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“Certain Conditions of Form and Organization”: The Rules of Meter and Rhyme

The rule systems we are about to explore constitute the accessible part of poetry, Schlegel’s “conditions of form and organization.” They are accessible because they already exist in the minds of the poet and the listener/reader. They do not need to be discovered. This does not mean, of course, that children are born with these rules any more than children are born with the rules of English or whatever language is native to the child.

Rather, it means that metrical and rhyming phenomena are accounted for by rules that are natural to the brain. That is to say, the brain is hardwired to offer hypotheses about what the rules that account for metrical and rhyming behavior are, just as it is hardwired to formulate hypotheses about the rules that account for whatever language the child hears.

On the basis of preexisting hypotheses, then, the meter-and-rhyme learner formulates rules that account for metrical and rhyming behavior. Just as the rules of natural grammar enable a listener to determine whether or not a sentence is grammatical, these rules enable the listener to determine whether or not a given line is metrical and/or rhymes. Of course, the rules function differently for the poet and for the reader. For the poet, the rules are a filter that selects, from the infinite number of utterances of English, just those that qualify for some particular meter and rhyme scheme. For the reader, those same rules determine whether the lines in the poem indeed are metrical and rhyme.

This symbiosis between the poet and the listener is what I think of as producing a natural aesthetic. The reader finds a poem pleasing in part because the poet’s verse has been the occasion for the reader to exercise those rules. In this sense, reading/listening to poetry is in the same neck of the woods as doing a crossword puzzle or listening to a quiz program. It is a kind of problem-solving wherein finding the solution is a source of

pleasure. That's not the whole story, by any means, but it's an important part of the story. (I'll have more to say about this later.)

To see how this works, consider this sonnet by John Keats, probably written in 1816.

How Many Bards Gild the Lapses of Time

How many bards gild the lapses of time!
 A few of them have ever been the food
 Of my delighted fancy,—I could brood
 Over their beauties, earthly, or sublime:
 And often, when I sit me down to rhyme,
 These will in throngs before my mind intrude:
 But no confusion, no disturbance rude
 Do they occasion; 'tis a pleasing chime.
 So the unnumber'd sounds that evening store:
 The songs of birds—the whisp'ring of the leaves—
 The voice of waters—the great bell that heaves
 With solemn sound,—and thousand others more,
 That distance of recognizance bereaves,
 Make pleasing music, and not wild uproar.

The sonnet is about poetry done well and done badly. Line 1 condemns poets who wrap their poems in inept meter (“the lapses of time”). Line 5 talks of sitting down to “rhyme.” Keats likens the sound of good poetry to the pleasing albeit unmetrical (“unnumbered”) sounds of nature. He opposes both to the “wild uproar” of the poets who “gild the lapses of time.” The first line ends with the phrase “the lapses of time” while the last line ends with the phrase “wild uproar” that describes those lapses. The symmetry is not accidental.

The reason why this sonnet is important for our purposes is the first line. Although the content of the poem is all about comparing good metrical practice with bad metrical practice, the first line is unmetrical.

Here is a simplified set of rules shareable by the poet and the listener:¹

(1)

1. Definition of stress maximum:

A stressed syllable surrounded on both sides by a less-stressed syllable in the same syntactic constituent.

2. Metrical pattern for iambic pentameter:

W S W S W S W S W S

3. Constraint:

A stress maximum in the line must always correspond to an S position in the meter.

The notion of correspondence in (1.3) refers to mapping syllables onto metrical pattern positions. Each syllable must correspond to either a W or an S. Given that mapping, the initial (stressed) syllable of *lapses* in the phrase *the lapses of time* is problematic. It constitutes a stress maximum in accordance with (1.1). But it violates (1.3) because it corresponds to a forbidden metrical position for a stress maximum—namely, a W.

How many bards gild the *l*apses of time
 | | | | | | | | | |
 W SW S W SW SW S

Did Keats make a mistake? Highly doubtful. Whenever a theorist and a great poet are in conflict, it is unlikely that the poet is the one at fault. Perhaps the theory is wrong. But there is another possibility: both are right.

Keats is writing a poem about writing a poem. In the very first line, the one we are considering, he decries poets who make metrical gaffes. Yet here he is doing precisely that. A moment's introspection shows that that is just the point. The opening line is a metrical joke. The line exemplifies what it is about. But most importantly for this discussion, Keats could not have made his metrical joke unless the relevant metrical rules, in this instance those in (1) (or their counterpart in some other theory) were in the heads of his readers.

The opening of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" illustrates how the rules would scan the most regular form of an iambic pentameter line:

The *c*úrfew *t*ólls the *kn*éll of *p*árting *d*áy
 | | | | | | | | | | |
 W S W S W S W S W S

According to definition (1.1) the line contains the maximum number of stress maxima, four. (The last stressed word is not a stress maximum because it is not surrounded on both sides by a less-stressed syllable.)² And each stress maximum corresponds to an S position.

We have seen an unmetrical line from the Keats sonnet. We have seen a perfectly regular line from Gray's "Elegy." Now consider this line from Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It is significant because, in one sense, it is the most important line in the play. It occurs at the very pinnacle of the drama, when Lear finally accepts the reality that the daughter he is

carrying in his arms is dead and that her death is his fault. Overwhelmed with that heartbreaking realization, he too dies. Here is the line:

Never, never, never, never, never.
 | | | | | | | | | |
 W S W S W S W S W S

It is a remarkable line because it is as un-iambic a line as one can imagine. On the surface, it consists of five trochees in a row. A trochaic sequence is the mirror image of an iambic one, consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one (*fancy*) as opposed to an iamb (*delight*). And yet here we find it in a play written in iambic pentameter. How can we explain that? We could say that Shakespeare made a mistake. But, as with the line from Keats, that would be a dangerous move. If anyone were to have made a mistake, it would be the theorist, not one of the language's most brilliant versifiers. We could say that for the purposes of the play Shakespeare switched meters to trochaic pentameter. But that would be the only instance where he has done so. In any case, that would detract from Shakespeare's achievement.

