

## Why Poetry Theory is Important

John F. Hobbins  
[jfhobbins@gmail.com](mailto:jfhobbins@gmail.com)

In discussions with a publisher about getting what appears on this site in book form, it was pointed out to me that it will be a Herculean task to interest people in questions of prosody. Poetry, yes, everyone likes how it sounds. But poetry theory, that's for the birds.

It's like music and music theory. Almost everyone likes to listen to music, but few make the effort to learn to read music. Fewer still want to know enough about music to understand how its harmonies work and how it is composed.

The situation is exacerbated in the field of ancient Hebrew poetry by widespread disillusionment with past attempts to understand the nature of its prosody. In the absence of meter in the sense of tightly controlled recurring sequences of iambic feet or similar, like those of traditional English verse and Greek and Latin verse before that, it has been assumed that ancient Hebrew verse lacks prosodic regularities worth describing with care.

The dicta of Kugel, O'Connor, and Pardee, furthermore, have had a chilling effect on those who might otherwise be inclined to investigate the subject matter. All three reject the notion that ancient Hebrew verse is metrical in a strict sense. To a degree, this is a terminological dispute of the kind scholars enjoy to no end.<sup>1</sup> One might think that the measured-out quality of ancient Hebrew verse would be obvious to all, and despite the huffing and puffing, it probably is. On the other hand, there is a sense that if ancient Hebrew verse conforms to precise organizing principles, they have yet to be recovered. The jury, one might say, is out. It is not clear when, if ever, it will render a verdict.

The situation is reversed with respect to the study of Greek and Latin verse. In a recent monograph, Jeffrey Wills sets out to correct an imbalance in the study of Latin poetics. "Although the task of poetics in full is the study of all the markers of poetic language," he says, "the Latin tradition has been dominated by work on diction and metre. . . . The effort here is to provide both the evidence and argument for including other linguistic and stylistic

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the debate, see [A History of Modern Research](#). For full references to Kugel, O'Connor, and Pardee's contributions, see [Annotated Bibliography](#).

features in the study of poetics. In particular, this book studies the repetition of words, i.e., the syntactic figures where sound and sense overlap.”<sup>2</sup> Ancient Hebrew poetry studies, on the other hand, have been dominated by the study of the trope of parallelism in its semantic and syntactic facets. The study of prosodic structure remains at an elementary level.

This is a curious situation. Poetry typically involves the continuous correspondence of successive segments which come in certain shapes and sizes, phonologically speaking, and not others. According to specific expectations, prosodic phrases form packets referred to as lines, and groups of lines form chunks. The phrases, lines, and line-groups provide a mold into which a poet pours semantic content. In the case of ancient Hebrew verse, it is not difficult to see that it is structured in terms of prosodic frames. The study of prosodic regularities in ancient Hebrew verse ought therefore to be of considerable interest.

The semantic and prosodic dimensions of a text are two different things, but a correct understanding of the latter naturally leads for a more precise understanding of the former.

In the course of evoking her grandfather for posterity, the American poet Robert Frost, Lesley Lee Francis remembers that according to him, “certain poems, like haphazard knowledge, stick to you like burrs in the field” ([here](#)). That is a fitting description of Psalms 104 and 137; Isaiah 1:2-20; 5:1-7, and 40:1-11; Job 3 and 28; and other great poems of the Bible.

But the statement of Robert Frost describes what poetry does, not what it is. What is poetry? Frost makes two suggestions:

*...I have a tune [when writing poetry], but it's a tune of the blend of these two things [meter and rhythm]. Something rises--it's neither one of those things. It's neither the meter nor the rhythm; it's a tune arising from the stress on those--same as your fingers on the strings, you know. The twang!*

*. . . I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffery Wills, *Repetition in Latin Poetry: Figures of Allusion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from “Conversations on the Craft of Poetry,” *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: The Library of America, 1995) 856-57. Hat tip to the blogger who posts about Frost [here](#). The use and contents of the material in brackets I pick up from her.

## Meter and Rhythm in Poetry

Meter and rhythm are two different things. Frost understood that, and knew that the best poetry fights against both even as it falls under their sway. It isn't difficult to sense both meter and rhythm at work in his poetry.

An example may prove helpful. The meter of Frost's *A Peck of Gold* is describable in terms of twice-repeated duple counts of strong stresses across the components of its units. Variation in the shapes and sizes of the units dominated by a single strong stress determine its ever-changing rhythm. I have slightly altered the formatting of the original. Differences in the use of blank spacing define stress units, half-lines, lines, couplets, and quatrains.

### *A Peck of Gold*

Dust always blowing about the town,  
 Except when sea-fog laid it down,  
 And I was one of the children told  
 Some of the blowing dust was gold.

All the dust the wind blew high  
 Appeared like god in the sunset sky,  
 But I was one of the children told  
 Some of the dust was really gold.

Such was life in the Golden Gate:  
 Gold dusted all we drank and ate,  
 And I was one of the children told,  
 'We all must eat our peck of gold.'

