

THE
SACRED LIFE
OF WORDS

A Guide for Christian Writers

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MORNING STAR PUBLISHING

Published by Morning Star Publishing
An imprint of Bible Society Australia
GPO Box 4161
Sydney NSW 2001
Australia

ISBN 9780647530481

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All citations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), unless otherwise indicated.

Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available from the National Library of Australia <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/>.

This edition first published in 2020

Typesetting by John Healy

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PREFACE

This is a book about writing. It is a book about writing creatively. It is a book for those wanting to learn the writer's craft. It is a book for those seeking to improve their craft. There are hundreds of books out there that do all of these things quite well. So why this book? How is it different from the others? I would like to believe it is better organised, easier to understand and more practical than those other books. The reality is that it is probably not. What is different about this book is that it approaches the topic of the writer's craft from a distinctively Christian perspective and takes its examples largely from the world of Christian literature and publishing.

This book has its origins in a course of lectures developed over several years of teaching creative writing at a Christian tertiary institution. Much of my own writing, both fiction and non-fiction, falls under the broad category of Christian literature, and my editorial experience has also been with religious presses. So it made sense to incorporate the special concerns of the Christian writer in a book that began as a simple introduction to the basic skills of creative writing. This book is especially written for those writing for a Christian market, as well as those seeking to write consciously as people of faith for the mainstream market. The basics of writing poetry and prose are covered, but the topics addressed also include faith writing, the influence of the literature of the Bible, writing biblical historical fiction, writing religious poetry and publishing within a Christian market.

Finally, this book is more than a 'how to' book of writing. It is a celebration of words and wordsmiths. It is a celebration of the gifts of writing and creativity. It is a celebration of the Creative Word, in whose image we are both made and re-made. It is a book about the sacred life of words and those who craft them.

INTRODUCTION:

Creativity, Writing and the Christian Context

'It is incredible that a row of black marks on white paper can stir us to anger, shake us with laughter, or cause tears to tremble on our eyelids. Such is the power of written words.'

– Colin Thiele¹

What is creative writing?

All writing is creative. Anytime we put pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard, we are creating a new piece of written communication, whether it be a memo, minutes of a meeting, academic report, letter to a friend or the beginning of that long-anticipated novel. But when we speak of creative writing we usually have in mind particular kinds of writing, namely poetry and prose fiction. These are the forms of writing people read primarily for enjoyment. The exact dividing lines, however, may be blurred. Where, for instance, is the boundary between well-researched historical fiction and the creative re-telling of history? And what of so-called creative non-fiction?

Poetry is always considered creative writing – even the epic portrayals of historical events. If we write a romantic letter or tell of an historical event and put our words into verse, we have chosen to craft our words in a form that is aesthetically pleasing rather than a form that provides the most straightforward way of conveying information.

In the case of prose it is not the form but rather the subject matter that places a piece within the category of creative writing. Fiction, of whatever length and genre, is written to do more than simply communicate. Such writings are meant to amuse, arouse, entertain – perhaps even sadden or enrage – through the narration of a story or event, or the description of some person or thing that is, at least in part, the creation of the writer. Dr Seuss' *Cat in the Hat*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the short

¹ Colin Thiele, 'Poetry and the Magic of Words' in *Word Magic. Poetry as a Shared Adventure*, ed. Walter McVitty (Rozelle, NSW: PETA, 1985), 1.

stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the allegorical *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen are all examples of creative writing. The New Testament Gospels, C. S. Lewis' book *Miracles*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and this book on writing are not.

Creative writing in the Christian context

Whether such a thing as 'Creative Christian Writing' exists depends largely on how the terms are defined. Authors with a commitment to the Christian tradition do not write creatively any differently to the atheist, the Buddhist or the Muslim. The technique, the struggles, the overall process, are not distinct. It would be expected, however, that a Christian who is also a writer will be influenced by their faith commitment, at the very least at the subconscious level. In this sense, whatever style, genre or theme a writer takes up, the concept of a 'Christian writer' would refer to the personal faith of the writer and not the specific content of their writing. We might also understand 'Creative Christian Writing' as the writing of creative literature that is explicitly Christian in content. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the whole explosion of Christian romance, sci-fi and historical fiction now appearing in Christian bookstores are examples of this category.