Let's look at the rules again. The rules specify that if a line contains a stress maximum, then that stress maximum must correspond to an S position. The rules also define a stress maximum as a stressed syllable surrounded on both sides by less-stressed syllables in the same syntactic constituent. But there, as Shakespeare might have said, is the rub. Lear's dying line contains no stress maximum. It sounds like a trochaic line but it is iambic. Bringing the two meters into conflict matches the conflict the line represents. Every stressed syllable in the line is preceded either by silence (the first syllable) or by a syntactic break (indicated by a comma). It has five stresses well enough, but none of them qualify as a stress maximum. And the rules do not say that every line must contain a stress maximum—only that if there is one, it must correspond to an S position. Shakespeare's line is a brilliant bit of metrical maneuvering.³

The reason why I have presented this line here is that it shows how a master metricist can write lines that move to the very edge of acceptability but don't go beyond. Shakespeare's line is the very opposite of Gray's *The curfew tolls the knell of parting day*. Shakespeare has fit the meter to the occasion. We will see later on that in his Tenth Symphony, Gustav Mahler does exactly the same thing with the rules of tonal music.

Some version or other of the rules in (1) dominated English poetry from the time of Chaucer on. This is what H. T. Kirby-Smith (1998, 1) has to say about the verse tradition in English:

Among many American poets and scholars, in particular, the assumption is that such visionary gleams of free verse as may be found in past centuries are mere prefigurations that were finally fulfilled after 1900, or at best made possible an increased receptivity to the experiments of the Imagists early in this century. This is, on the whole, a correct view; at no time before this century had anything identifiable as free verse been a dominant mode for poetry.

From the perspective of this discussion, what made free verse “a dominant mode for poetry” was the abandonment of a shared set of rules such as those in (1).

There is another important attribute of metrical verse that reflects shared rules that were abandoned. In both Oton de Granson’s and Chaucer’s poetry, the lines rhyme. In fact, by the fourteenth century rhyme was well-entrenched in Middle English.

The origin of rhyme is not at all clear. Some have argued that it began uniquely in China and made its way west.⁴ Regarding the development of English rhyme, Michael McKie (1997, 821) points out:

Hence any account of the origins of rhyme in English verse has to explain the sporadic but slowly increasing use of rhyme in Old English verse over three centuries, with a single poem, around the middle of that period, that used far more rhyme than any other English poem of that time; the period of about a hundred and fifty years, from about 1050–1200, in which verse had both alliteration and rhyme; the transition, completed by the early fourteenth century, to a Romance syllabic prosody, at first in the couplet and subsequently in stanzaic verse, in which end-rhyme was obligatory.

“The single poem” that McKie mentions is the anonymously authored “Rhyming Poem” dating anywhere from the eighth to the tenth century. It uses rhyme and alliteration simultaneously. This is a remarkable poem, one of a kind from a metrical point of view, at least within the English tradition.⁵ Ruth Lehmann (1970, 437) begins her account of the poem as follows:

The *Riming Poem* ... of the *Exeter Book* is usually mentioned in treatments of Old English literature, but it is rarely given more than a page or two of discussion. In the first place, it stands alone in that it regularly rimes—abundantly rimes—and it also follows the regular alliterative pattern of other poems of the *Exeter Book*.

Because of the prominence of rhyme in English poetry and because it, like meter, depends on shared rules, it seems important to spend some time looking at it.

Let's begin with the rhyme scheme that a poem like *Beowulf* (circa eighth century) makes use of (as does the "Rhyming Poem"), namely, *alliteration*. Unlike the later "end rhyme" that dominated English verse from Chaucer on, this is a form of rhyme based on the identity of the initial segments of words. And, lest you feel a certain impatience with this excursus into Anglo-Saxon poetry, I assure you that what I am about to describe is, in fact, knowledge that you as an English speaker already have in your head and that I will force you to use before this excursus is over.

We start with the second line of *Beowulf*:

þeodcyninga,	þrym gefrunon,
Of those clan-kings	heard of their glory

The first sound of *þeodcyninga* (spelled here with the Anglo-Saxon character *þ*) is the same as the first sound of English *thin*. It is identical to the first sound of the first word of the second half line, *þrym*. It was via this kind of sound identity—this alliteration—that the vast majority of Anglo-Saxon poetry rhymed. This is the sort of thing that has led many critics to include the line

and the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain

from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" in their lists of the most memorable lines of English poetry.

Unfortunately, things are never as easy as they seem. Referring just to the "initial segment of a word" won't work in any definition of alliteration, as *uncertain* in "The Raven" and the following lines from *Beowulf* show:

24.		
lēode gelæsten		lofdædum sceal
liegemen loyal		with lauded deeds shall
47.		
þā gýt hīe him āsetton		segen gyldenre
then they set out for him		a golden standard

88.

þrāge geþolode,
he suffered bitterly

sē þe in þystrum bād,
he who in darkness dwelt

In the second word of line 24, *ge-* is a prefix followed by the primary stressed syllable *-læst-*.⁶ But it is the /l/ of *-læst-* that alliterates, not the /g/ of *ge-*.⁷ Similarly, in the fifth word of line 47, *a-* is a prefix followed by the primary stressed syllable *-sett-*. It is the /s/ that alliterates. The initial consonant cluster of the first word in line 88, *þrage*, is /þr/. It alliterates with the /þ/ of the second word, *geþolode*. It also alliterates with the /þ/ of the second word of the second half-line, *þe*, and of the fourth word of the second half-line, *þystrum*.

The pair *þrage* and *geþolode* show that the first consonant of a cluster preceding the primary stressed vowel is sufficient for purposes of alliteration. That is, remaining words that begin only with /þ/ and not /þr/ in the position before the primary stressed vowel will alliterate.

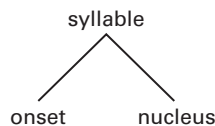
Now let's look at the "Rhyming Poem."⁸ Here is the first line:

Mē lifes onlāh
He gave me life

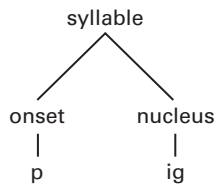
sē þis leoht onwrah.
who revealed the sun

Alliteration and end rhyme are both at play in the single form *onlāh* 'he gave'. The consonant preceding the primary stressed vowel establishes the alliterating segment. The primary stressed vowel and everything to its right constitutes the rhyme. In this sense, alliteration is the inverse (pun intended) of end rhyme. End rhyme requires the primary stressed vowel and everything to its right to be identical. Alliteration requires the initial segment of whatever cluster of segments precedes the primary stressed vowel to be identical. In other words, alliteration and rhyme require identity at opposite ends of the word.

