

REVIEW OF DEREK ATTRIDGE,
POETIC RHYTHM: AN INTRODUCTION

John Constable

Albion, New Series 42 (1996), 64–71.

Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*
(Cambridge U.P.: Cambridge, 1995) xx + 274pp.

One of the problems with literary criticism in the university is that you never know if you have been persuaded of the point at issue by fair means or just bullied into acquiescence by the size of your opponent and their subtle sense of conversational opportunity. Student minds cannot be changed in this way, it might be said, but it is hardly necessary to point out that they can, and in large numbers daily are, paralyzed with the fear of penalization, or stunted with any of the almost imperceptible secretions which a skilled teacher learns to produce at the first sign of trouble. More depressing still, the student has little to hope for in this line of work beyond succeeding to their professor's dubious trade. This cannot be the basis for that relationship of trust, between the pupil-public and the professional intellectual, which forms the substance of an enduring discipline in the university, and in the long run it will lead to the erosion of respect and the constriction of budgets. The study of literature must, simply enough, clean up its act or be forced from the stage.

The central element in any reform with more than a dog's chance of success must be the adoption of procedures which lead the teacher into positions which are falsifiable. Not trivially so, as when we allow students to remember the pages of last week's reading assignment or the name of a character in a novel, facts far beneath the attention of the high-minded critic, and, after all, only the starting point for a massive delivery of felt human response, but in the sense, common in the sciences, where a student can, with sufficient acumen and application, demonstrate that a major plank in a lecturer's position is simply wrong. It does not seem unduly cynical to regard the edifice of evaluative criticism as constructed largely with the particular intention of avoiding this responsibility. In a situation so bleak one must look for signs of hope wherever they turn up, and they turn up here, in an undergraduate textbook on literary prosody by a critic, Derek Attridge, who, in spite of strategic alliances with reactive fashion, is fundamentally an appreciator. Fortunately, the subject, which requires rigor, and the educational purpose, which demands clarity, have overridden the belle-lettristic obfuscation that damages all but the most statistically inclined discussions of literary style. This is not a perfect book, traces of the previous dispensation remain in its manner and declared aim, but it is so far and away the best available introductory treatment of the technical side of prosodic analysis that no one teaching poetry can afford to neglect it.

Attridge is already well-known as the author of two major works on English verse. The first, *Well-Weighed Syllables* (C.U.P.: Cambridge, 1974), is an historical study of the efforts to apply classical quantitative metrics in English during the 16th century, and hardly a book to recommend

to anyone less than a dedicated graduate student. The second, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (Longmans: Harlow, 1982) is currently the standard volume for anyone seeking sophisticated guidance on matters of metrical form in English verse poetry, and though teachers continue, for convenience, to use John Hollander's brief and cozy *Rhyme's Reason* (Yale U.P.: New Haven, 1981, 2nd ed. 1989) they push Attridge's book at the brighter sparks, with a gloomy feeling that it is too verbose, too involved in controversy, and, the last straw, burdened with a tiresome notation. Despite being a very powerful approach to verse, this book has not had so dramatic an effect as it obviously deserves to have done, perhaps because the effort required to understand its novel system would not always have appeared to make economic sense to a professor too tired to understand it at first glance.

Nevertheless, its reputation is high, and there are even entire monographs, Brennan O'Donnell's *The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth's Metrical Art* (Kent State U.P.: Kent, Ohio, 1995) for example, built around its main principles. By and large, however, it has been more respected than used, and even recent works as apparently definitive as O. B. Hardison's *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance* (Johns Hopkins: Baltimore, 1989) or George T. Wright's *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1988), employ a method of metrical analysis that must, post-Attridge, be regarded as obsolete. More disastrously since they are more influential, many standard primers, Hollander's revised edition would be a case in point, and even the newest would-be-standards, such as Philip Hobsbaum's recent and very unsatisfactory *Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form* (Routledge: London, 1996), show no evidence of having managed to absorb the advances made by Attridge. The problem is partly that the distance between the Attridge system and that found in most of the literary prosodists of this and the last century is large, and partly that when combined with the difficulty of the presentation in his 1982 volume, this radical change has proved easy to neglect, perhaps as unworkable. In addition a knowledge of verse form, as opposed to a ready sensibility, has rarely seemed of much real importance to the critical establishment, and hence there has been little pressure to ensure that the arbitrary and misleading systems of Saintsbury and his followers are brushed aside. The reasons for this lethargy make interesting objects for speculation, but it should escape no one that Leavis's influence has here, as elsewhere, been to direct educational effort away from what can be taught and towards those things which, even by the standards of his own secular soul-psychology, cannot. The professorial motivations for this are readily discovered by sincere introspection.