In this book, we will discuss the ways in which a commitment to Christ affects the themes and style of our writing, both consciously and subconsciously. This book is not specifically about how to write Christian fiction or Christian poetry, though those topics will also be covered. At its heart, it is simply a book about how to write. But it assumes that those who have a personal faith in Christ can and should integrate this commitment into their writing.

The creative impulse

As people created in God's image we should not be surprised at the human capacity for creativity and imagination. Every culture, ancient and modern, has had its storytellers. Elaborate epic tales were told around campfire and hearth, using mnemonic devices that eventually became incorporated into written poetry. As cultures developed written language, the oral storyteller became the writer. The oldest stories in

most cultures are generally poetic in form and reflect the epic oral tales that were put down into writing. These include the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Assyrian, 20th century BCE), The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Greek, 8th century BCE), Virgil's *Aenid* (Latin, 1st century BCE), *Beowulf* (Old English, 9th century), the *Shahnameh* (Persian, 11th century), *The Saga of Grettir* (Icelandic, 13th century) and the *Nibelungenlied* (German, 13th century).

Wherever people went and thrived, the impulse to create stories for entertainment and edification has been present. But from where does this desire to create and write come? From the Christian perspective we would answer that it is part of the manifestation of being made in the image of a creative God. The desire to create, whether in the visual or literary arts or some other form, and the ability to appreciate that which has been created (good painting, good cinema, good writing) is inherent in all human beings. For those at home in the world of written words, the desire to write creatively is simply part of who we are as people made in the image of God.

Writing as a calling

For the Christian author, writing should be viewed as a vocation, or calling – whether one is able to make a living at it or not. The question is not so much, ‘Can I write?’ but ‘Should I write?’ We are really asking: ‘Is this what I am called to do?’ There is no easy answer to this question with regard to writing any more than there is for any other type of vocation or service. If someone is looking for a divine revelation or some other unmistakable sign from God as to whether or not they should be a writer, they may end up waiting a long time. More often than not, it’s the simple things we should be looking for. A former lecturer of mine once advised: ‘If you are trying to work out whether God is calling you to a certain vocation, try to do something else. If you are happy doing anything else – or can imagine being happy doing anything else – then that’s an important indicator.’ The inverse is also true. As the Christian author Liz Curtis Higgs wrote: ‘The surest sign that I am called to write is this: I am happiest when I am writing. The sense of rightness and satisfaction is overwhelming.’²

2 Cited in D. Elble, *Behind the Stories* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002).

Writing Poetry

CHAPTER 1

Beginning with Poetry

*'Poetry is the most ancient and the most natural form of literature.
Prose fiction is a latecomer.'*

– Gene Veith¹

'The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error.'

– Percy Bysshe Shelley²

Poetry as the foundation of creative writing

Many writers assume that poetry is an advanced form of writing that should only be taken up, if at all, after much experience with prose forms. The reality, however, is that poetry is foundational. Both in terms of the history of literature and of human literacy, poetry comes first. The great epic stories such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that stand at the heart of all literate societies are all in poetic form.³ So too, young children are exposed predominantly to poetry in their earliest experience with books. Dr Seuss is a children's poet whose work is usually either alliterated, metred, rhymed or all of the above. Nursery rhymes are just that. Read a few classic children's stories carefully and you will detect that many are actually poetic in form. While poetry may at some levels be more difficult to construct, it is much easier to remember. This is why oral storytellers used it, and why it is so successful in children's literature.

It makes sense, therefore, to begin a book on creative writing with poetry. Poetry is not only the older and more fundamental form of

1 Gene Veith, Jr. *Reading Between the Lines. A Christian Guide to Literature* (Wheaton, Ill. Crossway Books, 1990), 79.

2 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in H. Needham, ed. *Sidney An Apology for Poetry: Shelley. A Defence of Poetry* (London: Ginn and Company, n.d), 74.

3 And it is not only the classic early stories that were put in poetic form. Sir Philip Sidney observed in his Elizabethan era defence of poetry: 'So Thales, Empedocles, and Parmenides sang their natural philosophy in verses; so did Pythagoras and Phocylides their moral counsels; so did Tyrtaeus in war matters, and Solon in matters of policy.' *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. H. Needham (London: Ginn and Company, n.d), 3.

creative writing, but learning to read and write poetry teaches skills that every good writer of prose fiction should possess. Poetry teaches us to be attentive to words. It teaches us to be attuned to the alliterations, rhymes, rhythms, and metre of our language. It teaches us to not be satisfied with the first word that comes to mind, but to search for the word that conveys our intended meaning in the most aesthetically pleasing way.

