Here the poet has so contracted that the reader refuses to consider the four *'weep*'s as a series of sounds equally stressed (contrast the reader's very different treatment of King Lear's "Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!"); instead, the reader shapes the four *'weep*'s into two iambic groups and pauses between the two groups. But if the *'weep*'s were removed from their context, the metrical contract would be abrogated, and the reader would give them equal stress as he does Lear's *kill*'s. Such is the authority of the reader's lust for rhythm, once the poet who is in charge has indicated that it is time for it to be unleashed and satisfied.

According to John Crowe Ransom, a poem is an organism like a person, and, like a coherent person, the poem approaches to merit and even to virtue when its head, its heart, and its feet are all cooperating economically. The emphasis that we are going to bring to the feet ought not to seduce us into an overemphasis. It is true that great poems are great metrical achievements. But great metrical achievement alone does not make great poetry. A poet like Robert Bridges is an example of how little mere technical skill in versification—and his is a large and admirable skill—will in the long run serve to redeem and make permanent a poetry without any compelling intellectual or emotional impulse.

2

The Technique of Scansion

Scansion, which can be defined as any system of representing more or less conventional poetic rhythms by visual symbols for purposes of metrical analysis and criticism, does not make rhythm: it reveals and simplifies it by translating it from a temporal into a spatial dimension. By giving a critic a clear visual representation of the metrical situation in a poem, scansion becomes an elementary tool of criticism. If the tool is used clumsily and unimaginatively, the criticism will be primitive; but if the tool is used with devotion and sensitivity, the criticism has a good chance of coming to grips with matters of fundamental poetic value.

The practice of scansion derives, unfortunately, from the techniques of scholarship in the classical languages. This derivation has tended to invest the act of scansion with an air of the doctrinaire, the prescriptive, and the pedantic; for when a classical scholar scans some Greek or Latin verse, he *knows* what pattern the poet is following—or ought to be following—and keeps his eye peeled for "false quantities" or other blemishes indicating that the poet has neglected his metrical business. Our practice in scanning English poetry must be very different, partly because we shall be attending largely to an accentual or an accentual-syllabic rather than a quantitative poetry, and partly because English poetry employs quite different artistic principles from those of classical verse: it engages in much bolder and much more expressive variations from metrical norms than classical poetry. Indeed, it is to locate and interpret and finally to value these variations, rather than to reprehend them, that we scan at all.

Prosodists use one of three systems of signs for scanning English verse: the graphic, the musical, and the acoustic. In graphic scansion, which is the kind we shall be using, the reader affixes the symbol ˘ to syllables which, in their context, are unstressed; he uses the symbol ´ to indicate syllables which, in context, are stressed. A division between poetic feet is indicated by /. A caesura, or metrical pause, is indicated by ||. In musical scansion, on the other hand, eighth notes may be used to represent unstressed syllables, and quarter or half notes to represent stressed syllables of varying weights. Caesuras are sometimes indicated by musical rests of various lengths. Musical scansion does have the advantage of representing more accurately than graphic certain delicate differences in degree of stress: it is obvious that an English line has more than two prosodic kinds of syllables in it, and yet graphic scansion, preferring convenience to absolute accuracy, seems to give the impression that any syllable in a line is either clearly stressed or clearly unstressed. But musical scansion has perhaps a greater disadvantage than this kind of oversimplification: it is not only complex, but even worse tends to imply that poetry follows musical principles closer than it does, an assumption that can lead to all sorts of misapprehensions not only of rhythmical patterns but of total poetic meanings. The third method of scansion, the acoustic, translates poetic sounds into the marks on graph paper produced by such machines as the kymograph and the oscillograph. Like musical scansion, this system has the advantage of accuracy, especially in its representations of many of the empirical phenomena of verse when it is actually spoken aloud; its disadvantages are its complexity, its novelty, and its incapacity to deal with rhythms which no speaker may enunciate but which every silent reader feels. Musical scansion may do no harm to those already learned in music and musical theory; acoustic scansion may be useful to the linguist and the scientist of language; but graphic scansion is best for those who aspire to become not merely accurate readers but also intelligent critics of English poetry.

