations' of the ancient forms, rather than exact reproductions of them. Essentially, then, there are two traditions of the ode in English verse: firstly, the 'Pindaric' or 'high' or 'elevated' ode form; and secondly, the 'Horatian' or 'lesser' ode. Sometimes a third category is mentioned, designated the **irregular ode**, in which sometimes the two forms seem to be blended, and a looser, reflective style of poem emerges, formally structured, and quite lengthy, and addressed to an abstraction (as in Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy'), an inanimate object (as in the same poet's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'), a view (as in Thomas Gray's 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College'), an element (as in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind') or a group or category of people (as in Allen Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead').

A good example of the Pindaric ode in English is Thomas Gray's helpfully subtitled 'The Bard: A Pindaric Ode' (1754–55), which tells the story of Edward I's subjugation of Wales, and how the order was given by the English that any bards captured should be executed.[1] In the melodramatic action of the poem, a grey-bearded bard denounces and curses the invading army from the slopes of Snowdon, foretelling the death of Edward I and the fall of the Plantagenet dynasty, before hurling himself from the mountain into the river below. Gray uses the regular triadic Pindaric form, with strophe and antistrophe each of 14 lines, followed by an epode of

1 James Reeves (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray* (Heinemann, 1973), p. 77.

20 lines, this pattern being repeated three times. The 14 lines of the strophe and antistrophe look something like sonnets, rhyming *abab*, *ccdd* and *efefgg*. The epode has a separate rhyme scheme. In a letter, Gray suggested that the strophe and antistrophe in a Pindaric ode should be no more than nine lines long, since otherwise the shape of the metrical patterning can hardly be apparent to the reader. This is surely true, and it is unclear why Gray did not act upon his own conviction, but it might be argued that in nearly all verse forms in English poetry, the metrical patterning is usually 'back-grounded' rather than foregrounded by the execution. Here, for instance, is the opening of Gray's ode:

Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!
Confusion on thy banners wait,
Though fanned by Conquest's crimson wing
They mock the air with idle state!
Helm, nor Hauberk's twisted mail,
Nor even thy virtues, Tyrant, shall avail
To save thy secret soul from nightly fears,
From Cambria's curse, from Cambria's tears!

These are the words of denunciation, addressed to the English king, by the Welsh bard who will hurl himself to his death at the end of the poem. The rhyme is formal (*abab, ccdd*), and the overall effect is highly rhetorical, partly because of the setting (these lines are declaimed by the bard from the mountainside, arresting the invading army in its tracks), and partly by reason of the rolling cadences of the verse itself. The vocabulary is elevated (the Latin 'Cambria' is used in preference to the vernacular 'Wales', and the sense of the words is often Latinate rather than colloquial). Thus, 'virtue' means 'might' or 'strength', and the word derives from the Latin word '*vir*', which means a man, rather than 'goodness', which was the meaning it only later assumed in English. The alliterative pairings (like 'Ruin' and 'ruthless' and 'Helm, nor Hauberk') intensify the high rhetorical effect of the lines. Thus, the sense of 'elevation' of tone and sentiment often attributed to the Pindaric form is immediately felt. Also, the implausibility of the situation is disguised by the verbal form – would an army really be daunted and stopped in its tracks by an old man shouting at them from a hilltop? Probably not, but it seems plausible in a poem when he is described thus in heroically elevated language in the antistrophe:

Robed in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the Poet stood;
(Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Streamed, like a meteor, to the troubled air)

The long white hair and beard stream out in the wind like the tail of a comet, the eyes red and glaring, the garments black. This sight, to an army living on its nerves in bleak and hostile territory, might conceivably be enough to daunt and terrify. But, as Gray seems to realise, a reader caught up in the drama of the depicted scene may well not be particularly aware of the intricacies of the metrical and formal patterning on which the verse is built.

The best-known example of the Horatian form of ode is Andrew Marvell's 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland', which Blair Worden describes as 'the most private of political poems'.[2] It celebrates the homecoming of Cromwell after his bloody suppression of Ireland and anticipates similar success in a forthcoming campaign against the Scots, while also coming to terms with the execution of King Charles I the year before. But it does so at the same time as expressing obvious admiration for the dead king, and without offering any extravagant praise of Cromwell. It uses the four-line Horatian stanza, and the poised and ironic detachment of the tone seems constantly to undercut the apparent triumphalism of the title. These are the opening stanzas:

The forward youth that would appear
Must now forsake his Muses dear,
or in the shadows sing
His numbers languishing.