Poetry and language

Every language has its own forms of poetic expression that are uniquely suited to it. Metre and rhyme work well in English, but not in many other languages. French, which is unstressed, tends to work with syllabic structures. Languages with heavy reliance on regular systems of endings, like Greek, find rhyme less effective because too many words rhyme. This is one reason why poetry is notoriously difficult to translate. The meaning is easy enough to transport from one language to another, but puns, innuendo, word play, homonyms, synonyms, alliterations and rhymes in most cases simply do not translate. And if we translate poetry from a tonal language into a stressed language, the meaning of the poem might be preserved, but the feel of the poem lost. Good poets seek out the unique features and qualities of the language in which they write. For those of us who write poetry in English it is especially important to know the history of the language.

English is a hybrid language. About half the key words we use every day are of Germanic origin, and the other half of Romance (Roman) origin. While every language picks up numerous loan words from other languages over time, two distinct languages blending together to form one new language is rare. From the fifth century onward, Germanic tribes migrated to England, pushing out or overwhelming the Celtic population. They brought with them a number of Old Germanic dialects that we now collectively refer to as Old English. If left alone, English today would have remained a very near kin of German and Dutch, and would have also been more closely related to the Nordic languages. But in 1066, French speaking Normans led by William the Conqueror successfully invaded England. They set themselves up as the nobility of the country, and French dominated official life for three hundred years. The Normans, however, had little interest in forcing the English peasantry to speak

French, so a bilingual system developed in which French was the official language of law and politics (and Latin of the church), while the common people continued to speak their Germanic dialects. Without wealthy and educated speakers of Old English, however, there was little literature produced, and no formal learning of the language. Soon, the Germanic grammar began to give way and prepositions increasingly did the work of case endings. Also, a growing number of French words (themselves evolved from Latin) were being adopted by the common people, and the French-speaking nobility were picking up numerous Old English words.

The result of the two language traditions existing side by side was the production of a wide range of synonyms (very useful for writers!). These also tend to reflect the cultural origins of the words. Words for body parts (elbow, hand, bone, head, neck, foot), common animals (cat, hound, wolf) and common professions (baker, smith, shoemaker), are Germanic. Words for legal and church affairs, the life of the court, professions requiring some specific education (professor, cleric, ambassador, courtier) all came from the French or Latin. The common people were the ones who raised the animals, therefore we have simple Germanic words like swine, cow and sheep. But when the meat of these animals is eaten (it was usually the wealthy French occupiers who could most afford this) they were given names such as pork, veal and mutton.

Germanic origin words tend to be simple, bold and more guttural. The Latin and French based words more complex, subtle and flowing. The different sounds reflect the different linguistic origins. This is important as the feel, sound and cultural associations of individual words are vital in poetry. A good poet must be aware of this vocabulary divide that still lies at the heart of the English Language, and must know when to employ which type of word.

The following are two poems I composed to illustrate the different texture and feel of the two different vocabulary groups. The first poem is constructed entirely of words with Germanic and Norse etymologies.

Wasser unser⁴

Come forth, rain
Flow through heaven's gate;
Blot sun with cloud
As ploughmen shout aloud:

Fill our streams with watery swills,
Turn clay to mud – whate'er it wills
Bring life from death, quick'ning earth
With newborn grass and rose-white blooms

That trim young apple shoots
At war again with oak and ash
For rights of leaf and trunk to drink their fill
From unseen roots, which have no other will.

The next poem is constructed primarily of key words with Latin or Greek etymologies.

**Dulce et decorum est
pro sui cogitare⁵**

Random reflections
on quantum simultaneity
and other partially cogitated
theorems of the mind,
stand sentinel
over elusive intellects;

4 A pun on "*Vater unser, der du im Himmel bist*" (Our Father, who are in heaven.) The opening words of the Lord's Prayer in German are also the name of the prayer.

5 A pun on the Latin line, "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*," from Horace's Odes. (It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country). Wilfred Owen famously punned this ancient piece of pro-war propaganda in his WW1 poem 'Dulce et decorum est' describing a mustard gas attack. *Dulce et decorum est pro sue cogitare* means roughly, 'It is sweet and fitting to think for one's self.'

now connected via modem and remote
to uninhabited ether,
like galactic black holes
exploring the *creatio de novo*
of abandoned space and mind.