In learning to perform graphic scansion of a line or group of lines, the reader first marks stressed and unstressed syllables, *not according to any preconceived pattern, but according to the degree of rhetorical emphasis residing in the syllables.* A good way to begin is to mark a prose sentence, thus: Thĕ ónly úsefŭl ĕxpĕctátiŏn thăt ă réadĕr căn bríng tŏ ă póĕm ĭs thăt ĭt wĭll bĕ ĭn cértăin wáys ŭníque, ă thíng ĭn ĭtsélf. Having marked a prose sentence with regard only to the relative force of its various syllables in projecting its meaning and emphasis, we proceed to a stanza of poetry (here, from Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*) and do the same:

I sómetĭmes think thăt névĕr blóws sŏ réd

Thĕ Róse ăs whére sóme búrĭed Cǽsăr bléd;

Thăt évery̆ Hy̆ácĭnth thĕ Gárdĕn wéars

Drópt ĭn hĕr láp frŏm sóme ónce lóvely̆ héad.

Notice that in scanning we mark according to the sound of words, not according to their appearance on the page: thus in the third line here, we mark *évery̆* rather than *év̆ĕry̆*, for that, whether correct or incorrect, is the way we actually say the word. The syllabic regularity in Fitzgerald's lines—each line has ten syllables—as well as the more or less regular placement of stresses suggests that the stanza is written in accentual-syllabic meter, and that hence it is appropriate to invoke the concept of poetic feet.

A poetic foot is a measurable, patterned, conventional unit of poetic rhythm. Because the idea of the foot has been imported into modern accentual-syllabic scansion from classical quantitative practice, quarrels about its nature and even its existence have been loud and long since the Renaissance. Most authorities would agree that if we are going to use the concept of the foot to describe the rhythmic norm of poetic lines, then the foot consists of one stressed syllable and one or two unstressed syllables. The poetic line in a more or less regular composition, traditionalists would maintain, consists of a number of feet from one to eight. By convention, the feet are conceived of as roughly of the same kind, although variations, produced by the "substitution" of different feet, are not only permissible but desirable so long as these substitutions do not efface for long the repeated pattern of the prevailing or dominant kind of foot, which establishes a "grĭd"—like the steady rhythmic beat in jazz—against which departures are audible as "syncopation."

The following are the most common "base" feet in English:

iamb (iambus); iambic, as in	dĕstróy
anapest (anapaest); anapestic	ĭntĕrvéne
trochee; trochaic	tópsy̆
dactyl; dactylic	mérrĭly̆

And the following, although obviously not encountered as base feet, are frequently used for substitution:

spondee; spondaic	húm-drúm
pyrrhic	the sea/sŏn ŏf/mists

Iambic and anapestic feet are called—misleadingly—ascending or rising feet; trochaic and dactylic are known as descending or falling. A poem written prevailingly in iambic or anapestic feet is said to be in ascending or rising rhythm: the rhythm is so called because the reader is presumed to feel, in each foot, an "ascent" from a relatively unstressed syllable to a relatively stressed one. The term is useful only if we keep in mind that it has no metaphoric or symbolic value: ascending rhythm does not, in itself, transmit a feeling of aspiration, levity, or cheer, nor does descending rhythm—generated by prevailing trochees or dactyls—necessarily transmit illusions of falling nor emotions of depression or gloom.

In addition to classifying feet as ascending or descending, we can classify them as duple or triple: two-syllable feet like iambs and trochees are duple feet; three-syllable, like anapests and dactyls, triple. To exemplify poetic feet by single words, as above, is of course to distort their nature: foot divisions do not necessarily correspond to word divisions. Actually, the foot is rather like a musical bar in that both foot and bar are arbitrary abstract units of measure which do not necessarily coincide with the phrasal units on which they are superimposed. The difference between foot and bar is that the bar always begins with a stress.

