

How Writers Write Poetry 2015

Class Session 4: Formalism and Meter

Video Transcript

Welcome to the Class Session 4 Video Transcript: *Formalism and Meter* with Camille Rankine, Shane McCrae, and Richard Kenney.

Camille Rankine is the author of the chapbook *Slow Dance with Trip Wire*, selected by Cornelius Eady for the Poetry Society of America's 2010 New York Chapbook Fellowship. Her first full-length collection of poetry, *Incorrect Merciful Impulses*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press. She was selected for a MacDowell Colony Fellowship in 2013, and was named an Honorary Cave Canem Fellow in 2012. She is Assistant Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Manhattanville College, editorial director of *The Manhattanville Review*, and lives in New York City, where she sings with the band Miru Mir.

Shane McCrae is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The Animal Too Big to Kill*. He is the winner of a Whiting Writers' Award and has been a finalist for the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and a PEN Center USA Literary Award. He teaches at Oberlin College.

Richard Kenney is a professor of English at the University of Washington. His works include *The Evolution of the Flightless Bird*, *Orrery*, and *The Invention of Zero*. Kenney is the recipient of numerous accolades, including the Yale Younger Poets Prize, the Lannan Literary Award, and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation fellowship. His most recent book is *The One-Strand River*.

The transcript begins here:

Welcome back. For this class session we're going to be discussing the very interesting topic of form, how it can liberate the imagination, and how constraints can actually lead you into new material, how that can be a way to generate new poems. We have three terrific videos, and we're going to begin with my co-teacher in this class, Camille Rankine, who is the author of the forthcoming *Incorrect Merciful Impulses* from Copper Canyon Press. She is also the author of the chapbook *Slow Dance With Tripwire* which won the Poetry Society of America's New York Chapbook Fellowship. She is a graduate of Harvard College and Columbia University and she is the Assistant Director of the MFA Program at Manhattanville College in New York.

That's me. And next we'll have Shane McCrae, who is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The Animal Too Big To Kill*. He is the winner of a Whiting Writers Award and has been a finalist for the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and a PEN Center USA award. He teaches at Oberlin College. And we'll finish up with Richard Kenney. He is a professor of English at the University of Washington. His works include *The Evolution of the Flightless Bird*, *Orrery*, and *The Invention of the Zero*. Kenney is the recipient of numerous accolades including the Yale Younger

Poets prize, the Lannan Literary Award, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. His most recent book is *The One-Strand River*.

Onward!

Hi! I'm Camille Rankine and I am going to talk today about the pantoum. So, the pantoum is a poem of any length composed of four-line stanzas. Now, the stanza form -- this is where it gets complicated -- but not too complicated -- Each in stanza, the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza, and we'll get examples of these, so you can see how it all fits together -- And the last line of a pantoum is generally the same as the first line. So, I really like this form because in general I feel like form can be -- kind of -- it removes certain elements of choice for you as a poet. And that can be kind of freeing. The pantoum in particular, I feel that it can be a really great way of entering into an idea or subject or telling a story because of the element of repetition, what kind of texture that gives a narrative or idea, and I think that can be, for certain subjects, that can really add something. And it can be a really good way of entering into an idea or narrative. I love the musicality of the repetition and what that can offer, I love the way that a pantoum can tell a story, have a story unfold a little at a time. And the way that repetition can serve as a means of emphasis, and also kind of as a means of undoing and retelling. So, we're going to look at a couple different examples of pantoums, and see how these poems and these poets find different ways of using these forms and what those forms for each poet add to the story they're telling and at what they create. So we're going to start with *Incident*, this a poem by Natasha Trethewey.

We tell the story every year—
how we peered from the windows, shades drawn—
though nothing really happened,
the charred grass now green again.

We peered from the windows, shades drawn,
at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
the charred grass still green. Then
we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.

At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,

a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.

We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps,

the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil.

It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns.

When they were done, they left quietly. No one came.

The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil;

by morning the flames had all dimmed.

When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.

Nothing really happened.

By morning all the flames had dimmed.

We tell the story every year.

So, I think this poem, from the first line I can tell, to me this is the perfect form for it: We tell the story every year. And you know when you tell a story over and over again, a lot of the time what happens is that it changes a little bit each time. So one of the great things about the pantoum and the pantoum as she's utilizing it here is that the lines come back again it's like a wave on the shore and every time it returns it changes just a little bit, just as when you tell a story little details might shift around. Essentially the story is the same but the way it unfolds, the impression you get each time is a little bit different, and you see that in the way that she has these little moments return and then the way they come back. You know you feel that this is a story that has been told over and over again for years, and you get that impression through the way that she uses repetition in the pantoum and makes these tiny changes to those repeating lines. So you have that sense, and you also have the idea of a story being made and unmade, built and then taken apart. And like the way that, you know, when you're talking about this subject, the idea of the Klan coming and burning a cross on a family's lawn, and if you think about the narrative of Natasha Trethewey's life as a child of a biracial marriage, and what kind of impact that would have and the relevance of that, and how significant event this could, she also is negating the power of that event and these men by saying, Nothing really happened. And I think that having that line come in in the beginning and the end -- to me that reflects the power of repetition as well -- not only to build up an event and emphasize it but to

take it apart, repeating it over and over again until it has less meaning. And also the power of storytelling in general, of owning that story, and making that narrative your narrative and not theirs. And I see all of these things happening with the pantoum, and the form she's chosen, and the way she's utilizing it. And I think that's really a powerful way of taking a form like that, making it your own, and deciding how that form is going to really inform and express this subject, and how to use those elements to really make your piece come alive and say exactly what you want to say and give it this texture and all these different layers. So that to me is a beautiful example of that form. So next I wanted to take a look at a different poet's interpretation. This is by Natalie Diaz, from her book *My Brother Was an Aztec* and this is *My Brother at 3am*.

