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Prosody atrocities

by [Robert Richman](#)

Review of All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification by Timothy Steele

One odd side effect of the growing interest in formal poetry over the last fifteen years is the continuing divergence of opinion regarding just what form is. In fact, there now seems to be as much if not more disagreement afoot (if you'll forgive the expression) than there was in the free-verse-dominated 1960s and 1970s. In this day of the iambic triumphant, we still see metrical philosophies ranging from the liberal (i.e., allowing so many substitutions in the line so as to distort the beat), to the conservative (i.e., limiting substitutions so readers never lose that iambic pulse). Paul Valéry's 1921 remark about the then-mushrooming free verse movement—"Our epoch has seen the birth of almost as many prosodies as it has counted poets"—could at century's end apply with equal force to the formal poets of today.

I am happy to report that Timothy Steele—from whose new book I took the quotation from Valéry—is among the more rigorous metrical theorists around. He is also among the most rigorous metrical practitioners: in addition to *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter* (1990), he has published four volumes of poems and edited a collection of J. V. Cunningham's poems. Steele argues that poets ought to limit themselves to a judicious deployment of the three time-honored variations of the iambic pentameter line: a trochee in the first foot, a trochee in the third foot, and a feminine ending.

A crash course for the metrically uninitiated: the substitution-free iambic pentameter line *the fossil bears the stamp of fin or leaf*—in which each of the five, two-syllable feet are made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one—with a first-foot trochaic substitution would read: *Fossils may bear the stamp of fin or leaf*. The same line with a third-foot trochee would read: *The fossil's world, dying and lost, now lives*. And with a feminine ending—i.e., the addition of an unstressed syllable at the end of the line—the line would read: *The fossil bears the stamp of face and body*.

Even limiting themselves to these three time-sanctioned substitutions, "skillful poets," Steele argues, "can flexibly handle, in regular iambic verse, pretty much any and all the verbal and syntactical resources of English." Steele considers all the other possibilities—an entire section, for instance, is devoted to an examination of "Loose Iambic—Iambic Verse with Anapestic Substitution." But generally speaking, Steele doesn't favor such innovations. One famous anapest-ridden poem Steele does like—Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"—works because the *abab* rhyme scheme lends the poem additional glue. (An anapestic foot consists of three syllables, with an accent only on the final syllable, as in the third foot of Frost's trimeter line from "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep":

“They turn their back on the land.”) The rhymes in Frost’s poem, Steele says, “help us hear the line-endings distinctly.” And this is crucial, given the unusual recurrence of the anapestic foot.

Another out-of-the-ordinary substitution Steele does not dislike is the first- and second-foot trochees in Louise Bogan’s line from “Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral”: “Eager quickly to free its sticky foot.” One reason that this odd substitution works is because the rest of the fairly long poem consists primarily of iambic lines; another is that both trochee stresses are themselves powerful and clearly defined—something that is not always the case when large-scale metrical changes are rung.

One of the remarkable things about iambic verse, Steele points out, is its ability to accommodate the various levels of stress in spoken English. And indeed, one of his strengths as a critic is the emphasis he puts on this often misunderstood relationship between stress and meter. As Steele eloquently observes, “[i]n the mountain range of the line, one of the valleys may prove higher than one of the peaks.” Serious readers and writers of iambic verse know that one of its neatest tricks is to have a syllable that is normally stressed in a line of prose or spoken English be unaccented, and to have a normally unaccented syllable be accented. In a line from a poem by Anne Finch, quoted in Steele’s book—“Of heightened wit and of the critic’s art”—the *of* that is unaccented in the first foot is accented in the third. In a line by Edward Thomas—“Their doubles and the shadow of my boat”—the usually light *and* is stressed. The best course, writes Steele, and it is a valuable piece of advice, “is to treat as an iamb any foot whose second syllable is heavier than the first.” (Following the practice of the Danish philologist Otto Jespersen, Steele in one section marks lines with the numbers 1 through 4, with 1 identifying the lightest syllable and 4 the heaviest.) These mutations in stress in particular, Steele remarks, “indicate how incredibly complex metrical practice is in comparison to metrical description.”

