

ENGLISH METRES

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English Metres by William Strunk

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WILLIAM STRUNK

**ENGLISH
METRES**

cover

ENGLISH METRES

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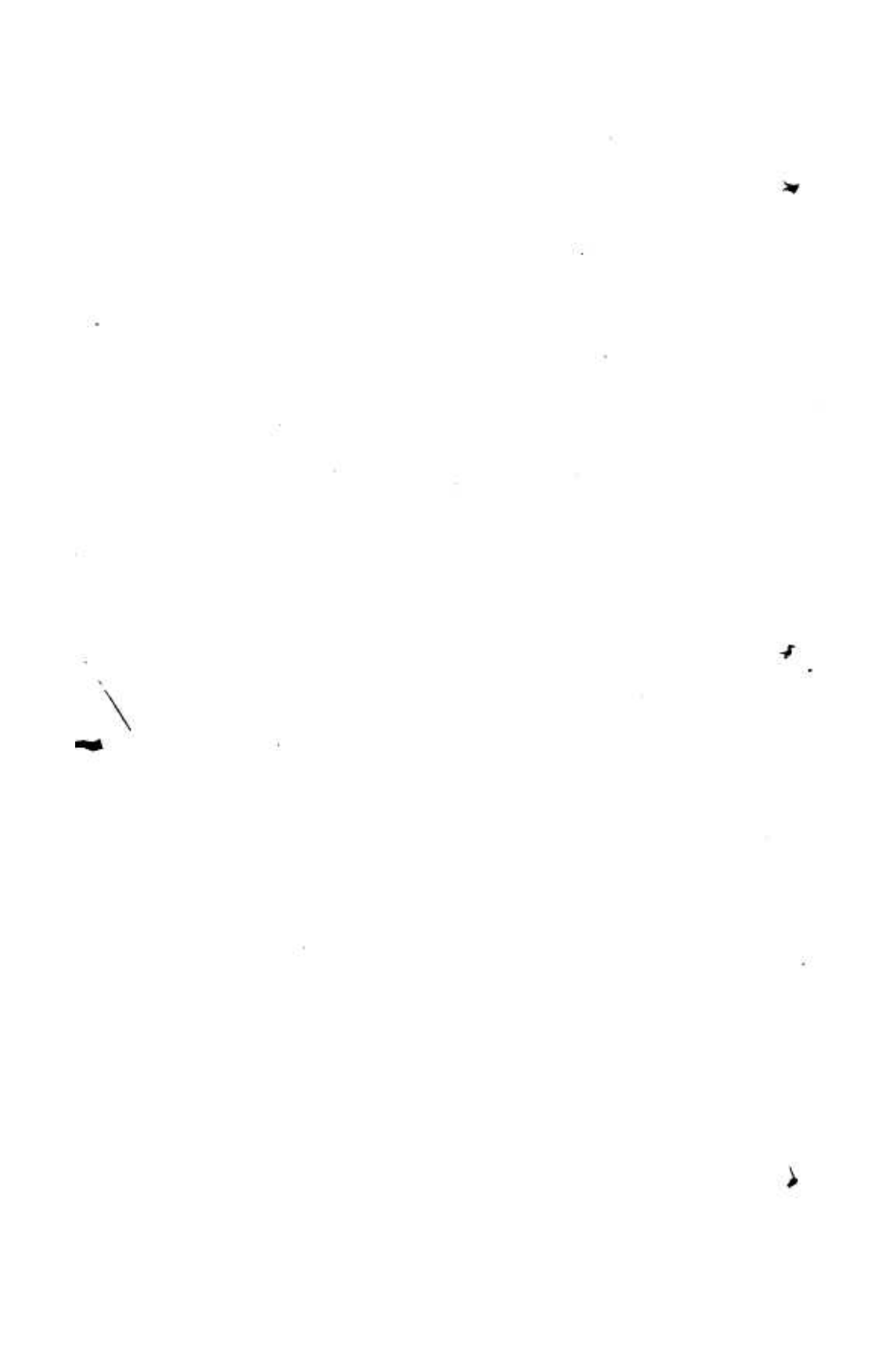
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PREFACE