To see more clearly what's going on, we need to understand something about syllable structure in English. The language game Pig Latin is helpful here. Let's start by assuming that English syllables are composed of two parts, an onset and a nucleus:



The word *pig* then has a structure like this:



That is, within a syllable the nucleus begins with the stressed vowel. The segments that precede the stressed vowel are the onset. Using this structure, we can state the rules of Pig Latin like this:

To change any word into its Pig Latin form

1. Add a new syllable to the end of the word.
2. Move the contents of the original onset into the new onset.
3. Put the sequence /ay/ in the new nucleus.

These rules change the syllable structure of the word *strobe* to its Pig Latin form *odestray*, as shown in figure 6.1. Referring to the onset allows us to explain why the whole cluster /str/ moves and not just a part of it, like /s/, /t/, or /tr/.⁹

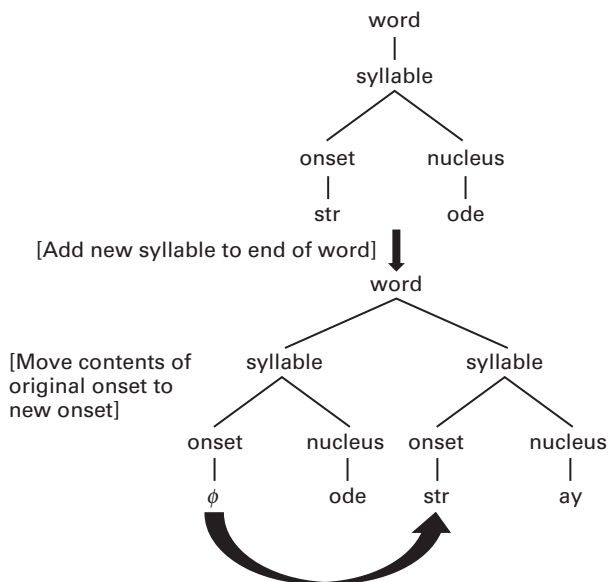


Figure 6.1

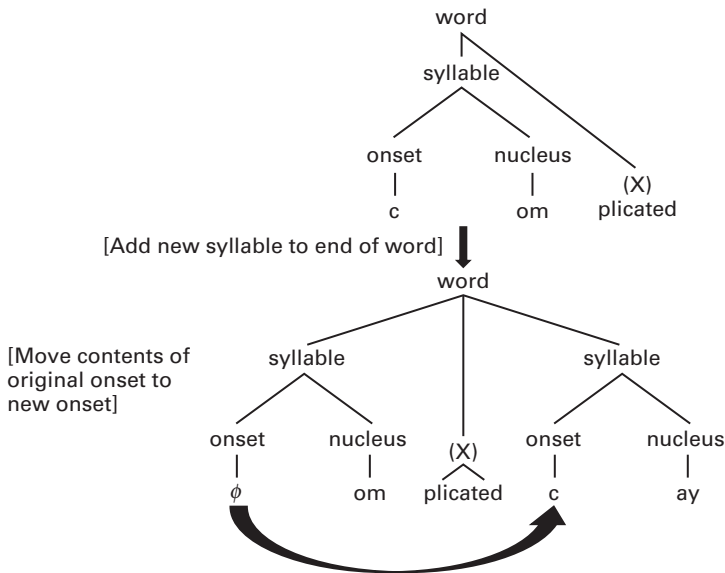


Figure 6.2

The rule is a bit more complicated since it has to work for longer words like *complicated* → *omplicated* + *cay*. To take such words into account, we need to insert a variable X after the first syllable in the syllable tree, where X stands for any number of segments including none. X does the trick since no matter how long a word might be, for Pig Latin it is only the first syllable that matters.¹⁰ The modified tree is shown in figure 6.2.

Armed with this conception of syllable structure, we can now state the rule of alliteration quite simply:

Alliteration: Two words alliterate when the initial element of the onset adjacent to the primary stressed vowel of one is identical to the initial element of the onset adjacent to the primary stressed vowel of the other.¹¹

Now let's look at end rhyme.¹² To begin with, every rhyming poem has a rhyme scheme that tells the reader which words must rhyme. Take Keats's sonnet, repeated here:

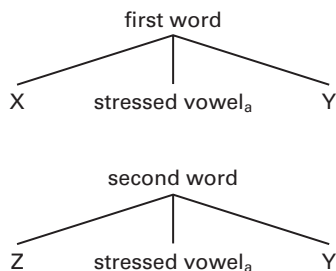
How Many Bards Gild the Lapses of Time

How many bards gild the lapses of time!	a
A few of them have ever been the food	b
Of my delighted fancy,—I could brood	b

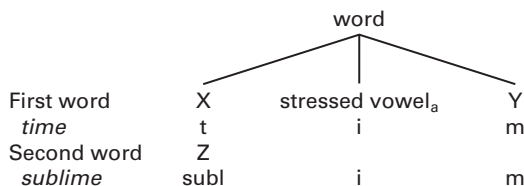
Over their beauties, earthly, or sublime: a
 And often, when I sit me down to rhyme, a
 These will in throngs before my mind intrude: b
 But no confusion, no disturbance rude b
 Do they occasion; 'tis a pleasing chime. a
 So the unnumber'd sounds that evening store: c
 The songs of birds—the whisp'ring of the leaves d
 The voice of waters—the great bell that heaves d
 With solemn sound,—and thousand others more, c
 That distance of recognizance bereaves, d
 Make pleasing music, and not wild uproar. c

The rhyme scheme in this poem is that of a typical Italian sonnet. The letters to the right specify the lines that must rhyme. That is to say, the word or syllable in the last S metrical position of a line must rhyme with its partner word or syllable in a like-lettered line. But what does it mean for two words to rhyme—say, *time* and *sublime* as in lines 1 and 4?