'Tis time to leave the books in dust,
And oil the unused armour's rust,
Removing from the wall
The corslet of the hall.

So restless Cromwell could not cease
In the inglorious arts of peace,
But through adventurous war
Urgèd his active star:

2 Blair Worden, 'The Politics of Marvell's Horatian Ode', *Historical Journal*, 27/3, 1984, p. 525.

This is the time for action, not contemplation, the poem begins, opening as if with a rousing trumpet call. But what are the motives of this action? The 'forward' youth could just mean the ambitious young man who wants to make a name for himself – there is no mention of any idealistic principles being involved. What is it that makes Cromwell too 'restless' to be content with peace? Are the arts of peace really so 'inglorious', and is an 'adventurous' spirit really a sufficient reason for going to war? Is Cromwell thinking at all of such issues as he pursues what he sees as his destiny (his 'active star')? Thus, beneath the ringing, confident tones are constant notes of scepticism, and the weaving together of public and personal themes, which is characteristic of the Horatian ode, is seen in this poem to great advantage.

The 'irregular' ode form, which became prominent in the nineteenth century, seems to take elements from both the Pindaric and the Horatian forms. A good example of the irregular form is Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802). The characteristics of the irregular ode concern aspects of both form and content: firstly, it is an extended lyric-reflective form – this example has 139 lines in all, in eight stanzas, which vary in length between the extremes of 8 lines for stanza III and 32 for stanza VII. Within the stanzas, traces of the Pindaric form are evident in blocks of four lines identifiable by the preferred rhyming patterns of *abba*, *aabb* and *abab*, but the stanzas are not arranged in the strophe, antistrophe, epode patterning of the strict Pindaric form. So there is a certain on-going 'negotiation', as it might be called, between the free flow of the thought (as seen in the monster stanza VII, for example) and the demands of overall poetic structures and metrical patterning. In terms of what the poem depicts, there is frequent reference back to the setting in which the meditation is taking place, and within this setting the poet attempts to delineate the mood of restless ennui and melancholy that he feels as he contemplates his unpromising obsession with Sara Hutchinson (soon to be Wordsworth's sister-in-law), and the discontent of his own marriage, a situation that is incapable of any resolution. These characteristics are seen in the third and fourth stanzas:

III
My genial spirits fail;
And what can these avail
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?
It were a vain endeavour,

Though I should gaze forever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

IV
O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

Thus, stanza III is built on the Pindaric 4 + 4 pattern, but with the first quatrain split into two couplets, so that we have a rhyming couplet (fail/avail), then a *bccb* quatrain (breast/endeavour/forever/west) and then another rhyming couplet (win/within). Stanza IV is also made up of 'fused' (that is, un-separated) quatrains, which rhyme *aabc* (give/live/shroud/worth), *bbcb* (allowed/crowd/forth/cloud) and *dede* (Earth/sent/birth/element). The two stanzas taken together are a classic statement of Romanticist convictions about the supreme importance of the inner life and its ability to eclipse and occlude the outer world. As Coleridge puts it: 'I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passion and the life, whose fountains are within', and the thought runs through into the next stanza, with 'O Lady! we receive but what we give,/And in our life alone does Nature live'. As the flow of thought runs continuously through stanzas III and IV, they might be regarded as a single stanza of 20 lines, in which case they reflect the 20-line stanza that opens the poem, but the rhyme scheme and the metrical patterning of III–IV do not echo those of stanza I, as would be required if something like a stricter Pindaric style were being attempted. Thus, the irregular ode form allows a generous combination of structuring and flexibility, a combination which seems ideally suited to the genius of Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley.

