Three Essays
On 'Potty' and 'Unprincipled' Professorial Poetics

(2) *'How doth the Rosen Crocodile'…*

An Assessment of Michael Rosen's Book
What Is Poetry?

I

Introduction

Michael Rosen is a man with a very amusing, entertaining and thoughtful way with words, and he brings a lot of fun to many people, young and old. He is very successful at stimulating the imagination of children. However, his recent book, ***What Is Poetry?*** (Walker books, 2016) is a very bad one.

'Poetry' is a subject that is still thought important enough to be made a part of the National Curriculum for Primary Schools; but the teaching of it is something that many of the teachers themselves do not find easy. This is in no doubt in large part because nobody seems to be quite sure anymore quite what 'poetry' ***is***.

Mr Rosen is unable to help in this matter. Indeed, he would seem to seek to entrench the absence of definition and certainty in this regard. He is happily prepared to abandon the search that his book's title leads us to expect that he might seriously engage in, in favour of a fatuous declaration that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem.

In its 'easy' style, Mr Rosen's cheerfully presented book seems to be aimed at about the ten-year-old level. However, it makes broader claims. It is, according to its cover,

The only guide to poetry children and teachers will ever need.

However, teachers and children would be well advised to avoid a book which gives a distorted and corrupted idea of the true nature of English poetry.

This is a book that makes no attempt to describe the craft principles of metre and versification that have informed and defined poetry for centuries. The terms 'verse', 'metre' and 'prose' are not to be found in the book's **'Index'**, and hardly appear in its text. Mr Rosen is a cheat.

Further, when he deals with that other essential craft principle of poetry, 'rhythm', he does so in such an inadequate, confused and indeed bizarre way, that he renders the term – as he uses it – invalid by reasons of ambiguity.

In this, and in his other attempts to give any reasonable technical basis to his prosodical treatise, he is in the main partial, evasive and muddled – and sometimes, it would seem, unbalanced.

His book is a disgrace, and it should be withdrawn from publication.

II

A Shorter Review of the Book
What Is Poetry?

This book describes itself as 'The only guide to poetry children and teachers will ever need'. This claim, for a book that is apparently aimed at children of about ten, is absurd. In fact the book proves to be a dangerously misleading publication. This is because, firstly, the way in which Mr Rosen presents an answer to his question **'What Is Poetry?'** is partial and fundamentally flawed; and because, secondly, he proves to be in many ways incompetent in matters of poetics and prosody. This book is a disgrace.

Before any demonstration is made of the book's capacity to seriously misdirect unwary readers of any age in matters of poetry and poetics, an extended proposal will be made. It may be submitted that any book making the extraordinary claim to be 'the only guide to poetry children and teachers will ever need' might be expected to say something along these lines:

> That the craft of poetry is at least thirteen hundred years old;
> that this craft was originally one of making *metrical verses* which had sustained and consistent *rhythms;*
> that the verses of any piece of poetry relate to each other as members of a metrical 'set' or sets;
> that other formal patterning devices were used, first that of so-called *'alliteration'* (or 'head-rhyme'), and then of *end-rhyme*;
> and that such formal, technical characteristics are what principally distinguished *poems* from pieces of *prose*.

Such a perspective on the craft of poetry can be simply and interestingly provided for children, as for adults.

Mr Rosen does not attempt any such explication. Indeed, his book is fundamentally flawed and false because it does not anywhere deal directly with matters of *versification*: the terms 'verse', 'metre' and 'prose' *do not appear in his* **'Index'** *or in the text*. He makes no attempt to give an answer to his question **'What Is Poetry?'** by providing even a minimal description of the original craft principles of verse-making – formal techniques which may still be used to pleasurable effect in the shaping of poems.

The mode of Mr Rosen's discourse in this book is one that brings about what may be broadly termed a 'muddle'. However, it is worse than that. His failure to define the terms 'poetry' and 'poem' in an historical and technical way will leave his readers to a crucial extent *uninformed*. They will not then be able to see how he proceeds into a dissertation that is evasive and critically distorted and which leads to a *deformed* account of the nature of poetry and poems.

This is how he begins. In his Introduction he writes:

> This book talks about how to read, write and listen to poetry. In the first chapter, I'll start by simply asking, "What is poetry?' I don't think I'll be answering that, though! (page 6)

Then this is how he begins his first chapter, **'What is Poetry?'**:

> A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem. But people don't always agree, and when they argue about it, they try to find some special things about poetry that you can't find in other kinds of writing. They say things like:
>
> - a poem has to **rhyme**, or should have a particular **rhythm**;
> - a poem should have **metaphors** and **similes** (I'll be talking about these later on);
> - a poem should say something beautiful in an especially beautiful way;
> - a poem should say something that surprises us;
> - a poem should say something in a memorable way.
>
> One problem with this is that it's quite easy to find other kinds of writing that do some or all of these things; proverbs, riddles, jokes, plays, songs, holy writing and speeches. And another problem is that plenty of people have written what *they* say are poems but which have no rhymes or particular rhythms, metaphors or similes, or special, beautiful language.
>
> So answering the question "What is poetry?" is not easy. One way round it is to ask another question: "What can poetry DO?"
>
> So I've chosen some pieces of writing that writers and readers agree are poems and I'm going to think about what they DO and what I'm doing in my mind as I read them.
>
> (pages 9, 10)

Mr Rosen has told us that he will not be answering his leading question, **'What Is Poetry?'** We need to watch carefully as he realises the bizarre and rather nasty 'joke' that he

is playing on his readers, with its disarming question mark, because his disgraceful and insidious purpose with this book is to embed the fatuous assertion that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and reader agree it's a poem.

He draws up a series of suggestions as to what might be 'special things about poetry'. He attributes these possible distinguishing characteristics of poetry to unknown or unnamed 'people'. In this way he achieves a sort of 'impartiality' for himself. It is these 'people' who thus omit to consider the terms 'verse' and 'metre' as possible 'special things about poetry' and who fail to make any distinction between 'poetry' and 'prose'. Thus Mr Rosen 'impartially allows' the removal of some of the most fundamental terms that it is necessary to bring to bear in any attempt to answer the question, **'What Is Poetry?'** This is perfidious.

The first in the series of 'special things' presents **'rhyme'** and **'rhythm',** which seems to indicate some readiness to engage in basic, technical discussion of versification. This 'readiness' proves illusory. The next in the series concerns 'figures of speech'. The simple objection here is that such figures of speech as **'metaphors'** and **'similes'** are only *general* literary elements or devices – though they may be particularly prevalent in 'poetry'. As to the three other entries in the series, these are of increasingly weak literary generality.

Mr Rosen answers any such reservations as we might have by as it were agreeing with them. He dismisses this series of 'special things' *in toto* by raising two 'problems' – both of them presented in his own 'voice'. These 'problems' solve the one 'problem' of having to give some sort of 'definition' of 'poetry', of what might be its particular and fundamental literary qualities.

Both of the 'problems' he presents are essentially spurious as demonstrations in poetics, in that, as has been pointed out, a full discussion of the matters in hand has been stultified because crucial terms have been excluded from the debate. However, both 'problems' prove false on other, more limited considerations.

(Of course, the term 'problem', as Mr Rosen has used it, is a bit of a 'problem' in itself, and is best set aside. What he is saying is that there are two possible *'refutations'* of the whole attempt – as he has presented it – 'to find some special things about poetry'.)