The sounds, feel and mood of the two poems are strikingly different. Much of this has to do with the vocabulary chosen. The astute wordsmith, especially the poet, will choose words carefully with an eye (and ear!) to their origins. Words from the same or similar family background usually sound better together. A predominance of words from one group or the other can set the tone of a poem.

Exercise Germanic versus Romance vocabulary

Write a short poem using primarily or even exclusively Germanic base words. Then do the same with Romance base words from French or Latin (feel free to include Greek base words in this lot as well). The latter poem will need to include some Germanic words such as English prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions and articles as these are all Germanic in origin.

CHAPTER 2:

Finding Inspiration in the Poetry of the Bible

'The artistic impulse is everywhere evident in biblical poetry... The poets who wrote the poetry of the Bible loved not only God and his truth but also poetry. They were interested in poetry as a craft.'

– Leland Ryken¹

'It is probable that the poetry of Moses, Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah has produced a great effect upon the mind of Jesus and his disciples.'

– Percy Bysshe Shelley²

Biblical Hebrew poetry

The ancient Hebrews made use of a traditional form of unrhymed poetry that is preserved in many parts of the Hebrew Bible.³ Like all poetry, Hebrew poetry is built upon images, metaphors and similes. It says important things in the best and most beautiful way. Structurally, Hebrew poetry is distinctive. It is characterised by parallelism, a structural device in which the second line in a couplet says the same thing as the first line, but in a different way – or it parallels the first line in some other way. The Psalms are good examples of this type of poetry. Hebrew parallelism can occur in three different ways.

Firstly, and most common, is *synonymous* parallelism, in which the two halves of the verse make the same point or statement.

1 Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight. A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 187.

2 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed H. Needham, (London: Ginn and Company, n.d), 89.

3 For an excellent and readable study of the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

Give ear to my words, O Lord;
Give heed to my sighing...

O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice:
In the morning I plead my case to you, and watch. (Psalm 5:1,3)

Secondly, is *antithetical* parallelism, in which the second line contradicts or contrasts with the content of the first line. This form of parallelism is fairly rare in the main poetical works of the Hebrew Bible, but occurs frequently in Proverbs.

Rash words are like sword thrusts,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Truthful lips endure forever,
But a lying tongue lasts only a moment. (Proverbs 12:18f)

Finally, there are a number of couplets that do not fit into either of these categories. Yet the second line stands in some specific and distinctive relationship to the first, often qualifying or expanding upon it. These lines have generally been denoted as *synthetic* parallelism. This is essentially the ‘everything else’ category. Some good examples of so-called synthetic parallelism can be found in the first two stanzas of the great Hebrew alphabet poem, Psalm 119.

I will praise you with an upright heart,
When I learn your righteous ordinances. (conditional)

I will observe your statutes;
Do not utterly forsake me. (cause and effect)

How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word. (question and answer)

I have hidden your word in my heart
That I might not sin against you. (purpose)
(Psalm 119:7-9,11)

Hebrew poetry can also make use of other structures, such as the alphabet poem of Psalm 119, cited above. In this poem there are twenty-two stanzas (one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet) of eight couplets each. The first word of each of the eight couplets in the first stanza all begin with the letter (א) *aleph*, the second with (ב) *beth*, and so on. Hebrew poetry also commonly displays chiasmic structures in which the first and last couplets parallel each other in some way, again the second and penultimate couplets stand in parallel, and so on to the centre of the poem. Closely related to chiasmic poetry is the concentric poem. Concentric structured poems have a couplet or line at the centre which has no parallel and which usually indicates the theme or key point of the poem. A classic example of a Hebrew poem with parallelisms and a concentric structure is found in Isaiah 43:1-7.

Can you find all the parallelisms as well as the concentric structure in the following poem? Try working from both ends of the poem, looking for key words and phrases, and match these to their parallels on the other side/half of the poem.

This now is what Yahweh says

He who created you, Jacob

He who formed you, Israel:

‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine

If you pass through the waters,

I am with you;

And if you pass through rivers,

They will not overwhelm you;

If you walk through fire

You will not be burned,

And if you walk through flames

They will not consume you.