As it turns out, end rhyme is much easier to define than alliteration. We can say that two words rhyme if their stressed vowels and everything to the right of their stressed vowels are identical while everything else in the word is not. We can represent this relationship like this:



We can think of these as templates that you fit over the word. Let's return to *time* and *sublime*. In the “first word” template, X = /t/, stressed vowel = /i/, and Y = /m/. In the “second word” template, Z = /subl/, stressed vowel = /i/, and Y = /m/.¹³ The conditions are met: namely, the stressed vowel and everything to its right is identical in the two templates. Everything else (Z and X) is not—like so:



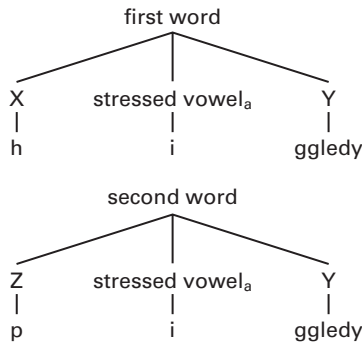
It is illustrative of Keats's metrical agility, I think, that the first line of the poem ends with the unmetrical sequence *the lapses of time* while the last line ends with the metrical sequence *wild uproar*, a metrically legitimate albeit complex commentary on its illegitimate partner.¹⁴

Up to now the identical part of the rhyming sequence—the stressed vowel and everything that follows it—has constituted a single syllable. That has been a consequence of the meter we have been focusing on. Choose another meter, and the stressed vowel can recede from the end of the line.

How far away from the end of a line can the stressed vowel be? It can be farther than a single syllable, as in this dactylic (SWW) dimeter couplet rhyming *higgledy* with *piggledy*:¹⁵

Here they come higgledy,
 S W W S WW
 There they go piggledy.
 S W W S WW

The templates for the pair *higgledy-piggledy* are these:



This rhyme shows that the sequence to the right of the stressed vowel can extend over several metrical positions, the only limitation being that in English, stressed vowels are generally no more than three syllables away from the end of the word. This isn't always true, however. For example, here is a well-formed trochaic couplet where the stressed vowel is four syllables away:

Those who seek the presidency
 S W S W SWS W
 Must have U.S. residency
 S W SW SWS W

What about in the other direction—that is, from the beginning of the word? English is much freer in that direction. Consider this familiar example:

supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!
 S W SWSWSWS WSWS W

Even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious
 S W S W S WSWS W S W S W

If you say it loud enough you'll always sound precocious
 S W S W S W S W S W S WS W

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!
 S W SW SWSWS WSWS W

The meter here is known as a fourteenner (seven repetitions of the unit S W).¹⁶ The rhyme scheme is a a a, and the rhyming templates are shown in figure 6.3.

The nonrhyming portion of the word goes all the way back to the beginning of the line, extending over twelve metrical positions.¹⁷

We can now see an important difference between end rhyme and alliteration: the latter requires reference to syllable structure. End rhyme only needs to know where the stressed vowel is. Then it divides the word into everything that precedes the stressed vowel and everything that follows it within the word, without reference to syllable structure.

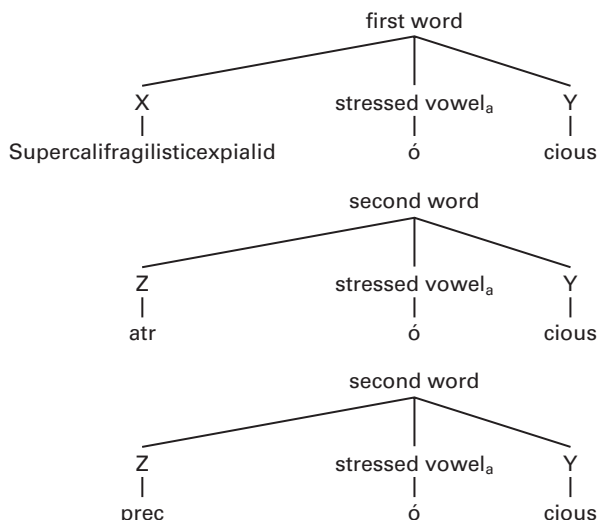


Figure 6.3

That onsets are not relevant to end rhyme is illustrated by the rhyming pair *collusion/illusion*. In this pair, the stressed vowels are identical and so are the following segment strings. However, the onset immediately preceding the stressed vowel in the two cases is also identical—that is, /l/. What triggers rhyme in this pair is the nonidentity of the string to the left of the stressed vowel. Any theory of rhyme based on the content of the onset to the left of the primary stressed vowel would run up against this problem of identity of the onsets.¹⁸

A major thesis of this book has been that the rules of the sister art forms are shared by artist and audience in just the same way that the rules of a natural language are shared between speaker and hearer. So far, we have looked at two processes relating to poetic rhyme, alliteration and end rhyme. Now consider an example that has nothing to do with poetry, namely, the following headline from *Slate* magazine (January 8, 2019, 5:07 p.m.):

Manafort Filing Suggests Mueller Has Evidence of Something That Starts With C and Rhymes With *Schmollusion*

The headline writer must have assumed that *Slate* readers know the English construction that gives rise to the rhyming puzzle, because the answer to the puzzle is the point of the headline.

So what is going on here? English has a rule that creates rhymes with a special semantic import. The rule takes a word and duplicates it. Then it changes the phonological content of the duplicate. As a result, the two words now rhyme. This convoluted process is intended to convey denigration, most likely because the duplicate comes out sounding like a comical Yiddish mispronunciation of the offending word. Here is the process at work in an imaginary conversation:

First speaker: What's wrong with you?

Second speaker: Why?

First speaker: You don't look happy.

Second speaker: Happy. Schmappy. Who needs happy?

Using the tools we have already developed, we can describe what has happened in two easy steps:

1. Duplicate the offending word.
2. Replace the duplicate's initial onset with /shm/.¹⁹

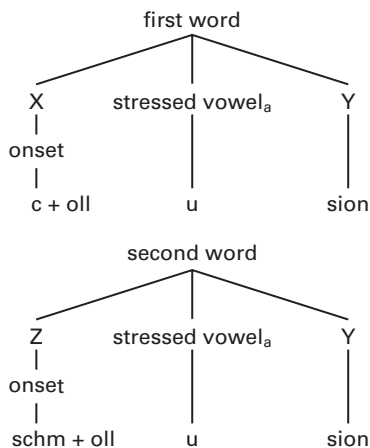


Figure 6.4

Let's run the headline through this grinder, only backward. We start with *Schmollusion*. We know the rule. So we remove the sequence /shm/ from the initial onset, leaving the incomplete word [onset] + *ollusion*. The headline writer has given us clues: the mystery word rhymes with *Schmollusion* and starts with the sound /k/ (spelled *c*). We place *c* in the now empty onset. Lo and behold: *collusion*:*Schmollusion*. Does it rhyme? We apply the two-word template (see figure 6.4). The template fits. The words rhyme. The headline suggests that Mueller has evidence of collusion.