In his first 'refutation', then, he takes as it were a 'punt gun' to 'sitting ducks' – and 'plastic' ones, at that. Of course, he is right about the spurious nature of most of the 'special things about poetry' that he has 'set up' as the objections of these other 'people'. However, his 'refutation' is in one obvious respect false: matters of **'rhyme'** and **'rhythm'** are *not* 'plastic'. If any piece of those 'other kinds of writing' that he instances (without examples) were to have a rhyme scheme and a formal rhythmic verse structure, that piece would reasonably prove to be a '*poem*': 'riddles', or 'jokes', for instance, may be in poetic form – as joking limericks always are.

Mr Rosen's second 'refutation' is weak, silly and indeed meaningless; but it will nevertheless 'carry' many unwary readers with it. The 'plenty of people' who, as both writers *and* readers now, are declaring pieces of writing to be 'poems' without reference to any sort of proof in poetics, may simply be laughed at. However, this is not a laughing matter. Mr Rosen is of course one of those self-declaring 'poets'; and in the course of these barely more than two hundred words he has laid a horrible trap for unwary readers, whether children or teachers: he has arrived at an apparently reasonable endorsement of his original, absurd proposition that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem.

This is *nonsense*. It is *cheating*. It is '*fakery'*. Mr Rosen's procedures in this discourse are *perverse;* and they are *perverting* of sound, logical processes. They are *corrupt*.

*

If the above analysis of what is a fraudulent process of argument and exegesis is not thought sufficient indication of Mr Rosen's unworthiness as a teacher and leader in matters of poetry, a demonstration of his ineptitude in prosodical matters may make the case.

There is one term used in the technical analysis of poetry of which he *does* make much use in this book, that of **'rhythm'.** However he uses the term in such an inconsistent and muddled way as to produce dangerous absurdities.

As a first instance, we may consider his response to a poem by R.L.Stevenson, 'From a Railway Carriage'. This is the first half of the poem:

Faster than fairies, faster than witches,

Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;

And charging along like troops in a battle,

All through the meadows the horses and cattle:

All of the sights of the hill and the plain

Fly as thick as driving rain;

And ever again, in the wink of an eye,

Painted stations whistle by.

Mr Rosen suggests that there is 'something strange going on' in the sixth verse (which he calls a 'line'), and that it

'doesn't fit the rhythm';

and his conclusion is that:

'it sounds to me like a train when it slows down'.

To call this finding 'potty' would be too kind: it is preposterous: it contradicts the descriptive terms of the whole poem; and it fails to recognise the consistent, even, four beat rhythmic nature of the verses. Examination of the eighth verse of the poem 'gives the lie' to Mr Rosen's nonsense. The verse has the same disposition of syllables and stresses as does the sixth; yet it (together with the seventh verse) describes the steady, rapid progress of the train.

Chronic absurdity of a different but related kind – in that it concerns the rhythmic nature of poetry – is provided by Mr Rosen in his penultimate chapter, **'Some Technical**

Points about Poems' In a cursory consideration of metrical matters he names one **'foot'**, the **'iamb'.** He has this to say of other, unnamed 'feet':

> There are many kinds of rhythmic feet: "Humpty Dumpty", for example, goes "**TUM**-tee, **TUM**-tee". "Catapult" goes "**TUM-TUM**-tee". "Football" goes "**TUM-TUM**". And "happily" goes "**TUM**-tee-tee". The **TUM** bit is called a **stress**, which marks out where a beat comes in a line.
>
> Each of these different kinds of foot has a name. But I can't promise you that knowing what they are or what they are called will help you write good poems. They are quite handy if a musician asks you to write some lyrics, but most people can just feel a rhythm without knowing anything technical about it.
>
> (page 176)

To suggest that the word 'catapult' might take two such **'stresses'** or 'beats', in such a way as to represent the obscure ancient Greek 'foot', the 'antibacchius', or that the word 'football' might reasonably take two **'stresses'** or 'beats' so as to represent a 'spondee', is *fatuous*.

A final example of such distorting fatuity in Mr Rosen's handling of matters to do with 'rhythm' comes from the same chapter, where he speaks of the limerick:

> In limericks the rhythm changes part-way through. You have two three-feet lines, followed by two two-feet lines, finishing with one three-feet line.
>
> (page 178)

This is nonsense. As with Stevenson's poem above, *the limerick has a consistent rhythmic mode*. To confuse matters of *'metre'* with matters of *'rhythm'*, as he does here, is an example of the disgraceful 'muddling and messing' that we find throughout this book.

Mr Rosen can write very entertainingly for children, and for adults. He can be a very pleasing 'clown'. However, close reading of this book leads to the conclusion that the 'muddling and messing' is *to the deliberate purpose of encouraging an ignorance in children and teachers alike of the simple, fundamental, formal and 'musicalistic' nature of the true historical craft of poetry*. This is a more sinister matter.

Mr Rosen is a cheat and a 'charlatan'. This dangerous book should be withdrawn from print and from circulation.

Michael George Gibson
May 2019

'How Doth the Rosen Crocodile'

How doth the Rosen Crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every glittering scale
How cheerfully he seems to grin,
How neatly spreads his claws,
And welcomes little children in
With gently smiling jaws!

(With apologies, and thanks, to Lewis Carroll.)

(Lewis Carroll's poem 'How Doth The Little Crocodile' is one that Mr Rosen introduces towards the end of his book. He presents it as part of a tendentious explanation of what he calls 'allusion' – without remarking in any way upon the poem's formal qualities as rhythmic verse.)

III

This Larger Essay explores the Book's chronic inadequacy further, and presents a Remedial Answer to Mr Rosen's Question

1. When an historical view is taken of the craft of poetry – a craft of which we have written evidence going back thirteen hundred years – it is quite easy to say what poetry 'is' and 'isn't', and to give a technical definition of a 'poem'.

In the earliest days of written English – say, in the time of Bede – the simple distinction was made between general writing, called gewrit or anfeald gerecednes – what we would call 'prose' – and fers, or meterfers, or song – what we call 'poetry'. (The g in the Old English words gewrit and gerecednes was sounded as the 'y' in our modern English 'yet'.)

The terms 'metre' and 'verse' entail a third technical term, that of regular 'rhythm', as in music. These three terms can all be subsumed under a single one, 'versification', as the primary and principal technical 'essence' of 'poetry'.

In Old English verse there was also a further essential technique of sound-patterning, that of regular 'alliteration' (or 'head rhyme'). In later centuries this sort of patterning was replaced by that of regular, ordered 'end-rhyme'. Patterning through end-rhyme persisted for centuries, and this technique or convention is still followed by some at the present time.

Metred, consistently rhythmic verses, generally in related sets, with additional sound-patterning of either alliteration or end-rhyme, were and are the simple formal characteristics which distinguished poetry from prose. Poetry is like music in these regards, an art and craft of measured, patterned sound.

Of course, poetry has always been further characterised by a strong literary tendency to what has been described as 'the use of concentrated and heightened language, in which words are chosen for their sound and suggestive power'. These less regularly patterned, literary qualities, are, however, in a logical sense, secondary and not defining characteristics of poetry, not least because 'poetic language' of one sort or another may occur in prose work.

Nowadays, 'poetic language and expression' is thought by many to be more of the 'essence' of poetry than are its formal, versified, sonic qualities. However, in poetics, as in literature generally, the very useful distinction has long been made between matters of 'form' – the abstract, organised sound-patternings in verse – and 'content' – matters of the meaning of the words of which the verses are composed; so perhaps it may be allowed that, from an 'other-than-logical' point of view, the two are in 'balance'. That aside, it can be said that a clear distinction was long made between 'prose' and 'poetry' - until more recent times, when illogicalities entered into the practices of poetry and poetics, so that formal versification declined and became, by degrees, 'unprincipled'. Two terms came into use to describe, support and encourage this tendency, both of which are contradictions in terms: 'free verse' and 'prose poem'. Both terms are nonsensical. A 'verse' is by technical definition a regulated and metred member of a set of related, regulated verses: it cannot in any meaningful sense be 'free'. Likewise, the term 'prose poem' is a contradiction in terms: a 'poem' is in verse; 'prose' is not.