For I am Yahweh your God

The Holy One of Israel, your saviour.
I give for your ransom Egypt,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious and honoured in my sight,
And I love you;
I will give people in exchange for you,
And nations in return for your life.
Fear not, for I am with you:
From the east I will bring your seed,
From the west I will gather you.
I will say to the north, ‘Yield,’
And to the south, ‘Do not hold back;
Bring my sons from afar,
And my daughters from the end of the earth,
All who are called by my name,
Whom I created for my glory,
Whom I formed and made.’⁴

A structural outline of Isaiah 43:1-7 shows the poem to have four main points in the first half (indicated by A, B, C and D) and four points paralleling these (in reverse order, D', C', B' and A') in the second half. If this were all there were to the outline, the structure would be *chiastic* (named after the Greek letter Chi [X]). The appearance at the centre of the poem of a couplet which has no parallel or counterpart makes the structure *concentric* (sharing a common centre), and indicates the central point or theme of the poem.

⁴ Translation my own.

- A God created/formed Israel
- B God called God's people by name
 - Fear not
 - C Waters/streams // fire/flame
 - Who God is ... saviour
 - D Nations given in exchange for God's people
- Focus →
- E **Because we are precious and God loves us (v. 4)**
 - D' People given in exchange for God's people
 - Fear not
 - C' East/west // north/south
 - Who God's people are ... sons and daughters
 - B' God's people called by God's name
- A' God created/formed the 'called' ones.

There is great intricacy and beauty in Hebrew poetry. Because so much of it is based on repetition, parallelism and structure, much of this beauty carries through in translation into other languages. Yet despite this, the form of Hebrew poetry has not exercised any significant influence on English poetry. This is due largely to two reasons. Firstly, the form of Hebrew poetry was not well understood or appreciated during the formative periods of classical English poetry. The structures of Hebrew poetry are obvious once spotted, and the first readers of these poems would have picked them up immediately upon reading or hearing them. Yet two centuries of modern biblical scholarship missed these structures almost entirely because we were not attuned to the rhythm and patterns of Hebrew poetry. Secondly, the forms did not suit the natural sounds and structure of English as well as did other forms. Nonetheless, parallelism can be used to good effect in English language poetry.

Exercise: Semitic symmetry

Write a short poem using parallelism. You may choose a theme echoing the psalms, or a very different, more modern theme. It is important that each couplet consists of lines that somehow parallel one another. To make it more interesting, follow that sense of symmetry or parallelism throughout the poem by adopting either a concentric or chiasmic structure. Aim for 10-20 lines.

What follows is a poem in concentric structure. It deliberately reflects the style of Hebrew verse, while also having a traditional iambic metre (see chapter three) and simple a-a-b-b rhyme scheme, thus combining traditional Hebrew and English poetic forms. Note the suitability of both parallelism and chiasmic structure for social and political critique. The centre couplet is set out on its own to show that it is shared by both halves of the poem. It is easy to see why so many of the Hebrew prophets turned to this form of poetry to express their words of warning.

Antipodean Arrivals

They landed on these southern shores in chains;
 With antipodean gaols pre-built along the plains.
In rat-infested stinking ships they came;
 In barques that scarcely stayed afloat in rain.
From Sheffield 'cross to Leeds they emptied gaols;
 Cleaned out the streets from Belfast down to Wales.
With forc'ed labour they must bow the head:
 Four years hard work for simply thieving bread.
First fleters, wreathed, held up in honour now;
 We fete unwilling pioneers somehow,

Deported nightmares landed on our shore.
 They came with dreams of newfound life, and more;

These immigrants were not sent for by us;
 Unwelcome queue jumpers we cannot trust.
In Baxter they must wait four years or more;
 No work awaits them at our bolted door.
They've fled Sumatra, Timor and Iran;
 Left Baghdad, Basra and Afghanistan.
They came in trawlers struggling just to float;
 In rusting hulks they cross our ocean moat;
They landed free upon our fertile coasts;
 Were carried off to Baxter by their hosts.

Poetry in the New Testament

While the poetic forms of the Hebrew Bible are nowadays quite well-known, the Greek New Testament also contains examples of poetry. For the most part these are found in songs that are quoted in the letters of St Paul. Some examples of these are the sacramental hymn of Titus 3:4-7, the meditative hymns of Romans 8:31-39 and Ephesians 1:3-14, the confessional hymns of 1 Timothy 6:11-16 and 2 Timothy 2:11-13, the Christological hymns of Colossians 1:15-20 and, most famously, the *Carmen Christi* (or *Song of Christ*) of Philippians 2:5-11,⁵ and the eschatological hymn of 1 Thessalonians 1:9,10. While in English translation much of the poetic character of these songs is lost, in Greek the poetic form is unmistakable. Like English, metre is often used (reflecting the likely origin of these poems as early Christian songs) and there are often basic chiming patterns – though these differ markedly from modern English rhymes.