The construction may have an Eastern European origin and it may be over 400 years old. The account given here is a pale shadow of the phenomenon in all of its creative linguistic complexity. For that, you should consult Nevins and Vaux 2003. The account will suffice, however, since the main point is to demonstrate the essence of the phenomenon and to establish that it is part of our knowledge of English and not some kind of special add-on. This is certainly Nevins and Vaux's view, as they note in their conclusion (p. 721):

We have shown, through our survey, that speakers have clear and consistent linguistic intuitions, suggesting that shm-reduplication is computed in the grammar, and that the systematic responses of speakers to these forms show that this is not a metalinguistic phenomenon to be dismissed, and that the notion of metalinguistic is vacuous here, as speakers' strategies still manipulate phonological objects.

Understanding the headline means, therefore, that our internalized knowledge of English includes the same processes that give rise to rhyme and alliteration in poetry. In other words, this example is precisely like the *lapses of time* example from Keats. We couldn't possibly get it if we didn't share the same rules as the headline writer. Furthermore, the /shm/ rule shows the symbiotic nature of rules of verse formation and rules of natural language.²⁰ Indeed, this rule is an incorporation into natural language of a verse-based rule—it creates a rhyme—just as the metrical grid appears to be a shared function between stress placement in English and beat construction in music (see chapter 7).

In the poetic processes we have examined—rhyme, alliteration, and meter—stressed vowels and onsets have been critical. Alliteration makes use of both. Rhyme and meter make use of stress.²¹ It is striking how often stress plays a role. It is critical for alliteration. It is critical for rhyme. It is critical for meter, and, of course, it is an intrinsic part of every word in the English dictionary. Indeed, stress also seems to be tied into our motor system. Try pounding your fist into the palm of your hand to emphasize the word *fantastic*. Your fist will strike your palm just as you pronounce the primary stressed syllable. Now try to say *fantastic* while timing your fist to strike your palm as you pronounce any other syllable. That is hard to do and when you do it, it feels unnatural. And, of course, there is metrical verse itself, which, as we have seen, depends crucially on the strong stresses in a word or syllable. It is not surprising that poets make use of this prominent property in constructing a metrical poem. Its prominence carries with it the expectation that the listener will be able to access it to determine the metricality of a given line.

McKie (1997, 821) notes that by the early fourteenth century, “a Romance syllabic prosody, at first in the couplet and subsequently in stanzaic verse, in which end-rhyme was obligatory” had taken firm root. From then on and for the next 800 years, end-rhyming metrical verse reigned supreme in English verse, but not exclusively. When he wrote *Paradise Lost*, John Milton dropped the obligatory requirement for end rhyme. But he also felt that he had to justify doing so. This is what he wrote in the introduction to his first edition:

The Measure is *English* Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of *Homer* in Greek, and *Virgil* in Latin; Rhime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of

a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter; grac't indeed since by the use of some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom, but much to thir own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse then else they would have exprest them. Not without cause therefore some both *Italian*, and *Spanish* Poets of prime note have rejected Rhime both in longer and shorter Works, as have also long since our best *English* Tragedies, as a thing of itself, to all judicious ears, triveal, and of no true musical delight; which consists onely in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoyded by the learned Ancients both in Poetry and all good Oratory. This neglect then of Rhime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteem'd an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover'd to heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing.

Milton's apologia underscores an important asymmetry. You can have a metrical line without rhyme. You can even have rhyme without meter.²² But a rigid rhyme scheme requires metrical lines. This suggests a certain topography of verse.²³

Suppose we say that the basic unit of any meter is the line. Then we can think of meter as a way of defining the length of a line by organizing it into smaller repeating units. We can think of rhyme as a way of enhancing the line end. That would give us a three-layered structure of sorts:

(2)

1. The line: The basic unit of poetry
2. Meter: Division of the line into metrical units
3. Rhyme: An enhancing constraint on metrical units, the so-called rhyme scheme (pace Milton)

There is a subtlety in (2) that needs some attention. (2.3) says that scannable lines can be enhanced by rhyme schemes. This does not mean that unscannable lines cannot rhyme. William Butler Yeats's "Broken Dreams" is a case in point.²⁴

While "Broken Dreams" is not metrical, it does rhyme. The first 13 lines show a rhyming pattern of sorts:

There is grey in your hair.	a
Young men no longer suddenly catch their breath	b
When you are passing;	c
But maybe some old gaffer mutters a blessing	c ²⁵
Because it was your prayer	a

Recovered him upon the bed of death.	b
For your sole sake—that all heart's ache have known,	d
And given to others all heart's ache	e
From meagre girlhood's putting on	d
Burdensome beauty—for your sole sake	e
Heaven has put away the stroke of her doom	f
So great her portion in that peace you make	e
By merely walking in a room.	f

Up to this point, every line-final word has a rhyme somewhere else within the first 13 lines, although the pattern hardly qualifies as a rhyme scheme like that of Keats's Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet "How Many Bards Gild the Lapses of Time." As the poem continues, the pattern disintegrates:

Your beauty can but leave among us	g
Vague memories, nothing but memories.	h
A young man when the old men are done talking	i
Will say to an old man, "Tell me of that lady	j
The poet stubborn with his passion sang us	g
When age might well have chilled his blood."	k

At this point, *us:us* hardly deserves to be called a rhyme, even an identical one. The disintegration of the earlier ragged rhyme scheme is explained in the final three lines:

From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged
 In rambling talk with an image of air:
 Vague memories, nothing but memories.

Yeats says explicitly that the rhyme scheme is rambling. In fact, the imposition of a precise rhyme scheme would undercut the poem's atmospheric, vague memories imprecisely recalled.

That is what (2.3) is meant to capture. Rhyme schemes are properties of metrical verse. To put it differently, there is a difference between rhyming and rhyme schemes. Only the latter appear in metrical verse.

The levels of (2) can be used to characterize English verse practice from the early fourteenth century up to the twentieth century. For example, (2) in its entirety characterizes the poetry exemplified by Keats's sonnet. The vast majority of English verse is of this sort. However, if you eliminate (2.3), you have blank verse as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
 Of that Forbidden tree whose mortal taste
 Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
 With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
 Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
 Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
 That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
 In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
 Rose out of *Chaos*: or if *Sion Hill*
 Delight thee more, and *Siloa's* brook that flow'd
 Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' *Aonian* Mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.