We may now expect better things, and particularly that attention to formal questions will make the standards of literary studies intelligible even to those who cannot meet them, as is the case, for example, in physics or baseball. There is nothing, however, so mountainous in Attridge's book, which only clarifies what has been hopelessly muddled in literary metrics, and provides a lucid model of versification which can be grasped and wielded with confidence. The reasons for his success are perhaps not entirely clear to Attridge himself, but probably derive from his adoption of a perspective which is, in the loose sense rather than the technical mathe-

metrical sense, generative. That is to say, rather than asking how particular verses can and should be described, he asks what sort of rules might be applied in the generation of a verse, and only then, when the field of options has been narrowed, turns to description, where the rules are expected to be statistically normative. By focusing attention on phenomena in the verse which are richly ordered, and away from features which are chaotic and accidental, the discussion, while demanding, is never opaque. There is still, for my taste, too much wayward description, particularly when, drifting into literary criticism, Attridge attempts to justify his technical material as a means of enjoying “the rhythms of English poetry in all their power, subtlety and diversity”. Overall, though, there is a widespread use of Occam’s razor, most noticeably on that most tiresome and misleading element of traditional scansion, the metrical foot, which leads to irresolvable ambiguities of description when dealing with irregularities, or even with extremely common formations, such as heptasyllabic lines of the “Mary had a little lamb” type, which do not readily break into the repeating units specified by foot scansion. In such cases the student is left without any clear principles for choosing between the alternative descriptions possible. Should “Love and constancy is dead” be described as iambic with a shortened first foot, or trochaic with a shortened final foot? To this the foot-bound teacher can do nothing but mumble, irrelevantly as it turns out, about word boundaries and rising and falling rhythms. In Attridge’s account we need fear no confusion on this or similar points, the description relying only on recognition of those syllables which carry stress and those which do not, and a further recognition of those syllables which are understood as realizing beats and those which are thought of as realizing offbeats.

Anyone looking for a quick way into the system, or wishing to size the volume up for possible class-room use, should bypass the first chapter, which is a compendium of the intellectual imprecision that the rest of the book helps to guard against, and go straight to the second section where the founding concepts are introduced by stages, starting with the rock-bottom basics, a short course in the recognition of syllabic units, and then moving on to discussions of stress. Each fresh concept is accompanied by shrewdly designed exercises, which, thanks to a considerably generous page layout, students may complete by pencil-marking their own text as if it were a workbook. Attridge supplies, in an appendix, suggested responses, making self-instruction possible for those disciplined enough to do the work before checking the crib.

The book has obviously been aimed at native speakers of English, but little knowledge is assumed, and my own experience of teaching the book in small classes of undergraduate literature majors suggests that these early sections can rapidly be mastered even by those whose fluency may lag behind their intelligence of the language. This is not high level linguistics, and the system of stress marking is restricted to three terms, stress (marked with / over the vowel), secondary stress (\), and unstressed syllables (x), but it is more than adequate for the purpose of understanding literary scansion, the patterns of which can be adequately specified with only two terms, stress and non-stress.

With these preliminaries out of the way, Attridge can then proceed to discuss the relationship between stressed syllables and beats, the distinction between them being the core of his analytic method. Normally, a beat is realized by a stressed syllable, and an offbeat by an unstressed syllable, verse lines being made from patterns of beats and offbeats. As Attridge emphasizes, it “is extremely important to remember at all times that STRESSES are different from BEATS; they often coincide, but they are not the same thing”. This is to say that in certain situations beats may be realized by unstressed syllables, a phenomenon Attridge calls “promotion”, and offbeats by stressed syllables, “demotion”. With the addition of a horizontal line to represent a beat, the following combinations comprise the basic notation:

Unstressed offbeat	Stressed beat	Stressed offbeat	Unstressed beat
x	/	/	x

The value of this simple system is that it allows a degree of accuracy in the description of rhythmic effects that has not before been possible without it being overwhelmed by an unmanageable and spuriously precise attention to distracting minutiae. When discussing a very simple line such as “Then out in the mead the poor girl ran”, one of Attridge’s examples, the teacher and students are able not only to point to what will, for most readers, be an intuitively obvious fluctuation in the pattern towards the end of the line, but explain, by analyzing the effect in terms of its phonetic material, how it comes about.