The short eschatological hymn of 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10 – likely an excerpt from a longer song – provides a classic example of these poetic elements. Notice especially the use of pronouns (underlined in the Greek text) that are either repeated or occur in an order not typical of prose. Also, the first four lines all chime (with the second line an ‘inverted rhyme’), as do the last four words of the final line. In order to better appreciate the structure of this Greek verse each line is given first in Greek, then in transliterated form, and finally in English translation.

Ἐπεστρέψατε προς τόν θεόν ἀπό των εἰδώλων
Epestrephate pros ton theon apo ton eidolon
You turned to God from idols

Δουλεύειν θεῶ ζῶντι καί ἀληθινῶ
Douleuein theo zonti kai alethion
To serve God, living and true

⁵ A useful discussion of the literary features of this text that sheds light on the nature of the poetic sections of the New Testament is found in Ralph Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 24-41.

Καί ἀναμένειν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν,
Kai anamenein ton quion autou ek ton ouranon
And wait for his Son from heaven,

ὃν ἤγειρεν ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν
on ageiren ek ton nekron
Who was raised from the dead –

Ἰησοῦν τὸν ρυόμενον ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης.
Iesoun ton ruomenon amas ek tas orgas tas erkomenas
Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.⁶

The New Testament poetic tradition is carried on perhaps most authentically in the sung poetry (hymns and songs) of the Christian community. Poetry was an established vehicle of biblical revelation, and has remained a vital part of Christian worship.

⁶ Translation my own.

CHAPTER 3

Keeping the Beat – The Importance of Metre

'You can write a poem and know nothing of metrics, just as you can play a piano and be unable to read music. But why choose ignorance?'

– John Whitworth¹

Metre

Every language has its own poetic forms and devices. We have seen how two quite different poetic forms were employed in biblical Hebrew and New Testament Greek. English, with its unique history and sounds, has developed and often borrowed poetic devices particularly suited to it.

One of the most basic elements of traditional English poetry is metre. English is a stressed language, which means the alternating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables can be used to create a regular rhythm that may be either somewhat hidden, or very obvious, depending on the particular metre used. In early English poetry, like *Beowulf*, these stresses were not patterned in the classical sense of Greek metre, but were regulated by having a set number of stressed syllables, often four, in each line. This, combined with the frequent use of alliteration (the repetition of initial word sounds), gave the poetry of the language a very strong and earthy rhythm.

Listen to the following lines from *Beowulf* and try to pick up the rhythm. Each line can be divided into two halves with two stressed words in each half. Keep in mind that alliteration is often used to highlight which words should be stressed.

So the company of men led a careless life,
all was well with them: until One began
to encompass evil, an enemy from hell.

¹ John Whitworth, *Writing Poetry*, 2nd ed. (London: A and C Black, 2006), 71.

Grendel they called this cruel spirit,
the fell and fen his fastness was,
the march his haunt. This unhappy being
had long lived in the land of monsters
since the Creator cast them out
as kindred of Cain. For that killing of Abel
the eternal Lord took vengeance.
There was no joy of that feud: far from mankind
God drove him out for his deed of shame!
from Cain came down all kinds of misbegotten
– ogres and elves and evil shades–
as also the giants, who joined in long
wars with God. He gave them their reward.

This form of poetry continues into the early Middle-English period, and it is found in such poems as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Again, we find the standard four stresses per line, with usually at least three of the stressed words alliterated.

He rode far from his friends, a forsaken man,
Scaling many cliffs in country unknown.
At every bank or beach where the brave man crossed water,
He found a foe in front of him, except by a freak of chance,
And so foul and fierce a one that he was forced to fight.
So many marvels did the man meet in the mountains,
It would be too tedious to tell a tenth of them. (stanza 31)

An attempt to reclaim this early English use of metre was made in the late nineteenth century by the Jesuit priest Gerard Manly Hopkins. Hopkins meters his lines by placing the same number of stresses, usually four after the pattern of Old English, in each line. Similar to Old English, his stressed words often alliterate, making it easier and more natural to stress the right sounds. In lines where the stresses are not readily apparent, Hopkins placed accent marks over the stressed syllables. He called his technique ‘sprung rhythm.’ An excellent shorter example of this technique can be seen in his poem, *Inversnaid*. Notice also Hopkins’ preference for words of Anglo-Saxon (Germanic) origin.