Each line is in iambic pentameter, but none of the lines rhyme, the final line of the above passage notwithstanding. Unlike Chaucer, Milton clearly saw rhyme as a bothersome constraint in a poem as long as *Paradise Lost*. So, he treated it much the way he treated divorce. When he wanted a divorce, at a time when divorce was beyond the pale, he wrote a treatise justifying it.²⁶ Then he got one. By the same token, when he wanted to write a long poem in blank verse, he wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then he wrote an introduction trashing rhyme.

Had he gone one step further and eliminated (2.2), he would have anticipated Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound by several centuries.

In 1915 Pound began—but never finished—one of the major poems of the new versification, his *Cantos*. His only metrical unit was the line itself. He had succeeded in eliminating metricality and, a fortiori, systematic rhyme schemes. These are lines 48–58 at the beginning of his Canto 81 in which he declares pentameter verse bankrupt:

“You will find” said old André Spire,
 that every man on that board (Crédit Agricole)
 has a brother-in-law
 “You the one, I the few”
 said John Adams
 speaking of fears in the abstract
 to his volatile friend Mr. Jefferson.
 (To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)
 or as Jo Bard says: they never speak to each other,
 if it is baker and concierge visibly
 it is La Rouchefoucauld and de Maintenon audibly.

The eighth line notwithstanding, toward the end of the canto there is a chant section skillfully written in perfect iambic pentameter, something that Pound wanted to break a hundred lines or so earlier. He is like Baudelaire, who argued in 1859 for the necessity of rules and three years later longed for their destruction, although Pound went back on himself in the space of just seventy lines. The usual interpretation of Pound's switch into meter is that it signals a switch in tone. Anthony Woodward (1980, 91) puts it this way:

The artful rhetoric, and then the sudden change of tone, have the effect of establishing a remoteness from the religious wholeness craved. So too a hint of distance and loss is the silent companion of the exquisitely moulded cadences of this slightly later section of Canto 81.

The switch from what Woodward (p. 89) calls “so fluid a poetic medium” is, of course, noticeable. It is like walking from cobblestones onto a putting green. But suppose the section before the “moulded cadences” were written like this:

“You will find” said old André Spire, that every man on that board (Crédit Agricole) has a brother-in-law. “You the one, I the few” said John Adams speaking of fears in the abstract to his volatile friend Mr. Jefferson. (To break the pentameter, that was the first heave) or as Jo Bard says: they never speak to each other, if it is baker and concierge visibly it is La Rouchefoucauld and de Maintenon audibly.

This version of the canto drops (2.1), the last vestige of a verse form. Had Pound, having already abandoned (2.2) and (2.3), jettisoned (2.1) as well, he would have left poetry behind and entered the realm of prose. As Jeremy Bentham put it, “Prose is when all the lines except the last go on to the end. Poetry is when some of them fall short of it.” Would it make any difference to the listener if the earlier portion of the canto were laid out as prose and the later (iambic pentameter) portion as verse? I think the answer has to be no. It is only in the reading on the page itself that the difference is perceived.

Listening to metrical verse, one can tell when a line ends because of the shared rules. Rhyme is an important signal as well. But even in unrhymed metrical verse, one can tell where the line ends if one has internalized the metrical rules. That is not the case with free verse. There are no rules that govern line length. The line ends where the poet chooses to insert a line break; there is no generalized set of rules comparable to those for metrical verse that can account for where the line breaks fall. Consequently,

when one listens to free verse, there is no way to tell that one line has ended and another has begun. Think of Jorie Graham’s “San Sepolcro” once again. Laid out as prose, the first sentence looks like this:

In this blue light I can take you there, snow having made me a world of bone
seen through to.

Reading the poem read aloud from the page as Graham laid it out and reading it aloud from a text laid out according to Bentham’s dictum would be indistinguishable. If a performer were to introduce some sort of pause or prosodic marker to indicate where the lines end on the printed page, the poem would surely sound stilted and artificial.

This is also true of metrical verse where line lengths vary. An example is the opening seven lines of T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”:

April is the cruellest month, breeding	9
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing	9
Memory and desire, stirring	8
Dull roots with spring rain.	5
Winter kept us warm, covering	8
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding	8
A little life with dried tubers.	8

Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle (2008, 90–91) scan these lines as loose iambic pentameter, a term used by Robert Frost, who held that in English there are really only two kinds of meter, strict and loose iambic. The point is that in “The Waste Land,” line lengths vary from dimeter to pentameter. Consequently, with eyes closed the listener cannot tell where one poetic line ends and the next begins; the repetition of line-ending participles in the first six lines is a crutch that quickly disappears. Eliot’s metrical practice constitutes a halfway house on the journey from Chaucer to poets like William Carlos Williams and Jorie Graham.

The history of English verse from Chaucer through Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to Ezra Pound’s *The Pisan Cantos*, then, is basically a history of shedding shared constraints that end with free verse, essentially a visual meter as opposed to a metrical one.

This has not gone unnoticed. H. T. Kirby-Smith (1998, 211) writes:

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, the truth is that for much published poetry its appearance on the page does matter—that in fact visual arrangement may be more important than any recurrent patterns that appeal to the ear.²⁷

The centuries-long process of shedding aural constraints ended when modernism consigned much of poetry to how it looked on the page. There is a parallel between this and painting's shift of attention away from mimesis toward how its materials—brushstroke, pigment, canvas—appear on a flat surface. In both instances, the look of the medium became an important if not dominating factor.

The shift of poetry away from rhyme and meter raises a question about the location of these two rule systems in the brain. One might think—given our present knowledge of neural circuitry and the abstract representation of rule systems—that very little light could be shed on this question. As it happens, that is not so, thanks to research with a woman known as Chelsea undertaken by Susan Curtiss and her colleagues (2013).

Chelsea was born profoundly hearing-impaired. Her inability to hear was not appreciated until she reached the age of 32. Curtiss's primary interest was to determine Chelsea's grammatical capability and compare it with other cognitive functions, such as her ability to count. Chelsea turned out to have no grammatical functioning at all. Although she could remember words—she had a 50-word lexicon when Curtiss encountered her and that number increased over time—grammatical constructions eluded her completely.