Because the concept of the foot is an abstraction, we will never encounter a pure example of any of the standard feet. "For that matter," as Hugh Kenner says, "you will never encounter a round face, though the term is helpful; and if the idea of a circle had never been defined for you, you might not be clearly aware of how a round face differs from a long one, even though the existence of some sort of difference is evident to the eye. The term 'iambic foot' has the same sort of status as the term 'round face.' " Although we will probably never meet a really pure spondee or pyrrhic, in which the two syllables are of exactly the same weight, there would seem to be no need for such overscrupulous formulations as the terms "pseudo-spondee" or "false spondee," which suggest that our work as scansionists and critics ought to be more objective and accurate than of course it ever can be. The goal of what we are doing is enjoyment: an excessive refinement of terms and categories may impress others but it will probably not help us very much to appreciate English poetic rhythms.

The terminology of the poetic feet derives from classical quantitative prosody, and this too has been a source of misunderstanding and even hostility among readers of English, for in ancient poetry rhythmical usages are generally much more regular and predictable than in English poetry, where "substitutions" are governed by instinct, whim, or taste rather than by rule. Although it is not often necessary to invoke any more than the six feet indicated above in describing the rhythm of an English line, it does no harm to be acquainted with the following feet, all of which are to be found in Greek or Latin poetry (where, of course, duration of syllables rather than stress determines the pattern):

amphibrach	˘ ´ ˘
antispast	˘ ´ ´ ˘
bacchic	˘ ´ ´
choriamb	´ ˘ ˘ ´
cretic	´ ˘ ´
epitrite	˘ ´ ´ ´

(called first, second, third, or fourth epitrite according to the position of the short syllable)

ionic a majore ´ ´ ˘ ˘

ionic a minore ˘ ˘ ´ ´

paeon ´ ˘ ˘ ˘

(called first, second, third, or fourth paeon according to the position of the long syllable)

mollossus ´ ´ ´

tribrach ˘ ˘ ˘

Returning now to our *Rubaiyat* stanza: after ascertaining whether the rhythm in general is ascending or descending, we mark the feet, making certain that the end of each line corresponds with the end of a foot:

Ĭ sóme/times thínk/ thăt név/ĕr blóws/sŏ réd/
Thĕ Róse/ăs whére/sóme búr/ĭed Cáe/săr bléd;/
Thăt év/erў Hý/ăcĭnth/thĕ Gár/dĕn wéars/
Drópt ĭn/hĕr láp/frŏm sóme/ónce lóve/lў héad./

Although only the first line consists wholly of iambic feet, it is not hard to see that the prevailing or dominant foot of the stanza is iambic, and that the lines are based on a recurrent pattern of five feet. We thus designate the meter as iambic pentameter. Terms for other line lengths are:

one foot	monometer
two feet	dimeter
three feet	trimeter
four feet	tetrameter
six feet	hexameter
seven feet	heptameter
eight feet	octameter

A fuller description of the *Rubaiyat* stanza would indicate the rhyme scheme: *a a b a*. A handy way to notate both the rhyme scheme and the length of the line in feet is: *a a b* a^5.

The stanza from the *Rubaiyat* presents a very uncomplicated metrical situation. Some complexity begins to enter when we encounter lines like these, from Pope's "The Rape of the Lock":

Fávŏurs/ tŏ nóne, || tŏ áll/shĕ smíles/ĕxténds;/
Óft shĕ/rĕjécts, || bŭt név/ĕr ónce/ŏffénds./

Here we come upon a strong, rhetorically meaningful caesura, or extrametrical pause, within the lines. The caesura here, positioned after the fourth syllable, near the middle of the line, is called a medial caesura. If it should occur near the beginning of the line, it is called an initial caesura; if near the end of the line, terminal. Caesuras, which are often marked by punctuation, can be said to correspond to breath pauses between musical phrases; in verse, their slight interruption of the propulsive metrical pattern can provide a kind of expressive counterpoint or opposition as well as enforcing the rhetorical sense, as, in the Pope example, the caesura provides a metrical fulcrum for the rhetorical antitheses. Some lines have more than one caesura; some have none. Unless the slight unpunctuated pause after *lap* in the last line of the *Rubaiyat* stanza be considered a caesura, those four lines have none.