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frówning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,
Wiry heathpacks, fitches of fern,
And the beadbonny ask that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.²

Despite the strong tradition, the best-known of the Middle English poets, Geoffrey Chaucer, abandoned the Old English rhythms for iambic pentameter. This was a metre taken over from the Greek – via the French. The following description of the Knight's Squire from the prologue is a good example of this new style of English poetry.

There was a Yeoman with him at his side,
No other servant; so he chose to ride.
This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while
– For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,
His arrows never drooped their feathers low –
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.

² Gerard Manly Hopkins. *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. Gardner (New York: Penguin, 1985), 50f.

Most English poets followed Chaucer in adopting the metre of classical Greek and Latin poetry, which soon supplanted the more native metre. The most famous such metre is called the iambic. Iambic metre consists in ‘feet’ or sequences of two syllables: an unstressed followed by a stressed. The shortest lines in iambic would be those of only a single foot, that is, two syllables. The following is an example of iambic dimeter, laid out as monometer for effect.

**Iambs
In Line**

I am
in line
I am
supine
I am
not here
I am
not near
I am
divine
I am
in pine
I am
thus spread
I am
quite dead.

The following is an example of true iambic monometer.

The Hill

We filled
And tilled
The hill
With rocks
And stocks

To block
Undrained
Ordained
Spring rain
That sweeps
And heaps
The steep
With staged
And gauged
Rampage
That swills
And stills
Our hill.

All the various combinations of metre have Greek names and are derived from Greek antecedents. But while the standard metres used in English poetry are found already in Greek, the form and effect are very different. In Greek, ‘feet’ were measured by the repeated combinations of long and short syllables, whereas in English, there is a beat to the language which the poet is able to manipulate into regular combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Types of classical metre which occur in English are shown below. The flat lines [-] indicate stressed syllables, and the upward curving lines [~], unstressed syllables.

Iambic ~ - / ~ -

Trochaic ~ ~ / ~ ~

Anapestic ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~

Dactylic ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~

Spondaic - - / - -

Amphibrachic ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ ~

By **nine** I’m **nearly done** with **hay**

William Yeats is **laid to rest**

and the **peak** of the **mountain** was
apples

Porcelain dolls never **dance** when we’re
looking

Earth, wind, fire, sea

There **was** an old **lady** from **Hahndorf**

Iambic and trochaic are the most common and the easiest metres to detect. Anapestic and dactylic metres occur in English poetry but often

go initially unnoticed. Spondaic metre is difficult to sustain and usually occurs over a limited number of words, often lists or other unusual grammatical constructions. A burst of spondaic metre can produce a good effect as a line within free verse or as a break within a poem of some other metre.

The metre pattern of English poetry is easier to understand when we recognise that iambic and trochaic are essentially the same pattern, as are anapestic and dactylic. The main differentiating feature is whether the line begins with a stressed or unstressed syllable. While true trochaic and dactylic lines should end with unstressed syllables, they often end with a stressed syllable for the sake of effect and the conventions of English rhyme. But they will always begin with a stressed syllable, in contrast to their more common iambic and anapaestic counterparts.

The other identifier placed on metered poetry concerns the number of feet per line. *Feet* indicates the number of times the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables repeats itself in each line. The designation iambic pentameter, for instance, simply means that the poem is written in alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (iambic metre), and that this pattern repeats itself five times in in each line. The main possibilities in terms of number of feet per line are:

Monometer = one foot per line

Dimeter = two feet per line

Trimeter = three feet per line

Tetrameter = four feet per line

Pentameter = five feet per line

Hexameter = six feet per line

Heptameter = seven feet per line

Tennyson was a master of rhyme and metre. Neither the rhyme scheme nor metre is mistakable in the following untitled sonnet.