In his book ***What is Poetry?*** Mr Rosen joins in the process of 'muddling' the presentation of the nature of English poetry; and the manner in which he does it is disgraceful.

2. The word 'muddling' is a good one to describe the way in which he sets about obscuring and misrepresenting the true technical nature of poetry. Another apt word is 'messing'. He does his work using a sort of 'false poetics', or perhaps 'mock-poetics'.

3. Mr Rosen begins with a crucial equivocation, a sort of simple 'conjuring trick'. He first presents a 'simple' answer to his question, 'What is Poetry'?, by making a general, highly questionable and indeed absurd 'definition' of a 'poem'. Then, in a way quite lacking in rigour, he presents the sort of questioning of this 'definition' that other 'people' might make or have perhaps made. He is then able to question these weak and partial objections to his definition by raising two false 'problems' with regard to them.

When Mr Rosen has done this, by what may be described metaphorically as 'sleight of hand', he then simply moves on. He says that it is obviously very difficult to answer the question 'What is poetry'? so he will approach matters of poetry in a different way. The effect of this process is to leave his original absurd 'definition' of a 'poem' in place as an established nonsense.

4. This short description of Mr Rosen's 'logical' procedure may now be expanded and justified. The relevant text was presented in the Shorter Review above. Here it is again:

> A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem. But people don't always agree, and when they argue about it, they try to find some special things about poetry that you can't find in other kinds of writing. They say things like:
>
> - a poem has to **rhyme**, or should have a particular **rhythm**;
> - a poem should have **metaphors** and **similes** (I'll be talking about these later on);
> - a poem should say something beautiful in an

especially beautiful way;

- a poem should say something that surprises us;
- a poem should say something in a memorable way.

One problem with this is that it's quite easy to find other kinds of writing that do some or all of these things; proverbs, riddles, jokes, plays, songs, holy writing and speeches. And another problem is that plenty of people have written what *they* say are poems but which have no rhymes or particular rhythms, metaphors or similes, or special, beautiful language.

So answering the question "What is poetry?" is not easy. One way round it is to ask another question: "What can poetry DO?"

So I've chosen some pieces of writing that writers and readers agree are poems and I'm going to think about what they DO and what I'm doing in my mind as I read them.

(pages 9, 10)

His first chapter has the same title as the book, 'What Is Poetry'?. Its first sentence presents the absurd proposition that:

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem.

Mr Rosen then appears to question his proposition by saying that there are 'people who try to find some special things about poetry that you can't find in other kinds of writing'. He presents these five suggested 'special things': that 'a poem has to **rhyme'** or 'should have a particular **rhythm'**; that a poem 'should have **metaphors** and **similes'**; that a poem should 'say something beautiful in an especially beautiful way'; that a poem 'should say something that surprises us'; or that a poem 'should say something in a memorable way'.

The first of these 'special things' – though itself actually perhaps two 'things' – might appear to introduce matters of direct poetic technique; but the terms **'rhyme'** and **'particular rhythm'**, as they are used here, are not specific enough to actually connect meaningfully to the essential technical matter of versification. Of the other four 'things', the first introduces literary but not specifically poetic terms; and the other three are increasingly vague and generalised. Thus Mr Rosen's set of 'special things about poetry' are not – apart from the first, and that but in a loose way - 'special' to poetry at all.

Nevertheless, he then proceeds to tell his young readers, and their teachers, that this search for 'special things about poetry' is 'problematic' in two ways. Firstly, 'It is quite easy to find other kinds of writing' that entail the use of some or all of these 'special things'.

He provides a varied list of 'other kinds of writing' that do some or all of these things: 'proverbs, riddles, jokes, plays, songs, holy writings, and speeches'. It is an interesting and diverting array. No examples are given. We could spend a long time thinking up our own examples and then applying combinations of some or all of Mr Rosen's five sorts of 'special things' to them; but this would be pointless. Most of the examples that we, or a struggling child, would naturally think up, would be *prose* anyway; but, more to the point, as we have already said, these 'special things' are, apart from the first, only *general* literary characteristics that are not specific to poetry at all: *he has created here an entirely false and spurious 'problem'.*

The second 'problem', according to Mr Rosen, is that there are 'plenty of people' who 'have written things which *they* say are poems' but which do not contain any of the first three 'special things'. This again is a false and spurious 'problem', one which is no less false just because it restricts itself to bringing to bear only the first three of the five 'special things', those which *appear* to have the greatest poetic import or reference. This second 'problem' is simply an unsupported 'refutation' of the *first* 'problem', presented in such a way as to 'restate' Mr Rosen's original proposition. This is *cheating*.

By means of these diversions and evasions, Mr Rosen has now made it appear that he has removed objections to his original proposition as to what a 'poem' is; but now, without claiming that this is the case, he moves away from the situation of this false challenge. He does so by saying that answering the question 'What is poetry' is not easy, but that 'one way round it' is to ask another question, 'What can poetry DO?' This is the direction that he now takes over the next seventy pages of a chapter that is still titled 'What Is Poetry?'.

Mr Rosen's exercise in 'false poetics' has something of the nature of a 'séance' about it, leaving his original, absurd, dangerous and destructive proposition,

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem,

'hanging in the air' like 'ectoplasm' as we read the rest of the book. It is a rare achievement.

What ten-year-old child would not be misled by such disgraceful nonsense? What teacher would have the time or the inclination to oppose it? Mr Rosen can be pretty sure that anything that he now presents as a 'poem' will have unwary readers' agreement *is* a 'poem'.

5. 'False poetics'? 'Mock-poetics'? 'The poetics of illusion'? Mr Rosen now sets out to realise and justify his utterly inadequate 'definition' of a 'poem'. To do this he will largely ignore or distort traditional poetics.

We can get some measure of the general dimensions and tendency of his discourse by looking at the **'Index'** to the book. There is no reference in it to 'prose', or 'verse', or 'metre'. It does not suit Mr Rosen to introduce his young readers to the good, useful and indeed fundamental distinction that has been made for thirteen centuries between 'prose' and 'verse'. For him, poems are things that are written in 'lines'. This is stupid. Any and every schoolchild will tell him that all their text books in all their subjects are written in 'lines'. Matters of 'metrics' (but not described as such) are only introduced by Mr Rosen in his penultimate chapter, '**Some Technical Points about Poems**', where they are dealt with, 'in passing', in a partial, even dismissive way – and where, as we shall see shortly, he creates an extraordinary 'mess and muddle' in his handling of 'feet' and their 'rhythms'.

6. Returning to his first chapter, **'What Is Poetry?'**, we find that Mr Rosen introduces eight examples of poems from the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, together with portions from two speeches in Shakespeare's plays. (Of these two pieces of Shakespeare, he says that they may not be actual poems but may rather be pieces of '"poetic writing"' – a very useful notion that he does not follow up elsewhere in the book.) He also includes an anonymous piece called 'An Iroquois Prayer', which is to be accepted as a 'poem' although it has no particular formal structure. The other eight pieces, however, are formally structured : they are all in metred verse, with a rhyme-scheme. However, Mr Rosen makes no mention of their formal qualities at all; except that in one case he talks about the 'rhythms' of the piece. (We will return to that example, and to Mr Rosen's extraordinary 'muddling' of matters of 'rhythm', in due course.)