This poem is not written in iambic pentameter, but is nonetheless prosodically regular. Twice-repeated duple counts of strong stresses characterize each line. Enjambment is universal across the half-lines that make up a line, in coincidence, usually, with natural syntactic breaks. Enjambment is frequent across the lines that make up a couplet.

Sequences of feet of fixed type and length as found in some traditional forms of verse are not a continuously operating principle of organization in Frost's poetry. But the sequences that occur are far from haphazard. The opening line of each quatrain begins with a strong-stressed first syllable. The last line of the last quatrain, on the other hand, is purely iambic.

Meter, rhythm, and rhyme, each plain to the ear, contribute to the sound orchestration of *A Peck of Gold*. Meter and rhyme occur at fixed intervals.

Rhythm does not. Its variability de-monotonizes the acoustic effect of the whole.

Research carried out in connection with this project supports the conclusion that ancient Hebrew verse possesses meter in the same sense that Frost's poetry does. Duple and triple counts of strong stresses follow one another and make up the parts of a line. Lines occur in couplets and triplets. Enjambment commonly occurs as well. Its rhythm and meter are distinct.

In its own way, the meter of ancient Hebrew verse is just as regular as that of Frost's verse. An example in translation is given below. It is formatted after the same fashion adopted for *A Peck of Gold* above, except that each part-line or verset is assigned a line of its own.

Hear o heavens,  
give ear o earth!  
Yahweh has spoken.

Sons I reared and raised,  
and they rebelled against me.

An ox knows its owner,  
an ass its master's pen;  
Israel does not know,  
my people do not consider.

O errant nation,  
iniquity laden people,

Brood of evildoers,  
miscreant sons,

Who abandoned Yahweh,  
despised Israel's Holy One,  
turned back!

Where shall one strike you again?  
You go on turning away!

The whole head is injured,  
the whole heart sick;

From sole of foot to head,  
no soundness in it:

Sore and gash,  
 raw wound,  
 Not drained,  
 not dressed,  
 not softened with oil.

(Isaiah 1:2-6)<sup>4</sup>

For the distinction between meter and rhythm, the comments of Viktor Zhirmunsky are worth keeping in mind:

Pure tonic verse is based on a count of the stressed syllables; the number of unstressed syllables is a variable quantity . . . When attention is focused on the stressed syllables, groups of unstressed syllables – even though they contain varying numbers of syllables – may be perceived as equivalent to each other.

Of course, the number of unstressed syllables between stresses is of essential importance in shaping the rhythm of individual lines or of the poem as a whole: since, however, such syllables form no part of the compositional structure, they belong to the area of rhythm, not meter.<sup>5</sup>

### A Definition of Poetry

Poetry is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation, says Frost. Two experiences in my life brought this truth home. The first was the impact of reading the Iliad in the original while in college, and being forced to memorize the first hundred lines for an oral exam. By the end of that trauma, I had a bit of prosody in my bones, and I began to understand how prosody cooperates with other textual features to create the effect of an orchestra on the ears of the soul.

The second experience occurred after I had lived in Italy for many years, and had come to feel at home in that linguistic medium. Years before, with no Italian in my system, I had tried to read Dante in translation. I was repulsed. Then I picked it up again, almost by accident, and was stunned by its beauty. The magic of its meter and rhythm are overwhelming.

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss this passage at length in “The Poetic Structure of Isaiah 1:2-20: A Programmatic Essay.” Go [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Maksimovich Zhirmunsky, *Introduction to Metrics: The Theory of Verse* (tr. and ed. C.E. Brown; introd. Edward Stankiewicz and Walter N. Vickery; The Hague: Mouton, 1966) 171.

The moral of the story ought to be clear. If you haven't learned Hebrew, it's time you do. [Elsewhere](#) I offer advice about how to go about learning Hebrew.

### The Theory of Poetry

It's a rare musician who, like Fred Lerdahl, loves the theory and not just the practice of music.<sup>6</sup> Even so, it's not possible to get a degree in music without completing a number of courses in theory. That one can get a degree in literature without taking a course in poetry theory is not a positive sign. That one can read poetry in ancient Hebrew and not seek to understand its organizing principles bespeaks a lack of intellectual curiosity. An understanding of the art of poetry, its meter and rhythm included, has its own rewards. As Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote - he was speaking about life in general:

“Don't be confused by surfaces; in the depths everything becomes law.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (trans., Stephen Mitchell, trans., Vintage Books 1984) 39 [To Franz Xaver Kappus, Worpswede, near Bremen, July 16, 1903. The original reads: “Lassen Sie sich nicht beirren durch die Oberfläche; in den Tiefen wird alles Gesetz.”].

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996 [1983]); Fred Lerdahl, *Tonal Pitch Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Lerdahl's approach to music theory has ramifications for poetry theory. See Fred Lerdahl, “A Music-Theoretic Approach to the Sounds of Poetry,” in manuscript; “The Sounds of Poetry Viewed as Music,” in *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music* (ed. Isabelle Peretz and Robert J. Zatorre; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).