On the other hand, as it turned out, Chelsea's arithmetic functioning was quite serviceable (Curtiss 2013, 77). She could add, subtract, multiply, and divide. She could balance a checkbook, make change in a store or restaurant, and tell time. She did all of this without the aid of grammar. This points strongly to a dissociation between the grammatical and arithmetic functions in the brain. That is to say, they are separate and distinct cognitive functions. Other work by Curtiss and her colleagues supports this conclusion (see Grinstead et al. 1998; Curtiss 2014).

Now comes, from the point of view of this book, an unexpected implication of Curtiss and her colleagues' work. Recall our templates and conditions that determine whether two words rhyme. Together these represent a cognitive function of the brain, a small one of course, but a real one nonetheless. Somewhere in that mental wetware is the instantiation of the rhyming templates.

And indeed, in the course of her work, Curtiss found that Chelsea also had the ability to tell when two monosyllabic words rhyme.²⁸ This is a remarkable discovery because, by parity of reasoning, it suggests that the

phonological component of our ability to speak is, like arithmetic, dissociated from the grammatical function. In other words, the phonological component of the grammatical function of the brain must be an add-on, something that was added on to the grammar, most probably as a way of enabling *Homo sapiens* to externalize the products of the grammatical function by linearizing it.

One might even think of phonology as akin to numerical synesthesia, the sensation of experiencing an association between a given number shape and color—for example, perceiving 1 as red, 2 as yellow, and so forth. V. S. Ramachandran (2004) suggests that numerical synesthesia, a phenomenon that occurs in one out of every 200 people, is the result of the physical proximity in the brain of the areas dedicated to recognizing number shapes and color. Because of this neural proximity, dendritic leakage between the two primary function areas might be expected to take place, producing an emergent property: numerical synesthesia.

One can imagine that phonology followed the same route. It arose as a separate function in the brain for whatever reason, but its proximity to the grammatical function gave rise to the emergent property of being able to linearize the productions of the grammatical function by means of the vocal tract. From the point of view of natural selection, the benefit is obvious. Without phonology, the only way to communicate meaning would be by signing. In other words, the first language was probably some sort of sign language. Once the possibility of vocalization emerged, it would have a definite selectional advantage. One could now communicate in the dark.

I have suggested that rhyme exploited the phonological function to adorn metrical verse, very likely as a way of enhancing the end of a metrical line. But what about meter? The stress maximum defined in (1) makes use of syntactic constituent structure. It does so because of lines like Shakespeare's *Never, never, never, never, never*. The reference to syntax in that definition entails that meter, unlike rhyme, is not dissociated from the grammatical function.

This might not be the case, however. To begin with, *Never, never, never, never, never* contains no syntactic structure. Rather, it consists of items in a series, like a telephone number or the alphabet.²⁹ If there were some way to eliminate reference to syntactic structure in the metrical assignment rule, then it might be possible to relegate both rhyme and meter to

the phonological component alone. In fact, Hayes (1989, 224) makes precisely this startling and attractive claim:

I would like to suggest that metrical rules NEVER refer to syntactic bracketing, only to prosodic bracketing. In other words, syntax has effects in metrics only insofar as it determines the phrasings of the Prosodic Hierarchy. This claim is the metrical counterpart of Selkirk's (1981) contention that syntactic effects in phonology are limited to the determination of phrasing. Intuitively, the hypothesis states that meter is essentially a phonological phenomenon; thus we might call it the Hypothesis of Phonological Metrics.

Given Chelsea's ability to discern whether two words rhyme, Hayes's theoretical insight allows us to draw a tight connection between meter and rhyme by locating both processes in the phonological component. It also allows us to put in a grammatical light the difference between traditional English verse and free verse.

When free verse abandoned the phonological component as a source of poetic constraint, it abandoned poetry as an aural art form. But so as not to throw out the baby with the bath water, a substitute for rhyme and meter had to be found in order to preserve the notion of a poetic form. Without a constraint of some sort, there would be no genre, just straight prose. The simplest property that the grammatical component had to offer was the line break.

In a sense, this was the weakest possible constraint. The poet could end a line almost anywhere. For example, on two occasions in "San Sepolcro," Jorie Graham inserts the break in the middle of a compound noun; between *assembly* and *line* in the compound [assémby lîne] (lines 29–30) and between *air* and *market* in the compound [ópen-air màrket] (lines 31–32). She shows a propensity to otherwise end lines with prepositional phrases, roughly 30% of the time in "San Sepolcro."

In practice, however, poets have placed line breaks virtually anywhere, as e. e. cummings's poem "Old Age Sticks" illustrates:

old age sticks
up Keep
Off
signs)&

youth yanks them
down(old
age
cries No

Tres)&(pas)
 youth laughs
 (sing
 old age

 scolds Forbid
 den Stop
 Must
 n't Don't

 &)youth goes
 right on
 gr
 owing old

Notice that this poem demands that it be read on the page rather than be recited. The effect of the ampersands would be completely lost if the poem were read aloud. Would you read the line “old age sticks/up Keep/ Off signs) *ampersand* /youth yanks them/down”? Furthermore, the line break after the onset of *growing*—namely, /gr-/—is nonexistent in recitation. Its effect would be totally lost.

Although the poem employs a variety of line breaks in unexpected places, there are limits, however weak. The break after *Forbid* is both morphemic and syllabic: *forbid + en*. The same is true of *must + n't*. These examples drive home the point that free verse is essentially visual verse. There is no way one could sensibly put a pause inside *forbidden*, *mustn't*, or *growing*.

That said, one would never expect to find a line break after the *g* in *age*, where there is no constituent boundary at all, phonemic or morphemic, the letter *e* being a spelling convention. But who knows? The constraint is, as Frost said, like playing tennis without a net. Actually, it is even stranger.

What kind of art form “Old Age Sticks” is depends on how you come upon it. If you read it on the printed page, it is a poem. All those line breaks are laid out clearly, for you to see. (Remember *gr/owing*.) If you listen to it, it is prose. (Now it is *growing*.) I can't think of another art form that changes genre depending upon which sense perceives it.

At this point, it might be useful to suggest why poetry existed for such a long time before jettisoning the phonological component as a source of poetic form. A reasonable place to start is the pleasure that derives from an aesthetic experience. What does that mean? Thomas Bever (1986,

325) describes the aesthetic experience in a way reminiscent of a drug experience, only without the drug:

The emotional force of problem solving is interesting in its own right. This discussion so far has presupposed that it is a basic property of human cognition to get a thrill from solving a problem. ... From that standpoint, what is important is that the first intuition that a problem is solved evokes a burst of pleasurable energy. Whatever its source, we know this to be true.

