Verse and worse - rhythms in English

Martin Eayrs

Published in the *Buenos Aires Herald*, 1990

There is a basic difference in the rhythm and stress patterns of the English and Spanish languages, and the importance of the weak /ə/ ('schwa';) vowel, (the first vowel sound in the word "about"). English and Spanish have different stress systems, English being a stress-timed language and Spanish being a syllable-timed one, and this obviously presents problems for the learner of English, who inevitably tries to superimpose the stress patterns of his own language, Spanish, on the target language, English.

Some poems that are particularly good for practicing the rhythms of English are: for small children the nursery rhymes *The House that Jack Built* and possibly *Three Blind Mice*, and for adults, almost anything by Rudyard Kipling, W.S. Gilbert or from T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Specific poems I might single out which could serve as good rhythmic showcases would be John Masefield's *Cargoes*, with its variety of rhythms to suit the different kinds of water-going vessels he describes; Edgar Allen Poe's *The Bells* or *The Raven* and W.H. Auden's superb poem, *Night Mail*, written for the British postal services, which catches like no other poem that I know the different rhythms of a steam train working its way across the countryside.

Night Mail starts like this:

> *This is the Night Mail crossing the Border,*
> *Bringing the cheque and the postal order,*
> *Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,*
> *The shop at the corner and the girl next door.*
> *Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb-*
> *The gradient's against her, but she's on time ...*

Note here the ingenious way in which the pulse and the pace of a rail journey are captured in a few evocative phrases: to appreciate the full journey it is necessary to read the poem in its entirety.

My second example is from *The Pirates of Penzance* by Gilbert and Sullivan, which opens with the words:

> *I am the very pattern of a modern Major-Gineral,*
> *I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral;*
> *I know the Kings of England, and I quote the fights historical,*
> *From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical...*

and ends:

> *For my military knowledge, though I'm plucky and adventury,*
> *Has only been brought down to the beginning of the century,*
> *But still in learning vegetable, animal, and mineral,*
> *I am the very model of a modern Major-Gineral.*

Here, the rippling, polysyllabic rhythm (better sung!) rushes us through the verse at top speed, only touching ground to stress the second and the tenth syllables of each line. The effect is entertaining and, incidentally, causes some interesting pronunciations, such as the word 'vegetable', pronounced here as a four-syllable word instead of the usual three, and the coining of new words and expressions to meet the requirements of the rhythm. This meticulous attention to the stress pattern which appears so effortless in the work of W.S. Gilbert is, in fact, very difficult indeed to achieve, although easy enough to parody.

Ogden Nash's poem *England Expects* begins with the words:

> *Let us pause to consider the English,*

Who when they pause to consider themselves get all reticently thrilled and tinglish.
Englishmen are distinguished by their traditions and ceremonials,
And also by their affection for their colonies and their condescension to their colonials.
When foreigners ponder world affairs, why, sometimes by doubts they are smitten,
But Englishmen know instinctively that what the world needs most is whatever is best for Great Britain.....

Here, leaving aside Nash's chillingly perceptive view of British attitudes, we can see how the verse also derives its humorous effect from the deliberate subordination of the shape of the second part of each couplet to the long awaited rhyme which is held over from the first half, the reader being obliged, as in Gilbert's verse, to reach it at full pace in order to get to both the rhythm and the sense at the end of the second line, whilst still holding the end of the first line in his mind.

The basic rhythm pulse of English poetry is 'iambic' which means an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, e.g.

We TRAvel NOT for TRAFfickING alONE;
By HOTter WINDS our FIEry HEARTS are FANned:
For LUST of KNOWing WHAT should NOT be KNOWN
We TAKE the GOLden ROAD to SAmarkAND

where the capital letters denote stressed syllables.

Much of Shakespeare's drama is written in iambic pentameters, i.e. five iambic stressed beats to each line,

a HORSE, a HORSE, my KINGdom FOR a HORSE !

If, as in many cases, the iambic pentameters are not rhymed, the poetry is termed blank verse.

If we turn an iambic the other way round, we have a 'trochaic', i.e. a stressed beat followed by an unstressed one. I remember at school singing the hymn:

LORD, thy WORD aBIDeth:
AND our FOOTsteps GUIDeth:
WHO its TRUTH beLIEVeth
LIGHT and JOY reCEIveth.

These two-syllable forms are sometimes referred to as 'duple time', i.e. they have two 'feet'. However, other feet are termed 'triple time', i.e. they have three syllables and these may be either 'anapaests' or 'dactyls'. An example of an anapaestic would be:

He had FORty-two BOXes all CAREfully PACKed,
With his NAME painted CLEARly on EACH.

and dactylic:

FORty years ON when aFAR and aSUNder
PARted are THOSE who are SINGing toDAY.

which may be familiar to some readers as the beginning of the 'Harrow School Song'. Of course, poetry today often implies a mixture of these 'feet' but these four types of beat provide the basis of nearly all kinds of rhythmic poetry in English.

For reasons of demonstrating the rhythms above, I have put the stressed syllables in UPPER CASE letters, but learners of English who are bent on improving their rhythm would be best advised to study these rhythms with a teacher who is capable of reading them competently or, if not, find examples of these or other rhythmic poetry which have been recorded in order to listen to the different rhythms of the language.