To become sensitive to the presence of caesuras in English poems is to move toward both a heightened awareness of literary history and a new receptiveness to the art of texture in all the poems one encounters. In classical, Romance, and Old English verse the caesura is used in a fairly predictable way. It is only with the development in English of the staple iambic pentameter line—that ubiquitous and apparently permanent vehicle—that varied and expressive caesura placement (as in Chaucer) begins to become a subtle prosodic device. While in Old English verse the invariable medial caesura had been used to separate each line into two half-lines and thus to assert the regularity of the structure, in Modern English the caesura is more often used as a device of variety which helps mitigate metrical rigors as it shifts from position to position in successive lines. In formal verse, whether classical, Romance, or Old English, the medial position of the caesura is generally predictable; in verse aspiring to a greater flexibility and informality, we cannot anticipate the position of the pauses, and here they serve quite a different function.

The predictable medial caesura occurs with great regularity in the accentual, alliterative poetry of Old English:

Hige sceal þe heardra, || heorte þe cenre,
Mod sceal þe mare, || þe ure maegen lytlaþ.
("The Battle of Maldon")

It is also extremely regular in the staple line of French epic and dramatic verse, the syllabic alexandrine:

Trois fois cinquante jours || le général naufrage
Dégasta l'univers; || et fin d'un tel ravage
(Du Bartas, "La Première Semaine")

It appears as a formalizing device in English blank verse of the early Renaissance as the verse seems to strain to break away from memories of its Old English ancestry:

O knights, O squires, || O gentle blouds yborne,
You were not borne, || al onely for your selves:
(Gascoigne, "The Steel Glass")

Likewise much English Augustan poetry exploits the medial caesura, but for quite special effects of antithetical wit and irony:

See Sin in State, || majestically drunk;
Proud as a Peeress, || prouder as a Punk;
Chaste to her Husband, || frank to all beside,
A teeming Mistress, || but a barren Bride.
(Pope, "Moral Essay II")

In seventeenth-century blank verse, on the other hand, and especially in Milton's, the placement of the caesura is often extremely flexible and surprising:

Thus with the Year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, || or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn.

* * *

And Bush with frizl'd hair implicit: || last
Rose as in dance the stately Trees. . . .
(*Paradise Lost*)

It is also deployed with flexibility in much modern iambic pentameter verse:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, || unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress. . . .
(Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium")

From these examples it is clear that the caesura can be used in two quite antithetical ways: (1) as a device for emphasizing the formality of the poetic construction and for insisting on its distance from colloquial utterance; and (2) as a device for investing fairly strict meters with something of the informal movement—the unpredictable pauses and hesitations—of ordinary speech. If the caesura occurs regularly in the medial position, we are dealing with a different kind of verse from that in which caesura placement is varied and unpredictable: which is to say that the whole metrical contract between poet and reader becomes a different one. Consider, for example, Frost's "Out, Out——"; here the caesuras are prevailingly medial and astonishingly unvaried:

No one believed. || They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing! || —and that ended it.
No more to build on there. || And they, since they
Were not the one dead, || turned to their affairs.

What Frost suggests by this reminiscence of formal caesura practice is that a domestic rural disaster is being raised to the elevation of extremely formal art. We can contrast, on the other hand, the practice of T. S. Eliot in "Journey of the Magi." Here the caesuras are unexpectedly varied:

There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, || the terraces

* * *

All this was a long time ago, || I remember,
And I would do it again, || but set down
This set down
This: || were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? . . .