If we continue this consideration of the ode into the twentieth century, we reach a stage beyond the 'irregular' ode which I would call the **covert ode**, in which the word 'ode' is not necessarily part of the poem's title, but many of the ode's characteristics are present. The most important characteristic is that the ode is a 'public lyric', in the sense that it combines the personal with a range of more public or social themes, developing these in a sustained, meditative way, in a poem usually of 50 lines and upwards, and within a well defined structure (rather than 'free verse'). The form of utterance used in an ode has a certain rhetorical or declamatory feel – it is not aiming to sound like a private word in the reader's ear, for it usually has distinct elements of public oratory about it. It may be written in blank verse, rather than using a rhyme scheme, and there will always be stanzas, and sometimes other section breaks as well. Some examples would be the elegiac poems of W. H. Auden, which mark the passing of figures of major cultural significance, enabling a kind of social, political and cultural 'stock-taking' in verse, on behalf of the nation. In this category would be Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' (both 1939) and 'At the Grave of Henry James' (1941). Not elegiac, but also a covert ode, is Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles' (1952), which imagines what scenes might adorn a modern-day version of the shield of Achilles described by Homer in Book XIII of *The Iliad*, and containing a multitude of scenes of war and peace. Auden's modern-day version is filmic, and the scenes seem to represent drab, totalitarian conformist societies:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
  No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
  Yet congregated on its blankness, stood
  An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Another post-war example of the covert ode is 'For the Union Dead' by Robert Lowell. This is in 17 blank-verse quatrains, and concerns the condition of contemporary (1960) New England, as seen from its capital, Boston, where the public aquarium has been demolished to make way for an underground car-park, and the memorial to a Civil War regiment of black infantry has been boarded up for the duration. Identifying Lowell's great poem as a covert ode

is initially prompted by the fact that it comes in a line of odes, beginning with 'Ode to the Union Dead' (1865) by Lowell's ancestor James Russell Lowell (1819–91), to which Allen Tate (1899–1979), who had been one of Lowell's teachers and formative influences at Kenyon College in Ohio, replied with his 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' in 1928.[3] It might be argued that this covert ode does not have an addressee which is an inanimate object or an abstract quality, but that convention had already been partly abandoned even in the irregular odes of the previous century: thus, Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', for instance, is not an ode *to* melancholy, since melancholy is spoken about in the third person ('*She* dwells with Beauty', it says, and 'in the very temple of Delight/Veil'd Melancholy has *her* Sovran shrine' – both my italics). Likewise, Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' is not addressed to the abstract notion of dejection, but (repeatedly) to 'Oh Lady!', with variations such as 'O pure of heart!', 'virtuous Lady!' and 'Dear Lady!' Hence, the lack of such an inanimate addressee in Lowell's poem does not exclude it from being considered within the category of the ode, and nor does the fact that it is called '*For*', rather than '*To*', 'the Union Dead'.

Lowell's quatrains are unrhymed and may be considered a development of the Horatian form. The poem begins with a glimpse of the old aquarium (which Lowell vividly remembers being taken to as a child) now awaiting demolition:

> The old South Boston Aquarium stands
> in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
> The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
> The airy tanks are dry.
>
> Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
> my hand tingled
> to burst the bubbles
> drifting from the noises of the cowed, compliant fish.

This is a very personal memory, and every detail is vivid and realised, but the tone is declamatory and formal, and it can glide easily from the personal into major issues of idealism, commercialism, racism and prejudice, and how the public sphere ought to conduct itself and define its goals and ambitions. And if blending or

3 See Jonathan Raban's notes to this poem in his *Robert Lowell's Poems: A Selection* (Faber, 1974), pp. 175–6.

combining the personal with the public or political is a key feature of the Horatian ode, then Lowell does that with unique poise in stanzas 12 and 14, when he considers the surviving ideals of New England at the dawn of the so-called 'Camelot' era of the Kennedys:

On a thousand small town New England greens,
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic.

…

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his 'niggers'

'Shaw' was the white colonel of the black regiment which is commemorated in the bas relief monument by the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, a monument which, as Lowell writes the poem, is now 'propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake'. Lowell laments the materialism and commercialism which have eroded Boston's austere intellectualism and liberal commitments in the post-war period, and fears for the survival of the republican ideals which ensured its support of the Union cause in the Civil War. The rampant commercialism the poet sees everywhere is crystallised in the concluding image:

Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage civility
slides by on grease.

Lowell's verse form in this poem is regular, in the sense that all the stanzas are quatrains, so this cannot be described as free verse, and both content and treatment are influenced by the tradition of the ode. The lines do not have an initial capital letter, and capitalisation follows the same conventions as prose. This had already become the 'default' mode of twentieth-century poetry by Lowell's time, so that the use of rhyme becomes unusual, initial capitalisation is discontinued, and the lines do not have the regular rhythms of metrical verse, meaning that line length and syllable count become variable, but stanzaic divisions are frequently retained. Also, a

preference becomes evident in this period for shorter lines, and a certain sparseness of diction, with simplicity of grammar, and a tendency towards what might be called 'phrasalism', that is, a liking for phrases rather than sentences as the basic building blocks of the poem. Often, though, there is an impression of tightness of control and precision of delineation, as if the fluent wordiness of a poet such as Lowell is no longer quite to be trusted.