We observed that he sets aside the question 'What Is Poetry?' in favour of the question 'What Can Poetry DO?'. In the course of this peculiar process he introduces young children to such pieces as Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' ('Poetry can borrow voices'), and Shelley's 'Ozymandias' ('Poetry can be ironic'), both of which poems might be considered by many people to be too sophisticated for younger children, and unlikely to interest and entertain them. Mr Rosen seems to think that it is a good thing to invite young children to examine such a concept as **'irony'**, but that it is not worth bringing to their attention the very accomplished and pleasant measuring and rhyming of the verse which conveys the ironic words. Even with the easier example of Tennyson's 'The Eagle' ('Poetry can be symbolic'), Mr Rosen does not think it worth noting that the poem is composed of two sets of three, rhyming, four-beat verses – a wonderfully compact and memorable form. In this respect, Mr Rosen's approach to the teaching of the art and craft of poetry is deplorably imbalanced and inadequate.

7. The second half of the book is somewhat different in the material that it uses. In chapters such as **'My Thoughts on Writing Some Poems'**, **'Ways to Start a Poem'**, and **'Writing Poems'**, Mr Rosen uses generally much easier, 'child-friendly' and even childish examples of 'poems'. Many of these are by Mr Rosen himself, mostly in two or three beat 'lines', sometimes with a rhyme-scheme. However, some are not, technically speaking, poems at all, but perhaps 'poetic writing'; but since he says that they are 'poems', his young readers, and even their teachers, will be inclined to 'agree' that they are such.

8. The book's penultimate chapter is titled **'Some Technical Points About Poems'**. Here Mr Rosen contrives to make some brief, partial and generally unsatisfactory mention of some of the technicalities of poetry and poetics without using the term 'metre' – except in the compound, **'pentameter'** – or using the term 'verse' – except when introducing the terms **'free verse'** and **'blank verse'**. He does not give examples of either of these latter 'poetic entities'; and, where he makes a brief mention of the **'iambic pentameter'**, he provides two somewhat 'boring' verses (or 'lines') of his own, rather than examples of 'iambic' verses from any of the 'classic' poems (so termed on the book's cover) that he has introduced in his first chapter.

However, the one technical poetic term that Mr Rosen does make use of throughout this book – if generally in an incomplete and unspecific way – is that of **'rhythm'**. In this chapter he tries to be more specific about the nature of poetic rhythm; which brings him to talk about poetic **'feet'**. *It is here that he confirms his profound incompetence in these matters, and demonstrates his unfitness to 'guide' children in matters of poetry generally*. (What is

meant by the clause *'confirms his profound incompetence'* is this: that, as was said earlier, Mr Rosen first demonstrates his ineptitude in matters of poetic rhythm, and indeed in matters of poetic technique generally, in his first chapter, when he considers a poem by R. L. Stevenson called 'From a Railway Carriage'. We will in due course link these two 'demonstrations of ineptitude'.)

9. In this chapter on technical matters, then, Mr Rosen makes a cursory and unsatisfactory introduction of the 'classical', 'foot'-based system of prosody that has been used, in various ways, in the metrical analysis of English poetry for centuries. It is almost as if he does so with reluctance or distaste. (It must be said that he may indeed have good reason to be cautious. English is not ancient Latin or Greek, in which the verse was, as it is said, 'quantitative'. We will later return to this matter of the 'suitability' of the 'classical' prosodic system to the metrical analysis of English verse.) This section of Mr Rosen's chapter on technical matters is headed **'Rhythm and Rhyme'**. After a somewhat obscure paragraph in which he talks rather vaguely about 'strings' of words coming together and starting to make 'patterns' and 'rhythms', he prefaces his introduction of elements of 'classical' prosody with this curious passage:

> Poets have invented many rhythms over the years. Some are regular as clockwork, with beats and off-beats that fit exactly into a time. Regular poems have sections which go, for example, "tee-**TUM**" again and again.
>
> (page 174)

Before we examine this simple-seeming pair of statements, let us make a proposal of our own. Let us suggest that a simple and straightforward way of helping children towards an understanding of 'poetic rhythm' would be to tell them that the primary sense of the term 'rhythm' in English poetry has always been that of more or less regularly occurring 'stresses' or 'beats' in the verses or lines of a poem.

Mr Rosen's statement quoted above would seem to be his way of starting to go about such an explication.

First we may consider the term 'regular poems'. This implies that there are poems that are *not* 'regular as clockwork' and which thus have 'beats and off-beats' that *don't* fit exactly into 'a time'. Mr Rosen does not bring our attention to any examples of 'regular', or 'irregular', poems anywhere in his book (except in his treatment of Stevenson's 'From a Railway Carriage', to which we shall come in due course).

And what *is* 'a time'? This term is nowhere repeated in the book.

And what *is* 'a section'?

Might not a ten year old find everything in these two sentences a little *difficult*, a little 'off-putting' and 'unappetising'?

A whole 'section' which goes '"tee-**TUM**" again and again, as regular as clockwork', doesn't sound very enticing.

Mr Rosen goes on:

> If I write
>
> > **Today, today, today, today, today,**
> > **You cried, you cried, you cried, you cried, you cried**
>
> You can see it goes "tee-**TUM**, tee-**TUM**, tee-**TUM**, tee-**TUM**, tee-**TUM**" and then repeats that. There are five tee-**TUM**s in each line.
>
> (page 175)

His extraordinary, repetitive verses or 'lines' are briefly interesting, but will then be found by most ten year olds, and their teachers, rather less interesting. The verses are followed by a somewhat repetitive analysis. Both children and teachers, and we ourselves, might have needed no more than to be told that, 'you can see that there are five "tee-**TUM**s" in each line'.

There is a tendency in Mr Rosen's discourse – a sort of 'tendentiousness' in the choice of words, phrasing, and 'tone' – that continues in the next paragraph:

> Believe it or not, there's a word to describe that kind of rhythm. Each tee-**TUM** is called an **iamb**, and a five beat line is called **pentameter**. So **iambic pentameter** describes my piece of writing about "today".

The first sentence has a sort of 'suggestiveness' and ambiguity. We can 'hear' an 'alternative voice' saying something like this: 'Believe it or not, there are some people who want to get you involved in a complicated approach to matters of rhythm in poetry which uses a lot of funny, foreign terms'.

The suggestion that there is a 'tendentiousness' in Mr Rosen's discourse may be disputed; but it may be clearly stated that there is a serious complex of ambiguities in the next two sentences, which present a linguistic or grammatical or terminological 'muddle' of a rather nasty sort.

We do not know which 'word' we should understand to describe what Mr Rosen calls 'that kind of rhythm': is it the word **'iamb'**, or is it the word **'pentameter'**; or is it the whole phrase, **'iambic pentameter'?** Further, we don't know if his phrase, 'that kind of rhythm', refers to some aspect of the 'tee-**TUM**' – the single **'iamb'** – or to the *sequence* of iambs that have made up the '**iambic pentameter'**.

The 'word' that Mr Rosen is referring to which describes what he calls 'that kind of rhythm' would seem to be 'hidden' in the phrase, **'iambic pentameter'**, and to be in fact the word **'iambic'**. Are the children supposed to know that people may talk about an 'iambic rhythm' in poetry? *If so, what exactly is it?*

In the next paragraph, the tendentiousness of Mr Rosen's discourse increases. He has made what has become, for better or worse, a 'core' term in poetics, that of the **'iambic pentameter'**, appear to be a somewhat 'undesirable' entity, a 'regular as clockwork', 'again and again' sort of thing that one should perhaps be wary of. Now he says this to his child

readers, speaking of his two repetitive lines that he has used as an example:

> The only problem is that I don't think it's much good! In other words, I can write "perfect" iambic pentameters, but it doesn't make a very interesting line of poetry. The challenge (if I want it) is to write really good poetry in iambic pentameter'.