When Steele claims that the “possibilities for modulation in iambic pentameter are infinite,” it is this maneuvering of stress that he principally has in mind. The ease with which our syllables change their metrical value—despite a recalcitrant few, of course, such as *-ing* and *-y* (types of syllables Steele oddly enough doesn’t discuss in any depth)—distinguishes our language, for instance, from ancient Greek and Latin. In the “qualitative measures” of ancient versification, Steele notes—and this is also true of modern French and Italian—“metrical identities are less susceptible to manipulation.”

Given the almost perfect match between the iambic pentameter line in particular and our accentual language, it seems wrong to disavow rules that, far from fencing in the writer, actually permit much in the way of technical solution and aesthetic discovery. But then those who write exclusively in free verse would not know this. As the Australian poet-critic James McAuley wrote in *Versification: A Short Introduction* (1966)—an observation that Steele includes in his notes—alternate modes of versification “all have difficulties of their own, and all sacrifice something of the unique complexity or variability-within-strictness of the traditional norm.”

For the beginning poet especially, Steele’s book is full of good practical suggestions. “The pentameter line in particular seems capable of accommodating almost any syntactical arrangement, and the serious poet will avoid relying on the more common ones.” Internal rhyme (i.e., a rhyme within a single line) “sound[s] too jingly,” at least to Steele’s ear; but “commonplace rhymes are not inevitably bad.” (Steele’s discussion of the history of rhyme is fascinating.) A common word followed by an uncommon one, Steele avers, is a good strategy; congruent monosyllabic and multisyllabic lines also make for “interesting counterpoints.” “Complexity of technique,” he writes, “is not invariably an advantage.” But perhaps Steele’s most important bit of advice is his quarrel with the belief, put forward by T. S. Eliot, that “meter is most vital when violated” Such a view may have been true when metrical awareness was, as Steele puts it, “internalized and intuitive,” as it was in Eliot’s time; but in our day, when free verse is what is internalized and intuitive, meter is most vital when *not* violated.

The only flaw in Steele's rewarding book is his reluctance to criticize the views of other contemporary studies on prosody. Steele only mentions in passing, for instance, Annie Finch's *The Ghost of Meter* (1993), Alfred Corn's *The Poem's Heartbeat: A Manual of Prosody* (1997), and David's Baker's essay anthology, *Meter in English: A Critical Engagement* (1996).^[1] (Let us not confuse Annie Finch, the fine young American poet, with Anne Finch, the contemporary of Pope's whose line Steele quotes.) Steele commends in passing Corn's *Poem's Heartbeat*, but is Corn more permissive about meter because he has been writing free verse most of his life? I wonder. The positions of other critics need to be clarified, especially if any are passing off as formal verse what properly should be called free. In a note to chapter one, Steele does dispute two erroneous scansion by Paul Fussell in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (scansions involving pyrrhics and spondees), but this is very nearly it for criticism, at least when it comes to the current corps of writers. Indeed, in the very next sentence of this same note, Steele hints that a more tolerant view of pyrrhics and spondees is also found in a piece in David Baker's anthology; if so, I would certainly like to hear more about it.

A pyrrhic foot consists of two unstressed syllables, and a spondee, two long ones. I agree with Steele that if the second syllable of either the pyrrhic or the spondee is the slightest bit heavier than the first, those feet should be considered iambic. And if the first syllable of either spondee or pyrrhic is the slightest bit heavier than the second, these feet should be regarded as trochees. True pyrrhics and spondees are rare, claims Steele. At one point in the book, he writes: "I do not wish to seem spondicidal or pyrrhicial," but he is. In my view, this is another feather in his metrical cap.

This slight reluctance to criticize, however, is no reason not to read *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*. It is the first book on meter I can recall reading that prompted me to shake my head in agreement on almost every page. And apart from its judicious analysis and good counsel, Steele cites as examples some of the finest poetry I have ever seen in a study of this kind; Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Browning, Auden, Stevens, Edgar Bowers, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and Dana Gioia are a few of the poets whose work he draws upon. The glossary is useful, too, and does not suffer in the least from Steele's drumming home further, in different terms, points made earlier.

For someone like me whose views on iambic verse have changed over the years, from the tolerant to the orthodox, it is hard to speak with much authority in these matters. Timothy Steele, however, does not appear to have changed his mind at all. Good thing, because he was right from the beginning.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. See Daniel Kunitz's perceptive review of *Meter in English* in *The New Criterion* (September 1997). [Go back to the text.](#)

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