Several of these characteristics are seen in a poem not unrelated in subject matter to Lowell's, which is the tribute by Rita Dove to the civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks, who in 1955, on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, thereby provoking the successful year-long Montgomery bus boycott, which became a key milestone in the growth of the civil rights movement:

Rosa

How she sat there,
the time right inside a place
so wrong it was ready.

That trim name with
its dream of a bench
to rest on. Her sensible coat.

Doing nothing was the doing:
the clean flame of her gaze
carved by a camera flash.

How she stood up
when they bent down to retrieve
her purse. That courtesy.

Because of its discipline and control, this kind of writing seems inappropriately described as 'free verse', for the rhythm is actually very marked: in the second and third lines, for instance, the antithesis between 'time' and 'place' and 'right' and 'wrong', and then 'wrong' and 'ready', is marked by strong contrastive stress, with the last pairing being further emphasised by alliteration. Likewise, the near minimalism of sentence phrases like 'Her sensible coat' and 'That courtesy' implicitly emphasises the directness of Parks's character – in later life she denied reports that she was particularly tired after

a day's work when the incident took place, saying 'The only tired I was, was tired of giving in'. Interestingly, Dove avoids the **odic** direct address, referring to Parks throughout the poem as 'she' not 'you'. This sparse kind of stanzaic form seems characteristic of a good deal of contemporary poetry.

Another frequent contemporary mode can be exemplified with a poem by Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch describing the unpacking (for a house move) of some pieces of Delftware, displaying that minute and intricate **ekphrastic** description of an art object which is so often found in contemporary poetry. This poem has something 'odic' in its character (to borrow a term from Lisa M. Steinman which designates something similar to my 'covert ode'), in the sense that it addresses the little pieces of pottery which are intricately described within it. The delicacy of the pieces means that they bear the marks of their own fragility and transience, with all that implies, about a relationship, for instance, so that covert elegiac notes may also be detected. Whatever implied emotions and regrets we might sense in the poem are displaced and refracted throughout its 16 lines, which seem to enter the world-in-miniature depicted on the pieces:

Delft

I promise when I pack up the clogs,
raise them to chime with one chipped toe
your passing; when I glue back a pleat
in the skirt of the lady with pale blue hair
whose apron said *B ugge* after she fell
down the stairwell revealing a bell
beneath her dress on which a windmill
was waving goodbye to four birds
reflected in the inky water; when I wrap
the cold tile where your butter flattened
the sheaves of hay combed to a tuft
in the still wind in which etched-in cows
stared out under the low clouds looming over
a walled garden whose gate I longed to
walk through always, the glaze will be wet
on all your Delft, on both my hands.

The covert elegiac note is introduced at the start: the phrase 'when I pack up the clogs' is a half-echo of the expression 'to pop one's

clogs', which means to die – to 'pop' meant to take something to the pawnbrokers, so if shoes were 'popped' the implication is that they are no longer needed. This note is reinforced with the word 'chime' in the second line, suggesting a funeral knell, and by 'your passing' in the third, which again has overtones of death (as in 'to pass away'). The female porcelain figurine with 'B[r]ugge' on her apron puns on the word 'Bugger!' (a British expression of annoyance), as 'Brugge' is the local name of the city of Bruges, where 'Delft' is also made, for this term became a generic designation for a particular style of pottery, just as the term 'china' came to designate not geographical origin, but a particular way of firing and glazing pottery, whatever its provenance. The remainder of the poem then details the antique, rural scenes depicted on this kind of pottery, presenting an innocent and nostalgic world that seems to be rooted in the imagery of decorative woodcuts and childhood picture books. The lady figurine in the spreading crinoline dress is actually a tiny, tinkling bell, the bell concealed beneath the dress, like an innocent and oddly transcended sexual appendage. Both the speaker's longing to pass through the gate into a walled garden beyond, as depicted on the butter dish, and the perpetually wet glaze and hands, suggest an inchoate sexual longing. In its condensed implicitness, then, the poem hints at many fundamental aspects of human life – including innocence, experience, fulfilment and bereavement – the lines being, as it were, impregnated with meanings at several different levels. This condensed, disciplined and yet metrically irregular type of line seems to be the characteristic form of one of the liveliest strains of contemporary poetry writing.