Another example: unless we are in the army, we generally pronounce the word *detail* with the accent on the second syllable. That, at least, is the pronunciation prescribed in most dictionaries. Now if poetic rhythm were always supplied entirely by the rhetorical emphasis of the actual words in their prose sense, and never by the silent, continuing metrical background, the word *detail* in the opening lines of Frost's "Directive" would invite its normal prose pronunciation. But we find that it does not:

> Back out of all this now too much for us,
> Back in a time made simple by the loss
> Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off . . .

Here it is the meter itself that, regardless of the way we normally pronounce the word, forces us on this occasion to pronounce it as the poem demands we should.

At least two kinds of temptation toward mis-scansion offer themselves when we permit a scansion to register the metrical as well as the actual rhythm: there is first the general difficulty of knowing what the dominant meter of a line is and the temptation to simplify matters by mechanically reading some presumed meter into the words before us; and secondly there is the difficulty of mastering historical pronunciation and thus recovering the rhythm actually implicit in the line regarded as a historical artifact. It is safe to say that only very infrequently will a metrical pattern predominate so powerfully over the actual rhythm of the language in a line that it will force the pronunciation to bend to its will. If we must give a preference to either the metrical or the actual, it is probably safest to err in scansion on behalf of the actual rhythm. Proceeding *a priori* is as dangerous in prosody as elsewhere.

What, finally, is scansion for? To scan only to conclude that a poem is "written in iambic pentameter" is to do nothing significant. It is only as a basis for critical perception and ultimately for critical judgment that scansion can justify itself. The sort of perception that scansion makes possible by translating sound into visual terms can be illustrated in the *Rubaiyat* stanza with which we began. Consider what happens in the last two lines of that stanza:

> Thăt év/ery̆ Hý/ăcĭnth/thĕ Gár/dĕn wéars/
>
> Drópt ĭn/hĕr lăp/frŏm sóme/ónce lóve/ly̆ héad./

By giving us a clear visual representation of the metrical status of the words, the scansion of these two lines makes apparent the substitution of a trochee for the expected iamb at the beginning of the last line. This variation, which reinforces the shocking suddenness and rapidity of the fall of the drops of blood, constitutes a moment of high, although perhaps not the highest, technical accomplishment. It is to learn to appraise such accomplishments accurately that we scan at all.

3

Metrical Variations

Meter probably began as a mere mnemonic device, a way of helping bards and scholars memorize their epics and annals and genealogies, their medical prescriptions, legal codes, and recipes, before the days of printed books. When meter is used mnemonically it is essential that it be as regular as possible. The principle of expressive variation from a metrical norm is thus a relatively late metrical development. It is certainly the primary source of metrical pleasure for the modern critical reader. As Robert Frost puts it, "We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick."

We can discriminate three degrees of metrical competence in poets. In the lowest degree, exemplified by the effusions which appear in rural newspapers, we feel a metrical imperative either not at all or only very rarely:

I KISSED PA TWICE AFTER HIS DEATH

By Mattie J. Peterson

I kissed dear Pa at the grave,
  Then soon he was buried away;
Wreaths were put on his tomb,
  Whose beauty soon decay.

I lay down and slept after the burial;—
  I had started to school, I dreamed,
But had left my books at home,
  Pa brought them it seemed.

I saw him coming stepping high,
  Which was of his walk the way;
I had stopped at a house near by—
  His face was pale as clay.

When he lay under a white sheet
  On the morning after his decease,
I kissed his sad and sunken cheek,
  And hoped his spirit had found peace.

When he was having convulsions
  He feared he would hurt me;
Therefore told me to go away.
  He had dug artichokes for me.

Pa dug artichokes on that day,
  He never will dig anymore;
He has only paid the debt we owe.
  We should try to reach the shining shore.

Here so much effort is going into finding rhymes that little energy is left over for the meter.