If art is as an activity that engages the natural aesthetic, then reading, looking at, or listening to a work of art might well be akin to problem-solving.³⁰ For example, V. S. Ramachandran (2004, 51) writes:

[T]he wiring of your visual centers to your emotional centers ensures that the very act of searching for the solution [to what it is you are looking at] is pleasing, just as struggling with a jigsaw puzzle is pleasing long before the final “a-ha.” Once again it is about generating as many “a-has” in your brain as possible. Art may be thought of as a form of visual foreplay before the climax.

This is a widely shared view among neuroaestheticians. Anjan Chatterjee (2014, 106) puts it this way:

We experience pleasure when we figure things out, an effect that the developmental psychologist Allison Gopnick fancifully called “explanation as orgasm” (cf. Gopnick 1998). Babies purse their lips and wrinkle their brows when presented with problems that are confusing. When they figure out the answer, they smile and look radiant. ... So we have this reverberating cycle of pleasure helping us learn and what we have learned giving us pleasure. These cognitive pleasures may be the reason we experience pleasure with some conceptual art. Figuring out what they mean tickles our reward systems.

Eric Kandel (2012, 393) puts it this way:

Art is an inherently pleasurable and instructive attempt by the artist and the beholder to communicate and share with each other the creative process that characterizes the human brain—a process that leads to an Aha! moment, the sudden recognition that we have seen into another person’s mind, and that allows us to see the truth underlying both the beauty and the ugliness depicted by the artist.

I hope you will indulge me if I describe a personal experience that perfectly captures what Kandel writes about. During the years 2013–14, up until a spinal cord injury made it impossible, my morning exercise consisted of a walk from my home to Harvard University, roughly a mile away. I listened to audiobooks on these walks. I would sit at a small outdoor table just behind the new law school, sipping coffee and enjoying whatever book was on my mobile phone. On one such outing, I was



Figure 6.5

listening to Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* while I gazed idly at a nearby sculpture by the renowned American sculptor John Safer (see figure 6.5).

Although I had sat next to this sculpture day after day for several months, I never saw it as anything other than three abstract shapes—blobs, if you will. This particular morning, out of the blue, I realized that the upward-arching forward edge of the blob on the right resembled a medieval executioner's ax. Suddenly, the entire sculpture snapped into focus. The middle shape was an executioner's block; the shape to the left, an executioner's masking headgear. That was an *aha* moment if ever there was one. The sculpture had been a problem and I had solved it to my immense pleasure. My excitement was palpable. Only then did I think to see if the sculpture was titled. Indeed, it was. On one corner of the platform, a plaque bore the word *Judgment*.

For a time I was like the Ancient Mariner, "who stoppeth one of three." I would ask passersby if they had ever lingered long enough to actually look at that sculpture. One woman, who worked in a nearby building, told me she had passed it for 11 years. She had no idea what it was. She

was delighted to know. I did that on several occasions until I realized that maybe I was becoming a nuisance. That was the measure of my joy at having solved the problem of *Judgment*.³¹

This way of putting things of course raises a question: What is the mental representation of the problem that is being solved? My claim is that, for mimetic art, it is the mental representation assembled from the outputs of various areas of the brain—specifically, the fusiform gyrus and the parahippocampal and extrastriate body areas (among others, of course)—upon exposure to a painting. Assembling an appropriate mental representation constitutes solving a problem, rather like building a car out of Lego pieces. This act of construction is what Bever, Chatterjee, and Ramachandran think of as pleasing. Ramachandran (2004, 59) puts it this way:

The solution to the problem of aesthetics, I believe, lies in a more thorough understanding of the connections between the thirty visual centers in the brain and the emotional limbic structures (and of the internal logic and evolutionary rationale that drives them). Once we have achieved a clear understanding of these connections, we will be closer to bridging the huge gulf that separates C. P. Snow's two cultures—science on the one hand and arts, philosophy and humanities on the other.

To take another example, the pleasure one derives from listening to or reading metrical verse in part involves the inherent challenge for the listener/reader to determine whether the poet has obeyed the rules in constructing the lines. The challenge for the poet is to obey the rules in composing the lines. In each case, a problem is posed and aesthetic pleasure comes from its solution.

I have suggested that rhyme within a rhyme scheme is a property of metrical verse; in other words, no meter, no rhyme scheme. Meter and rhyme offer the same opportunities for problem-solving. We have seen the rules/templates that determine whether or not two sequences rhyme. The delight, presumably, comes in making a determination with the use of those templates. In the work of poets like Dr. Seuss and Edgar Allan Poe, rhyme offers an abundance of opportunities for problem-solving, and the delight comes in the novel ways in which poets have chosen to rhyme.

Green Eggs and Ham

Do you like green eggs and ham?

I do not like them, Sam-I-am.
I do not like green eggs and ham!

The Raven

“Surely,” said I, “surely *that is* something at my window *lattice*;
Let me see, then, what *thereat is*, and this mystery explore—

Dropping meter and rhyme leaves only the line ending. But the line ending offers no occasion for problem-solving. It is where the carriage happens to return. The reader can ponder, Why there? But there will be no shared rule system to help find the answer.

Because free verse *qua* verse is a visual art form, as opposed to metrical verse, the opportunities it affords for problem-solving now rest almost entirely on the poem’s meaning—and, as we have seen, unlike meter and rhyme, meaning can be frustratingly private. From this perspective, it is clear where the source of Robert Frost’s contempt for free verse lies.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/11966.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11966.001.0001)

The Mental Life of Modernism

Why Poetry, Painting, and Music Changed at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

By: Samuel Jay Keyser

Citation:

The Mental Life of Modernism: Why Poetry, Painting, and Music Changed at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/11966.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262356947

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2020



The MIT Press

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The open access version of this book is made possible due to generous funding from MIT Libraries.

This book was set in Sabon by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Keyser, Samuel Jay, 1935- author.

Title: The mental life of modernism : why poetry, painting, and music changed at the turn of the twentieth century / Samuel Jay Keyser.

Description: Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019015777 | ISBN 9780262043496 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Arts—Psychology. | Communication in art. | Modernism (Art) | Modernism (Literature) | Modernism (Music)

Classification: LCC NX165 .K45 2019 | DDC 700.1/9—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019015777>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1