The idea or entity, the **'iambic pentameter'**, is now made to sound even less 'desirable'. As an example of a 'rhythm' that is 'regular as clockwork', with 'beats and off-beats that fit exactly into a time', requiring the repetition of an element 'again and again', it now becomes something of a 'problem ([**'**believe it or not**'**])' in its '"perfect"' form. It then becomes 'not very interesting'. What is 'not very interesting' to a child is often thought by that child to be 'boring'.

Of course, Mr Rosen is only saying that it is his own two, contrived, '"perfect"', 'regular as clockwork lines' (of what might be the start of a 'regular poem') that are 'not very interesting'. He is not *directly* telling the children that **'iambic pentameter'** generally is 'not very interesting' or is even 'boring'. But what *is* he saying? What is his 'game'? The 'challenge' to write 'really good poetry in iambic pentameter' does not seem to be one that he personally would 'want'; and it is not, we may reasonably conclude, a 'challenge' that he is suggesting his young readers respond to either.

10. Something very bad is going on here.

Surely Mr Rosen could and should provide some examples of really 'good poetry in iambic pentameter?'

We will return to this question when we have considered how he concludes his brief presentation of the 'classical' system of prosody.

11. His next paragraph, which introduces the term 'foot', reads thus:

> An iamb is what is called a **foot** in poetry, as if poems were made up of footsteps. There are many kinds of rhythmic feet: "Humpty Dumpty", for example, goes "**TUM**-tee, **TUM**-tee". "Catapult" goes "**TUM**-**TUM**-tee". "Football" goes "**TUM**-**TUM**". And "happily" goes "**TUM**-tee-tee". The '**TUM**' bit is called a **'stress'**, which marks out where a beat comes in a line.
>
> (pages 175, 176)

This is an appalling 'mess and muddle'. We are near the end of the book. The term 'rhythm' has occurred throughout it on numerous occasions in a 'loose' and usually quite undefined way; but this is the first and only time that the term '**stress**' is used. (The term is not in the **'Index'**.) It was only three paragraphs earlier that the term 'beat' had been introduced, in the phrase 'beats and off-beats'. (But, as we shall see, on one occasion, very early in the book, the use of a system of 'tees' and **'TUMs'** was introduced, in two combinations, **'TUM**-tee-

tee' and **'TUM**-tee', when the children were invited to 'try tapping the rhythm' of a poem).

In this paragraph there is one named 'foot' and four unnamed ones. These four unnamed ones are presented with verbal examples. The first, **'TUM**-tee, **TUM**-tee: Humpty Dumpty', is the unusual 'ditrochee'. This is perverse. Why not introduce a simple 'trochee' (even if it is not named as such), which may be seen to be the 'reverse' of the 'iamb'?. The second **'foot'**, **'TUM**-**TUM**-tee: catapult', is an obscure foot called the 'antibacchius'. I have never seen this foot used in English prosody. The third **'foot'**, **'TUM-TUM**: football', is used in English prosody, for better or worse, and is the 'spondee'. The fourth **'foot'**, **'TUM**-tee-tee: happily', is the better-known 'dactyl'.

If this 'mess and muddle' were not bad enough, further examination of Mr Rosen's 'feet' reveals that two of his verbal examples or models are plainly and disgracefully false. It cannot be held that in normal speech, or in recited poetry, or in song, the words 'catapult' and 'football' would normally each carry two 'stresses' or 'beats'. The idea that the middle syllable of the *word* 'catapult' *is stressed, is ridiculous*; *and the idea that both syllables of the word* 'football' *carry equal* 'stresses' or 'beats' *is hardly less so*. If either of Mr Rosen's models were introduced into a 'regular poem' which had 'beats and off-beats that fit exactly into a time', and in which the 'beats' or 'stresses' are more or less evenly spaced, the result would be rhythmically absurd.

Mr Rosen's exegesis of the 'classical' system of prosody is becoming grotesque – or, in more demotic, or childish, parlance, 'grotty'. These matters of formal metrics, appropriate or not in themselves, or in their use by children, are being distorted and 'smeared'.

The particular tendency, or 'tendentiousness', in Mr Rosen's discourse intensifies in the next paragraph:

> Each of these different kinds of foot has a name. But I can't promise you that knowing what they are or what they are called will help you write good poems. They are quite handy if a musician asks you to write some lyrics, but most people can just feel a rhythm without knowing anything technical about it.

Mr Rosen has presented these 'technical' matters about 'rhythms' that are 'regular', and about 'feet', in such a cursory, uninteresting, muddled way, that he is now 'justified' in suggesting that such matters may be ignored – because 'most people can just feel a rhythm'. He says this after showing that he himself cannot 'feel' the natural and prosodic rhythm of the words 'catapult' or 'football'. It is perverse.

Furthermore, there is his 'delicate' use of the word 'promise' earlier. One might just imagine that Mr Rosen's first draft of that second sentence in the paragraph went along the lines of, 'I can promise you that knowing what these tedious feet are or what they are called won't help you write good poems'. And there is a great irony in his mention of 'a musician'; for nowhere in the book does he help the children to understand the matter of poetic rhythm by pointing up the fact that music and poetry both use regular 'measures' and rhythms.

Mr Rosen has more to say about technical matters in his next destructively misleading paragraph:

> Some poems have a regular rhythm and no rhyme. This is called **'blank verse'**. Some poems have neither a regular rhythm nor a regular rhyme. This is called **'free verse'**. It's been said that the foot of a free-verse poem is one whole line. So if you're writing free verse, you can think of each line as a single unit that hangs together because it creates a meaning.

It is a further great 'irony' that this next perverse paragraph is the only place in the book where he uses the term 'verse': so the children have not been informed as to what 'verse', or 'a verse', is. Mr Rosen now introduces the nonsensical notion of **'free verse'** (it is a nonsensical term, as we said, because 'verse' is *metred* and cannot be 'free'); and he accepts the term without reservation 'on behalf of' the children that he is, in this book generally, guiding into a 'chaos of nonsense'. According to Mr Rosen, a 'poem' in so-called **'free verse'** will not have 'a regular rhythm'. This statement is false. A 'verse' in a so-called 'free-verse poem' may not be 'measured' but it may well have 'a regular rhythm'. This falsehood simply adds to the tendentious effect of this whole deplorable section on 'rhythm', which gives the children the idea that poetry is not necessarily a particularly rhythmic literary art at all.

And now Mr Rosen proceeds to abandon his earlier, useful idea of a **'foot'** as a discreet 'footstep' in a 'line' of a poem, by stating, without reservation, that: 'It's been said that the foot of a free-verse poem is one whole line'. This is an 'immense and unmeasured absurdity'. It is rather as if he is now 'squashing' out of sight the whole 'classical', 'technical' business that he has been 'messing' with. We might further say that, in this way, any idea of the true, historical nature of English verse poetry is 'trampled under the monstrous free-booting feet' of so-called 'free verse'. Even the notion that Mr Rosen does imply here and there – as when he speaks earlier of 'beats and off-beats', for instance – that 'rhythm' in poetry might consist primarily in regularly spaced 'beats' or 'stresses', gets 'trampled' at the same time.

12. We may now turn to the matter of Mr Rosen's failure to provide any examples of poems or verses or 'lines' to illustrate his 'technical' discussion.

In this latest paragraph under review, he has introduced the terms **'blank verse'** and **'free verse'**. Regarding **'blank verse'**: earlier in the book he has discussed two pieces of the most wonderful blank verse from plays by Shakespeare – without, of course, acknowledging them to be in verse at all. Mr Rosen does not use these as examples. Then there are also two poems of his own, that are introduced to illustrate various other matters, which are largely in blank verse, 'Feeling Ill' and 'Today; One Day'. He could have used these. (However, that would have meant saying that some of his own 'poetry' was in **'verse'**, something that he will have wanted to avoid.)