The pallid thunder-stricken sigh for gain,
Down an ideal stream they ever float,
And sailing on Pactolus in a boat,

Drown soul and sense, while wistfully they strain
Weak eyes upon the glistening sands that robe
The understream. The wise, could he behold
Cathedraled caverns of thick-ribbéd gold
And branching silvers of the central globe,
Would marvel from so beautiful a sight
How scorn and ruin, pain and hate could flow:
But Hatred in a gold cave sits below;
Pleached with her hair, in mail of argent light
Shot into gold, a snake her forehead clips,
And skins the colour from her trembling lips.³

In the following poems I have employed standard metre schemes. Notice the distinctive rhythms created by the use, respectively, of iambic pentameter and irregular dactylic hexameter. The metre of each poem fits the mood and theme of that particular poem. The steady monotonous iambic is indicative of the long hard days in the hayfield, whereas the more rhythmic and flowing dactylic is suited to the gaiety of the dancing figurines.

I Dream Hayfields

I walk to work across a field;
along a brown, dry, brittle row
of hay that just four days ago
stood grassy fresh against the yield.
And though the work seems never done,
I tread atop the heat-cracked clay
and toss the bails t'ward wagon tongue,
while marching on throughout the day
to rhythmic beat of old John Deere,
circling the field I'm sure we've done
already twice before this year.

³ Alfred Lord Tennyson. *The Poetical Works* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, n.d.), 412.

By time we've done a round or two
I've so much chaff stuck to my skin
that when I sweat I itch still worse
so that I could not hope begin
recount the times I thought to curse
the chaff stuck on my back, my hair;
inside my shoes, my socks and shirt.
My arms are hay-scratched everywhere,
from tossing bails up eight tier high.
My burdened back now aches with hurt
from burning toil, and I would cry,
had I the time or tears to spare.

By nine I'm nearly done with hay,
as evening steals away my sight.
But we still have one load to lay,
so search the barn in dimming light
to find above a startled cat
an overworked extension lamp.
With tit-for-tat, by ten at that,
we've cleared the bails from off the ramp.
Now eyelids hang like leaden shields
as I take leave to rest at last,
but when I sleep, I dream hayfields.

Porcelain Dolls

Porcelain dolls never dance when we're looking;
nor do they sing when we wake up to listen.
They sit and they stare when we enter, not daring
to chance, e'er a word or a glance, that might hasten
the fright or the sight of their porcelain faces,
caught in the glisten and gleam of their secretive
smiles. Oh, we sleep all the while they tie laces
to places that ought not be touched with such festive
and frolicking chases. These porcelain boys with

their porcelain girls, dancing on top of our cedar chest bureaus. On some nights they dance and they swing with their partners, their blue and white dresses flung higher the faster they spin them. 'Tis true that they stand by their story, that they never move from their places; but surely they throw a gay ball when we sleep – I can tell by the smile on their porcelain faces.

A good way to get a feel for how metre works is to practise *scanning*. Scanning occurs when we read poetry with exaggerated emphasis on the stressed syllables to determine its metre. If a poem does not have a regular metrical pattern it is said 'to not scan'. Try the following: Choose two or three examples of 'traditional' or metred poetry. Most nineteenth-century poetry will provide good material for this. Photocopy the poems and 'scan' them, marking the stressed and unstressed syllables. If scanning proves difficult at first, try it with a traditional nursery rhyme such as 'Jack and Jill', tapping your fingers to mark the stressed beats.

Why metre matters

Many contemporary poets take pride in rejecting metre – and there is certainly no shortage of amateurish attempts to imitate the metre of English poetry of previous centuries which continues to give metre a bad name. But English is a stressed language and our natural speech contains all sorts of metrical patterns. Good poets will be aware of these patterns and be able to use them well when needed, and avoid them when not. Neither is possible without a solid understanding of metre. In other words, if you want to write non-metred, or free-verse poetry well, then you still need to learn the basics of metre.

Exercise: Getting into the rhythm

The most common form of traditional English poetry is iambic pentameter. Construct a poem about some aspect of the natural world consisting of two quatrains (8 lines) in iambic pentameter with a regular rhyme scheme. The following is my attempt at this exercise. Once you gain a feel for the metre it is not difficult.

Drought-breaker

Angelic trump of fast abating thirst
As dark clouds roll across the western hills.
The droplets fall unpromising at first,
Then driving waves and mud-encrusted swills.

The moisture sweeps across the sun-parched earth,
Restoring life to couch and daffodils.
This precious water spreading now its girth,
Cut loose from banks, baptising while it kills.