The aim of this book is to provide a brief explanation of the nature of English verse and of the means used to analyze and describe it, together with a description and history of the more frequent metrical forms. The examples are for the greater part from poems commonly studied in courses in English and American literature. It has seemed best to recognize that many points in metrical theory are still debatable. The method of marking scansion that has been employed is, of course, only one of many, but is that which, on the whole, most commends itself to the writer. For further study are recommended R. M. Alden, *English Verse*; C. F. Andrews, *The Writing and Reading of Verse*; Robert Bridges, *Milton's Prosody*; C. F. Jacob, *The Foundation and Nature of Verse*; T. S. Omond, *English Metrists*. The work last mentioned gives a complete history of the subject, with full bibliography. To these works the writer wishes to record his obligations. He takes this occasion to express his thanks to his colleagues Professors Martin Sampson, F. C. Prescott, and F. E. Fiske, for helpful comments on his manuscript, and Mr. J. H. Nelson, for assistance in reading the proof.



CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF VERSE

The word *verse* will be used in the following pages in the meaning of rhythmically organized language, the kind of language in which poetry is written. To avoid confusion, the word will not be used in the meaning of line or of stanza. The study of verse is essentially the study of the sound of poetry, not in utter disregard of the sense, but at least a study radically different from the study of the ideas or the imagery or the diction.

The study of the sound of verse cannot, of course, wholly disregard the sense, because the sound and the sense are inseparably connected. In verse, as in prose, the position of the pauses between words, the relative emphasis of different syllables, the speed or slowness with which a passage is read, though allowing of a certain amount of variation, are all determined or influenced by the sense. In verse, far more than in prose, the choice of words, and consequently the shade of meaning conveyed, is in part determined by considerations of sound. Further, as will be explained and illustrated later, in verse we often find correspondences of another kind between sense and sound: lines and groups of lines which correspond to each other in a metrical pattern are often paralleled or contrasted in sense.

Verse is often spoken of as rhyme, sometimes in disparagement, as if it were nothing but the matching of syllables, sometimes in poetic language, as when Milton says,

Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

But while this use of the term rhyme for verse is evidence that rhyme is ordinarily a conspicuous element

in the verse in which it occurs, it is not essential to verse. Classical Greek and Latin verse was without rhyme, and unrhymed verse is common in English and in many other modern languages. An examination of rhymed verse will show that its effect, which we uncritically assume to be due solely to the presence of rhyme, is in reality produced by several factors. The syllables that rhyme bear stress, and they occur at more or less regular intervals of time. This is as apparent in a nursery jingle like "Tom, Tom, the piper's son" as in a poem of lofty sentiment and diction like *Lycidas*. Nor are the rhyming words likely to be the only ones that have been selected with regard to their sound. In the aforesaid "Tom, Tom," there is a reason for its being a pig that the piper's son stole: *piper* and *pig* begin with the same sound. We feel a certain appropriateness that would have been absent if he had stolen, say, a sheep. There is also a reason for his roaring instead of howling or crying: *run* and *roar* begin with the same sound.

In unrhymed verse, the same elements are present: certain syllables are through stress more prominent than others and occur at more or less regular intervals of time; words are chosen and grouped together, not merely for their meaning and associations, but in part for their sound.

These two elements of verse will in this discussion be called rhythm and harmony.

The term rhythm, in a broad sense, is applicable to any wave-like progression, one which rises and falls recurrently. It is an essential element in music, in dancing, in anything that, as we say, has a swing to it. Indeed, there is little doubt that poetry, music, and the dance had a common origin in the expression of emotion through rhythm. In early stages of culture the three are practiced together. Song without dancing, verse not intended for singing, are later developments. But through all, verse remains, in literature, preeminently the lan-