Regarding so-called **'free verse'**: early in the book he presents a piece called 'An Iroquois Prayer' that is in 'free verse'; and his own 'poem' later in the book, 'The Lift', may also be said to be in so-called **'free verse'** – though it should more properly be said to be, using Mr Rosen's terminology, in 'free lines'. 'An Iroquois Prayer' (which may in its original language have been formed in some sort of verse-structure) begins,

We return thanks to our mother, the earth,
which sustains us.
We return thanks to the rivers and streams,
which supply us with water.
We return thanks to all herbs, which furnish
Medicines for the cure of our diseases.

And these are the closing lines:

We return thanks to the sun, that he looked upon
the earth with a beneficent eye.
Lastly, we return thanks to the Great Spirit,
in whom is embodied all goodness, and who
directs all things for the good of his children.

This translated piece clearly has 'neither a regular rhythm nor a regular rhyme'. And the same may be said of Mr Rosen's own 'poem', 'The Lift':

At the second floor
we heard a voice inside the lift say,
"Second floor, going up".
But the second floor
was the top floor.
Where were we going?

In fact both these pieces may be said to be both **'free'** and **'blank'** – except for there being an untidy sort of rhyming repeat of 'floor' in 'The Lift'. Whatever; Mr Rosen's failure to provide any examples at all of **'blank verse'** and so-called **'free verse'** does not just demonstrate a lack of thoroughness: he may be said to be *cheating* the children of the help and guidance that they need.

13. In this matter of the lack of examples, we can now return to the earlier paragraph, where he is discussing the **'iambic pentameter'**. Most commentators, past and even present, would describe the verses from the Shakespeare plays that Mr Rosen quotes, to be in 'iambic pentameters'. That Mr Rosen does not describe them as such, and does not use them as examples, is perhaps not particularly surprising – for one thing, they are 'blank', and he has not come to that term yet; and, for another thing, they are rhythmically complex.

However, three others of the 'classic' poems that he introduces in his first chapter, **'What Is Poetry?'**, could be said to be almost entirely in so-called **'iambic pentameter'**: 'How Do I Love Thee?', 'My Last Duchess', and 'Ozymandias'. Mr Rosen did not comment on the versification of these poems at the time; and he does not use verses from any of them as examples of 'really good poetry' in **'iambic pentameter'**. He might, for instance, have presented these verses by Elizabeth Barrett Browning as '"perfect" iambic pentameters':

I love thee freely, as men strive for right.

I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood faith.

Of course, these verses are somewhat 'archaic' in their diction, and 'adult' in content and tone, and rather beyond the reach and understanding of Mr Rosen's young readers. However, 'Ozymandias' might offer more to interest children in its 'visual' presentation. Apart from a few odd 'substitutions' and 'elisions', it is a wonderfully fertile sequence of 'iambic pentameters', a grand 'vista' of 'tee-**TUM**s' stretching almost to 'infinity' in the magnificent final verse, which most children would appreciate:

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Mr Rosen's failure here to offer examples of **'iambic pentameter'** can be described as 'dereliction of duty', a failure to guide his readers. But, further, there is another possibility open to him to present a 'good' and 'interesting' 'poem' in 'perfect' iambic 'tee-**TUM**s' which occur 'again and again'. As well as 'iambic pentameters' there are 'iambic tetrameters, trimeters, dimeters and monometers' to be considered. There is a 'poem' of Mr Rosen's in the book which uses 'iambic dimeters and monometers' to good effect. His 'Today; One Day' was mentioned earlier as being largely in blank verse. Here it is:

Today
The rain has died
My shoes have died
My coat has died
The earth has died
Today.

One day
The rain will flower
My shoes will laugh
The sun will sing
My coat will fly
The earth will dance
One day.

14. Consideration of these paragraphs that concern technicalities of 'rhythm' leads towards what is an almost certainly insoluble conundrum. It would seem that Mr Rosen has no competence in, or even perhaps full acquaintance with, the details of 'classical', foot-based prosody. At the same time, the tone of his discourse over those paragraphs suggest a personal antipathy towards such a system, and a determination to make it unappealing to the developing minds of his child readers.

It is rather as if, because of the important position that the 'classical' system has held

in English poetics – for better or worse – he finds it obligatory to present some elements of it in his book, for the sake of 'propriety'. Then, by excluding any direct consideration of metrics and versification throughout the book, and by 'messing and muddling' the matter of 'feet', he invites 'neglect' of the system.

However, it may be the case that he is in fact quite fully acquainted with the details of the system; in which case his 'botching' of the presentation of two unnamed 'kinds of rhythmic feet' must be seen as a deliberate and shameful act of misrepresentation.

Can this possibly be his 'game'?

There is a way of accounting for Mr Rosen's behaviour that provides a sort of 'justification' for the corrupted nature of his technical discourse in this section. It may be that, firstly, regardless of his own competence or incompetence in his use of the classical system of prosody, he considers that system to be one which is altogether too complicated for younger children to be burdened with. Further, it may be that, secondly, he regards the system to be anyway not fully suited to the analysis or composition of English verse. If these are his opinions, and if he were to openly state them, I would thoroughly agree with him.

The system of 'classical' prosody that has predominated in English poetics for centuries is not wholly appropriate to the metrical analysis of English verse. Indeed, it is intrinsically *unsuited* to it. This is because the verse of the old Greek and Latin languages, in the measuring of which the system was developed, was, as has been said, 'quantitive': that is, it consisted in arrangements of 'long' and 'short' syllables, in which the long ones were given twice the duration of the short ones. English verse, on the other hand, has always been 'stress-based': a fundamental aspect of its rhythm is that the 'beats' or 'stresses' are, generally, evenly-spaced in time – that is, 'isochronously' – but the syllables are not, strictly speaking, 'quantitatively' considered. The 'classical' metrical system cannot give an adequate description of the measures and rhythms of English verse.

However, there is no indication that Mr Rosen himself holds any such views regarding the appropriateness of the 'classical' system of prosody in respect of English verse. The suggestion that he might do so, only intensifies the 'conundrum'. We must return to our previous position with regard to his discourse on 'technicalities'.

15. Mr Rosen has, then, shown himself incompetent in the matter of the basic foot-prosody of the classical system as it is generally, 'approximately', and inappropriately applied to English verse; and he has demonstrated an apparent disinterest in and 'distaste' for the whole system. The purpose of his 'messy' and perfunctory presentation of some elements of it would appear to be to deter the children and their teachers from working with it.

Yet there is a further paradox in the 'conundrum'. In the **'Appendix'** of his book, Mr Rosen tells his readers that the best book that he knows that 'covers all the technical side of poetry', is *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Then he goes on to say that Mr Stephen Fry's book, *The Ode Less Travelled : Unlocking the Poet Within*, 'discusses how you can write poems by starting from this technical side'.

His recommendation of Fry's book is extraordinary. Mr Rosen has suggested to his child readers that he 'can't promise' that the pursuit of 'foot-prosody' will help them to write 'good poems'. Yet here he is suggesting the use of a book which, as part of its assiduous and 'over-bearing' explication of the fundamentally inappropriate 'classical' system, presents a table of twenty-eight binary, ternary and quaternary metric feet.

One may doubt the sincerity of Mr Rosen's recommendation of this book.

What *is* his 'game'?

16. A separate note needs to be made here regarding Mr Fry's book. It is a curious and dangerous one in its own right. (I have written elsewhere about this.)

The book makes an exhaustive presentation and application of the 'classical' metrical system; yet, at the outset, Mr Fry himself makes an admission of its 'inappropriateness'. At the beginning of his first chapter, on **'Metre'**, he says that English is:

> a language whose oral properties are actually very different from those of its more distant ancestors, Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek…..