In the middle range of metrical competence we find poems which establish in the first line a rigorously regular metric and then adhere religiously to it with little or no variation. Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* (1565), composed in an excessively regular blank verse, is such a work. Swinburne said of it: "Verse assuredly it is not; there can be no verse, where there is no modulation." The works of folk-poets like Edgar Guest and Henry Van Dyke belong to this second category. Their metrical regularity makes them remarkably easy to memorize and recite, and perhaps public recitation is what they are designed for:

I know that Europe's wonderful, yet something seems to lack:
The Past is too much with her, and the people looking back.
But the glory of the Present is to make the Future free—
We love our land for what she is and what she is to be.
(Henry Van Dyke, "America for Me")

The very regularity of the meter, indeed, is conceived to constitute a large part of the merit of such compositions.

In poems of the third and most sophisticated metrical kind, the entire function of meter is very different from what it is in poems of the second sort. Emerson's remark helps suggest the all-important difference: "It is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem." Or as Pound puts it, "[Meter] can't be merely a careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense." In this kind of poem the poet establishes regularity only to depart from it expressively. When he does compose a metrically regular line it is not because the metrical scheme tells him to, but because something in the matter he is embodying impels him toward a momentary regularity. It is only with poems of this third metrical level that we shall be concerned: here we shall see meter used less as a mere ordering element than as an expressive one.

"Most arts," writes Pound, "attain their effect by using a fixed element and a variable." The fixed element in poetry is the received or contrived grid or framework of metrical regularity; the variable is the action of the rhythm of the language as it departs from this framework. This opposition between the "silent" or abstract metrical pattern and the actual language rhythm has been described by many terms which mean roughly the same thing: counterpoint, modulation, tension, syncopation, interplay, variation. It is probably true, as W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley suggest, that "there is no line so regular (so *evenly* alternating weak and strong) that it does not show some tension. It is practically impossible to write an English line that will not in some way buck against the meter. Insofar as the line does approximate the condition of complete submission, it is most likely a tame line, a weak line." Tameness and weakness, for all the fraudulent pretence of vigor and manliness, are the metrical curse, ultimately, of lines like Van Dyke's, lines that are too regular or are regular for only extrinsic or mechanical reasons.

It almost goes without saying that the most expressive metrical variations are possible only in verse conceived in a tradition of more or less regular base rhythm. Variations of the kind we shall be considering are the province of a very specific and limited kind of poetry—namely, accentual-syllabic verse (or accentual verse with a high degree of syllabic regularity) written since the stabilization of Modern English early in the Renaissance. If English prosodic history has one great tradition, this is where we must go to find it.

If we are more or less traditional graphic scansionists, we will probably use the term *substitution* as the readiest way to describe metrical variations. Once a metrical pattern has been implied in a poem, we can say that variations in the rhythm occur through the introduction of substitute feet which here and there replace certain of the base feet. Such a way of talking is not likely to lead us astray so long as we remember that we are speaking in metaphors. In Yeats's lines that follow, for example, we can say that each contains a substitution for one of the expected iambic feet:

Ăn ág/ĕd mán/ĭs bŭt/ă pál/try̆ thing,/
Ă tát/tĕred cóat/ŭpŏn/ă stick,/ŭnléss/
Sóul cláp/ĭts hánds/ănd sing,/ănd lóud/ĕr sing/
Fŏr év/ery̆ tát/tĕr ĭn/ĭts mór/tăl dréss/. . . .

Line 1 has a pyrrhic in the third position; line 2 a pyrrhic in the third; line 3 a spondaic (or perhaps trochaic) substitution in the first position; and line 4 a pyrrhic in the third. Here the substitutions serve both to relieve the metrical monotony of the long-continued, unvaried iambic pentameter and to allow the rhythmical structure to "give" and shape itself according to the rhetorical pressures of the statement. And the rhythmical shaping is noticeable only because it takes place against the background of the "silent" metrical continuum.

In the following lines from Arnold's "Dover Beach" we find substitutions used very specifically on behalf of the physical and emotional reinforcement of the sense:

Listĕn!/yŏu héar/thĕ grá/ting róar/
Ŏf péb/blĕs whĭch/thĕ wáves/dráw báck,/ănd fling,/
Ăt thĕir/rĕtúrn,/ŭp thĕ/high stránd,/
Bĕgin,/ănd céase,/ănd thén/ăgain/bĕgin/. . . .