Then out in the mead the poor girl ran

x /_ x x /_ x /_ / /_

“Girl”, a monosyllabic content word, is stressed, but here occupies an offbeat position. Even in such cases, where the matter is almost too banal to require comment, the benefits are obvious, and when much more complex effects are considered, demotion in double offbeats for example, its effects are next to revelatory. Say that you are reading Hopkins, and confronted with the line “Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet”. After vague stylistics, gestures towards evaluating a rhythm which is not clearly understood, the class would be directed to the semantic representations which a reader might generate from such a string, in this case feel-good eco-criticism. By contrast a student working with the new markup language will be able to home in on the demoted syllable “live” and note that this particular fact distinguishes it from the subsequent double offbeats, “and the” and “derness”:

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet

/_ / x /_ x x /_ x x /_

Comparison with other lines becomes possible, fueling speculation as to the probable effects on readers. When applied to extended sequences of lines, to entire poems, this elegant reductionism yields a robust and communicable understanding on which student and teacher may co-operate and reach agreement.

Building on this basis, Attridge introduces discussions of the types of verse built around a hierarchy of primary and secondary beats (primary beats are marked with a double underline, =), familiar for example in Kipling, and then moves to the standard duple and triple meters, that is to say lines where the ratio of offbeat to beat is 1:1 and 2:1 respectively. Then in a move which shows how carefully he has planned his book, and suggests extensive classroom testing, Attridge turns to deal with rising and falling rhythms, just as students are beginning to wonder whether verse that is patterned offbeat/beat is *rising*, and that which is patterned beat/offbeat *falling*. These qualities, Attridge shows, are not determined by the pattern of beat and offbeat through the entire line, but by the sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables within stress groups, that is in the groups of syllables which are perceived as adhering to each other. If the words “So now she is gone and the servants are gone” are divided into groups and marked up as being stressed or unstressed, we can see that there are three rising groups, the first, second and fourth, and one mixed group, the third:

|So now|she is gone|and the servants|are gone|

In view of this it becomes clear, though Attridge does not explain the point, that foot-based scansion fails because it attempts to use a single descriptive system simultaneously to describe two phenomena, beat/offbeat patterning, on the one hand, and stress-group patterning on the other, which vary independently. The confusion is, however, understandable, since verse which normally begins with an offbeat and ends with a beat often encourages, a predominance of rising stress groups.

Surprisingly, given his achievements in this area, Attridge has preserved a distinction between “stress verse”, represented by ballads and the like, and “syllable stress verse” which contains most of the high literary tradition, and for which, he claims, the terms iambic, anapestic, trochaic, and dactylic are still more or less appropriate. It seems possible that the differences to which he points are not the hallmarks of distinct types, but the result of variously flexible applications of the same rules. In those works identified as stress meter we find a loose application of the syllable counting rule (not, as Attridge says, an absence of the rule), and a compensatingly restrictive tendency to avoid promotions or demotions, whereas verse which Attridge would call stress-syllabic is merely less tolerant in syllable count and more flexible in other areas. If this is correct, then further simplifications in the system are possible and desirable. Some readers may suspect a similar redundancy in the extended discussions of “virtual” beats and offbeats, which Attridge introduces in order to coerce the abstract rendering of a variant line into a pattern more nearly like its neighbors. This arbitrary saving of appearances seems curiously clumsy, and the correspondence with any objective phonetic feature, or psychological impression, is unclear.

These arguably blunt-edged elements aside, the book is a triumph. Attridge has presented his readers with a powerful toolbox for the analysis of verse and effects in verse, but his own views on the use of these tools are entirely traditional. In other words, he believes that an understanding of this kind will help readers to “experience and enjoy” poetry, and that this is a valuable

educational objective. Fortunately, there is no reason to be bound by his conservatism, and those who cannot accept that aestheticism, however pretentiously intellectualized, is worthwhile as a focus in the university, may feel entirely at liberty to take on other work altogether. However unwittingly, Attridge has assisted in prising open the door to a technical analysis of verse unpolluted, as even Jakobsonian approaches are, with criticism, and thus ultimately, though this seems a long way off, integration with cognitive psychology and the rest of the natural sciences. In the nearer term teachers may be recommended to take up this book as a text, despite the fact that it requires a good deal of work to use with confidence, because playing fair with students is, though often humiliating, the surest route to satisfaction as an instructor.

John Constable