Mr Fry's observation is both highly pertinent and highly 'impertinent'. To point out that English is very different from ancient Latin and Greek is true and of great significance to matters of prosodic practice. However, he fails to follow the observation through. Clearly, the prosodic or metrical system that he is intent on using and promoting was originally applied to versification in a more 'distant' language or languages with very different 'oral properties' to English. How then can it truly be appropriate to apply it to versification in English?

Mr Fry indulges in a further 'impertinence' in suggesting that 'Anglo-Saxon' (more usually termed 'Old English') is a 'distant ancestor' of Modern English. This is quite absurd and reprehensible. Indeed, one thing that makes his book invalid and dangerous is that he does not, and almost certainly could not, apply the 'classical' prosodic foot-system to the wonderful Old and Middle English poetry from which our Modern English poetry has naturally developed.

Mr Fry, then, blatantly proceeds to mislead his readers. Mr Rosen 'recommends' his book. What a silly, and nasty, game.

17. Mr Rosen has, then, in his specifically 'technical' discussion of 'poetical rhythm', taken the 'classical' system and, in so far as he has represented it, debased it. We may now observe how whatever principles of poetic rhythm he himself holds, are put to work. He has spoken of 'rhythms' that can be 'regular as clockwork', and of 'regular poems'; but he has committed himself to no clear and simple principle of 'rhythm'. To see how ineptly he puts whatever principles he has into effect, we can now go to the specific rhythmic analysis that he makes of one of the poems in his first chapter.

18. We return, then, almost to the beginning of the book. Mr Rosen has set aside the problematic question, 'What is poetry?', to take up the question, 'What can you do with a poem?'. This question then transforms, somewhat, into another, **'What can poetry DO?'** The first of a number of responses that he makes to this question is to say that 'Poetry can suggest things'; and he presents what is presumably the first of what are referred to on the book's back cover as 'classic' poems, Emily Dickenson's 'A Word Is Dead':

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

This piece, with its very short verses, is much like many of Mr Rosen's own poems for children – a number of which poems are included in this book. He does not remark on any of the formal qualities of the piece – not least on its imperfect rhyme-scheme. However, he exercises his own highly individual imagination regarding the possible meanings of the words and phrases, concluding that poems can 'suggest feelings, thoughts, problems and ideas' but 'don't try to give answers?'.

In the next section of the chapter, his response to the question 'What can poetry DO?' is to make the suggestion that 'Poetry can give an impression'. The poem that he chooses to consider here is Robert Louis Stevenson's 'From a Railway Carriage'. In this case he does make some sort of examination of the metrical nature of the piece: but, in doing so, he draws an utterly nonsensical conclusion as to the poem's description of the motion of the train. Here is the poem, and Mr Rosen's response to it:-

From a Railway Carriage

Faster than fairies, faster than witches,

Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;

And charging along like troops in a battle,

All through the meadows the horses and cattle:

All of the sights of the hill and the plain

Fly as thick as driving rain;

And ever again, in the wink of an eye,

Painted stations whistle by.

Here is a child who clambers and scrambles,

All by himself and gathering brambles;

Here is a tramp who stands and gazes;

And there is the green for stringing the daisies!

Here is a cart run away in the road

Lumping along with man and load;

And here is a mill and there is a river:

Each a glimpse and gone for ever!

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94)

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote novels – you probably know or have heard of *Treasure Island* – but he also wrote a book of poems about his childhood, and this is one of them.
When you read it, you can try tapping the rhythm just as you might when you hear a song. You can tap four times in each line of the poem. In the first line, for example, you can tap on "Fast" in "Faster", "fair" in "fairies", "fast" in the next "faster" and "witch" in "witches". If you say "TUM" for the tap and "tee" for the bits you don't tap, it goes:

FASTer than **FAIR**ies, **FAST**er than **WITCH**es

TUM tee tee, **TUM** tee, **TUM** tee tee, **TUM** tee

I think Stevenson wrote to this rhythm because **he wanted the poem to sound like the thing he was writing about** – a train going along a track. And if you're on a train you'll notice that there are times when your carriage has been moving at a steady pace and then suddenly the rhythm changes. Perhaps the poet wanted to show this (without telling us), because after the first five lines, the rhythm of the poem changes:

Fly as thick as driving rain

If you are tapping four TUMs to the line it goes:

FLY as **THICK** as **DRIV**ing **RAIN**

TUM tee **TUM** tee **TUM** tee **TUM**

If you are a musician you will already know that there is something strange going on here. This line doesn't fit the rhythm. You are several "tees" short! If the taps were to come at exactly the same time as in the other lines, either you'd have to leave little pauses or you'd have to make each of the tapped words last a tiny bit longer. Either way, it

> sounds to me like a train when it slows down.
> I call all this **giving an impression**. The poem gives the impression of something without saying that it is doing it. A lot of poems work like this, but they do it in different ways – not just with rhythms. For example, they might try to show what a stream or rush of thoughts feels like by using parts of sentences, broken-up phrases and single words, instead of whole sentences.
>
> (pages 16-20)

The poem is in rhyming couplets, with four 'beats' in each verse; and the whole piece invites recitation in a rhythm which may be described in 'musical', or 'musicalistic' terms as a sort of '6/8' mode.

Mr Rosen sensibly suggests that his readers tap out the 'rhythm' as they might when they hear a 'song'. This is the first use of the term 'rhythm' that he makes in the book; and the reference to 'song' is promising: but the idea is not developed, and the technical analysis descends into 'muddle and mess'.

Mr Rosen presents the poem's first verse in this way:

TUM tee tee, **TUM** tee, **TUM** tee tee, **TUM** tee

Then he says that he thinks that the author 'wrote to this rhythm' to give the impression of a train going along a track. This seems sensible enough, if we set aside for the time being the question as to what more precisely Mr Rosen means by the phrase 'this rhythm'.

Then he suggests that, with the sixth verse,

Fly as thick as driving rain,

the 'rhythm' of the poem changes:

TUM tee **TUM** tee **TUM** tee **TUM**

As he puts it, 'This line doesn't fit the rhythm. You are several "tees" short'. To Mr Rosen this curiously gives the impression of the train suddenly slowing down; and he thinks that this is what Stevenson sought to convey.

There is a complex sort of nonsense going on here, which is the result of Mr Rosen's muddled and inadequate use of the key term, 'rhythm'. The term is used five times in these few paragraphs, but without arriving at any sense of what the term may generally mean, as a regularity of 'beat' or 'stress', or with regard to the *particular* rhythm of the measures of this poem.

The reader only has to keep going through the seventh and eight verses of the poem to realise that Mr Rosen's 'prosodic train' comes 'uncoupled', and 'crashes'. The ideas of 'rhythm' and 'speed', for one thing, have been foolishly 'twisted' together. Then it must be said that, if Mr Rosen's 'impression' of the sixth verse is 'true', that a shortage of 'tees' indicates a slowing of the train, then we should have the 'impression' that the train has suddenly speeded up again in the seventh verse, and then slowed down once more through

the eighth verse as the train whistles by the painted stations.

This is ‘quite potty’.

The words of the verses themselves show what complete nonsense is Mr Rosen’s ‘impression’. The whole poem ‘tells’ us to deliver it in a consistent rhythm, and the verses are intended to go ‘whistling’ through at an urgent and steady pace from start to finish.

To call Mr Rosen’s poetics here ‘potty’ is too kind. He is ‘puffing out’ profound nonsense that cannot be laughed away. His analysis is bizarre and perverse.