Against the established iambic background which precedes, the initial trochaic substitution in line 1 constitutes an unexpected reversal of rhythmical movement which emphasizes the new intensification in the speaker's address to his listener. To replace the trochee *Listen!* with an iamb like *But hark!* is to appreciate the power of the reversed initial foot to grab the reader. In line 2 the spondaic substitution in the fourth position implies and enacts the slowness of the seawave as it withdraws back upon itself, gathering force by accumulation like a coil spring to shoot itself up the beach. The pyrrhic substitution in the first position in line 3 is the rhythmical equivalent of the speed with which the wave flings itself up the sloping sands. And in line 4 the return to the regularity of unvaried iambic meter after these suggestive variations emphasizes rhythmically in this context the infinite, monotonous continuance of the waves' old kinetic process.

In addition to the strictly dissyllabic substitutions we have been considering, lines can also be varied by the addition or subtraction of unaccented syllables: these variations are accomplished, we can say, by trisyllabic or monosyllabic substitution. In duple measures the substitution of a trisyllabic foot for a dissyllabic one is a bolder practice than any we have seen so far, for it increases the syllabic length of the line and thus effaces one of the norms of predictability. Consider Yeats's variations here:

Ónce óut/ ŏf ná/ tŭre Ĭ/ shăll né/ vĕr táke/
My̆ bó/ dĭly̆ fórm/ frŏm á/ ny̆ ná/ tŭrăl thíng,/ . . .
("Sailing to Byzantium")

In the second and fifth positions of line 2 we find anapests replacing iambs, and the two trisyllabic substitutions swell the line to twelve instead of ten syllables, a weighty equivalent of the climactic revelation the line embodies. Even more venturesome is Frost's metrical practice at the beginning of his lyric "Come In," where, after establishing an initial rhythm very like anapestic trimeter in a poem which will prove to be prevailingly iambic, Frost reverses completely to a dactylic movement, and then presents a caesura and a monosyllable as the equivalent of a complete foot:

Ăs Ĭ cáme/ tŏ thĕ édge/ ŏf thĕ wóods,/
Thrúsh mŭsĭc || —hárk!/

As we can deduce from these examples, the principles of expression through metrical variation are the following:

1. A succession of stressed syllables without the expected intervening unstressed syllables can reinforce effects of slowness, weight, or difficulty;
2. A succession of unstressed syllables without the expected intervening stressed syllables can reinforce effects of rapidity, lightness, or ease;
3. An unanticipated reversal in the rhythm (as in line 1 of the Arnold passage, or line 2 of the Frost) implies a sudden movement, often of discovery or illumination; or a new direction of thought, a new tone of voice, or a change or intensification of poetic address.

Before we consider some triumphant moments in English poetry of each of these principles, it might be well to make a cautionary point. We should understand clearly that although metrical variations can be displayed by scansion and analyzed dispassionately, when the poet performs them they are largely instinctual, a technique of his art so unconsciously mastered that he seldom pauses formally to debate a metrical alternative. Indeed, many poets whose work can be analyzed metrically according to the traditional foot system would undoubtedly be astonished to hear that they have indulged in anything like "substitution." The poet often composes according to the rhythms which his utterance supplies, and although these rhythms frequently turn out to consist of "base" and "substitute" feet, they do not necessarily begin that way.

At the same time, we may suspect that Alexander Pope, a highly self-conscious metrist, is one poet who is quite deliberately weighing and measuring feet in his famous passage from "An Essay on Criticism" designed to illustrate the first of our principles, the reinforcement of effects of weight or difficulty by the device of spondaic substitution:

Whĕn Á/ jăx strívcs/ sóme róck's/ vást wéight/ tŏ thrów,/
Thĕ líne/ tóo lá/ bŏurs, ănd/ thĕ wórds/ móve slów;/

Although a large part of the reinforcement is rhythmical here—the result of the spondaic substitution in the fourth position of