19. If we were to pursue further the ‘illogicalities’ of his ‘impression’, we could be spending time and effort merely circling the same ‘crash-site’ to ‘gawk’. For instance, we might start with the fact that he gives no time values to his ‘**TUM**s’ and ‘tees’. If we take them to be of the same duration in speech, but with the ‘**TUM**s’ being ‘stressed’, then the sixth and eight verses of the poem would actually be the quickest to speak, and should thus give the impression of the train being at its fastest. On the same principle, the fuller third and fourth verses would suggest the train at its slowest.

Instead, it would be better to consider Mr Rosen’s extraordinary appeal regarding the ‘anomalous’ sixth verse:

> If you are a musician you will already know that there is something strange going on here.

Mr Rosen is clearly no sort of musician himself; and I am sure that most musicians would perceive this poem to be in something like a steady ‘6/8’ time, or ‘rhythmic mode’, throughout. They might suggest to him that the verses of the poem are ready to be sung, and that the temporal structure of them can be easily presented in what might be called a ‘musicalistic’ way, using a form of temporal notation, involving ‘notes’, bar-lines, and rests as necessary. The first eight verses of the poem may then be represented like this:-

At quite a lick

‘6/8’ **Faster than fairies, faster than witches,**

Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;

And charging along like troops in a battle,

All through the meadows the horses and cattle:

All of the sights of the hill and the plain

Fly as thick as driving rain;

And ever again, in the wink of an eye,

Painted stations whistle by.

The speech–stresses, or beats, that Mr Rosen suggests should be tapped out, are represented as regular elements in the musicalistic setting. In the first phrase, 'Faster than fairies', which Mr Rosen represents as '**TUM** tee tee, **TUM** tee', the second '**TUM**', which is the first syllable of 'fairies', is simply held, in speaking, recitation or signing, so that the two 'halves' of the phrase take about the same time. By holding or lengthening the stresses or beats in the sixth verse in this way, the verse has the same duration as the others. (In his own analysis, Mr Rosen moves a little in this direction when he says, 'you'd have to leave little pauses or you'd have to make each of the tapped words last a tiny bit longer'; but the 'little' does not stop him gaining, and passing on, his fatuous 'impression'.)

This scheme satisfactorily and flexibly represents the simple rhythmic nature of the poem – a rhythmic nature that indeed 'most people can feel' without the provision of any of this apparatus.

20. Let us imagine that an attentive and enquiring child has read and re-read the book. That reader might then connect Mr Rosen's peculiar analysis of the rhythmic nature of this poem, with his system of **'TUM**s' and 'tees', to his 'technical' discussion of 'rhythmic feet' towards the end of the book. This would only increase the quite deplorable 'muddle and mess' that such a reader is 'enmired' in. No time values of **'TUM**s' and 'tees' are given anywhere. We only know that 'The **TUM** bit is called a **stress**, which marks out where a beat comes', and that some 'rhythms' can be 'regular as clockwork, with beats and off-beats that fit exactly into a time'. The reader might have arrived at the obvious conclusion that, if Stevenson's poem is to be considered to have the rhythmic nature of a 'song', then Mr Rosen's representation of the first verse as

TUM-tee-tee, **TUM**-tee, **TUM**-tee-tee, **TUM**-tee

must be of four 'measures' of equal duration, and that the **'TUM**s' fall as 'regular as clockwork' throughout the poem. But Mr Rosen cannot see this, or will not say it firmly enough.

One way of warning the children and their teachers off his 'miring and muddling' poetics is to put those two bizarre 'feet' of his into place – his 'catapult (**TUM**-**TUM**-tee)' and 'football (**TUM**-**TUM**)'. We can make up an extra couplet to introduce into Stevenson's poem – one of which we hope that the poet might have approved (if he could have excused the poor 'rhyme'). It could come after the child 'gathering brambles':

A boy with a catapult stalks in a wood;
And one, with a football, covered in mud.

In the ordered rhythmic flow of reading, or recitation, or 'song', clearly both words naturally provide only one 'beat' or 'stress'; and though these 'feet' differ in the number of syllables of which they are composed, they constitute 'measures' of about the same duration.

21. How has Mr Rosen got himself and his readers into this chaotic situation regarding 'the technical nature of poetic rhythm'?

Clearly, the 'muddle' originates from the way in which the term 'rhythm' is used in this discourse.

Before we try to analyse and explain this 'muddle' that Mr Rosen is imposing on us, we will 'wade' a little further into the 'metrical mire' as he 'paces' his way through Stevenson's poem.

He has introduced the crucial word, or term, 'rhythm' without giving it any formal temporal or mensural definition apart from an indirect suggestion of a regularity of 'beats' that can be 'tapped out'. Then he fails to carry that principle through in practice. As he uses it, the term is a decided 'dud'; and it is not given any better definition as we proceed through the book.

In his dealings here with Stevenson's poem, we have no clear idea what 'this rhythm', is, in which every verse of the poem other than the sixth partakes, or what the 'different rhythm' of the sixth verse is.

Any child, or its teacher, that has the curiosity to attempt to apply Mr Rosen's 'botched' version of foot-based 'classical' prosody to this poem will end up in a state of bewilderment. The first verse of the poem is presented as:

'TUM-tee-tee, **TUM**-tee, **TUM**-tee-tee, **TUM**-tee'

Two '"happily"' feet would seem to alternate with two of another sort of 'foot' not included in his list – and a 'foot' that we are told it would not be worth knowing the name and nature of anyway. However, whatever the second 'foot' might be called, we have been told that it will have its own 'kind of rhythm' which is different from the 'rhythm' of the '"happily" foot' . The child must therefore think that the one verse-line *changes* its 'rhythm' *three* times.

This is an appalling 'muddle'. The intellects of children should not be 'messed around with' in this way.

22. That same child could well present its teacher with yet another confusing statement of Mr Rosen's which deepens the metrical 'mire'.

In his chapter on **'Some Technical Points About Poems'**, he moves from matters of 'rhythm' to matters of 'rhyme'. As part of his discussion about 'rhyme', he introduces a 'limerick' by Edward Lear:

There was a young lady whose chin, A
Resembled the point of a pin; A
So she made it quite sharp, B
And purchased a harp, B
And played several times with her chin. A

In fact, with regard to the piece, Mr Rosen has more to say about its 'rhythm' than its 'rhyme':

> This poem is a **limerick:** its rhyme scheme is **AABBA**.
> In limericks the rhythm changes part-way through.
> You have two three-feet lines, followed by two two-feet lines, finishing with one three-feet line.
>
> (page 178)

Now, the 'limerick' is a delightful 'song and a dance' of a poetic form. It is one which involves a most interesting formal metrical 'game' which people usually enjoy without realising what it is. The form has an insistently regular 'rhythm' – to use the term 'rhythm' in a general, fundamental and 'colloquial' sense of a 'regularity of beat' – which 'most people can just feel'. Indeed, most people will venture to write a 'limerick' if no other sort of poem.

One's immediate response to Mr Rosen's suggestion that the 'rhythm' of the limerick 'changes part-way through' is to say that it is nonsense. It is not *entirely* absurd, because, as we shall show later, the suggestion is true in a 'subsidiary' sense. But he has nevertheless created another profoundly misleading 'muddle'.

The sense of absurdity arises because the clause, 'the rhythm changes part-way through', seems to parallel and correspond with, but at the same time oppose as different, the earlier statement regarding Stevenson's poem, that 'suddenly the rhythm changes'.

There is a 'clash' here between what are in fact two quite different uses of the single word or term 'rhythm'. In the earlier situation Mr Rosen's use of the term had, in a way which he never clarified, something to do with the *nature* of the so-called 'feet' in the 'lines'. In the new situation he is talking about the *number* of 'feet' in a 'line'. This is a profoundly silly 'mess'.

* * *

To Be Completed