He sat cross-legged, weeping on the steps
when Mom unlocked and opened the front door.

O God, he said. O God.

He wants to kill me, Mom.

When Mom unlocked and opened the front door
at 3 a.m., she was in her nightgown, Dad was asleep.

He wants to kill me, he told her,
looking over his shoulder.

3 a.m. and in her nightgown, Dad asleep,
What's going on? she asked. Who wants to kill you?

He looked over his shoulder.

The devil does. Look at him, over there.

She asked, What are you on? Who wants to kill you?

The sky wasn't black or blue but the green of a dying night.

The devil, look at him, over there.

He pointed to the corner house.

The sky wasn't black or blue but the dying green of night.

Stars had closed their eyes or sheathed their knives.

My brother pointed to the corner house.

His lips flickered with sores.

Stars had closed their eyes or sheathed their knives.

O God, I can see the tail, he said. O God, look.

Mom winced at the sores on his lips.

It's sticking out from behind the house.

O God, see the tail, he said. Look at the goddamned tail.

He sat cross-legged, weeping on the front steps.

Mom finally saw it, a hellish vision, my brother.

O God, O God, she said.

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So that's a striking poem to me and a very different example of how a poet can use the pantoum. So I think again in this use, the story is unfolding a little at a time, and to me, the repetition in the beginning has an effect of that confusion, that confusion that the mother would have coming to her door in her nightgown at 3AM, her husband asleep, and finding her son on her steps in this confused state and trying to draw the story out of him of what's going on, what's happening, so she uses repetition I think as a way of expressing that sort of confused state and she also uses, similar to what Natasha Trethewey did, Diaz is using small changes to draw that story out as well and to push the narrative forward and so she has the repetition, what's going on, who wants to kill you, and then that becomes the next iteration of what are you on, who wants to kill you, and so I think that she both has that backtracking, Let's get this straight, what's happening, and also in those changes it heightens that sense of like trying to gather information, trying to place ourselves, trying to figure out where we are and what's happening. And I think the way that she uses repetition changes throughout the poem, you know I think at first you have a sense of trying to figure out where you are a little at a time, of that confusion, and then I think as the poem goes on, by the end, to me those repeated lines

have a very different feel, I think you know she has a lot of repetition about the setting, what we're seeing, we have that sky that's not blue, the dying green of night, we have the stars and their knives, we have a visual, what her brother is seeing, the devil, the tail, and that for him the repeated images as well as what the speaker of the poem is kind of painting for us with the night, and with the sores on his lips, and that vision his mother is having, I think to me the repetition of those different visual elements creates a sort of prison in a way, has this feeling of inescapability and I think that it also has the feeling of maybe this could happen again or has happened before, and I think when you're talking about, you know in this situation what strikes me as a situation of maybe mental illness, drug use, these are the things that happen again and again with a family member, you're getting that feeling of there's no escape from this, this is the way that things are, this is the reality, and this is what's going to keep happening throughout the poem. I also love the way that she has used repetition and the way that she ends the poem, the way that vision shifts, you know at first the terrified person is the brother saying Oh God Oh God someone is trying to kill me and at the end the terrible belongs to the mother, repeating that same line, seeing that the terrifying vision is her son before her, so I think that for this, the power of that repetition is really in bringing us into that sense of despair that people are feeling in the poem, and it's a very different message a very different way that it's being used here from Trethewey's poem. And I love seeing that in each poet's mind that form can do something very different in their hands, it can do something very different from poem to poem, you can be utilizing the freedom that form is giving you in saying here are your options, they're limited, you need to be able to work within this and bend it to what you want it to do, and you can see that each poet here has done that, and that form, in general the pantoum especially to me is a great way of finding a way of telling a story, of you know, you make a way into a narrative or a story, setting that scene, the repetition and the musicality that offers.

- Hi, my name is Shane McCrae and I'm going to talk about this idea. I don't know if it's my idea. It's not especially fancy but I call it generative distraction, which makes it sound fancy and all I mean by that, in a broad sense, is that sometimes it helps when you're writing to have something to distract your mind. So, I'm going to start out. Well, no, I'm not going to start out with that. What I'm going to start out with is, I'm going to, in a very broad way, give you a sense of why this idea is important. So, broadly - poetry in English - Well, T.S. Eliot has this idea that he calls disassociation of sensibility which, those are also fancy words. All he really means by that is that up until, he thinks, around the seventeenth century poets in English apprehended feeling, you know, they expressed their feelings or they encountered their feelings with their intellects. So that there was a perfect union between, you know, head and heart essentially and that with the rise of two poets, John Milton and Dryden, whose last name I'm suddenly forgetting, there came a divorce between head and heart and he thinks that specifically, really what it is is a post-Miltonic poetics; poets after Milton, really. Up until Milton and even in Milton you get a kind of poetry that is both emotional, it is full of feeling, but it is

also incredibly intelligent. Once you get to Milton, or once you get to Dryden and Pope, their lives overlap but Dryden was first, you get - there's a certain anxiety about expressing feeling and people, poets lean far more toward talking about, you know, they write essays in verse and they're very what we would call now, technical, which is an inaccurate term, it just means that they are very thinky poems. They are poems about ideas but not in an emotionally compelling way. Not a lot of people like to read that poetry and this becomes incredibly prominent in the eighteenth century. So Eliot thinks or thought, he's been dead for a while - Eliot thought that poetry in English had never recovered from this disassociation of sensibility, that we had never gotten to a point where feeling and intellect had been unified. But I think that in this, as in many other things, Eliot was wrong and that the actual, the moment where that re-unification takes place is actually at the end, the very end of the eighteenth century. And the eighteenth century, as you all know, was the moment of, the highest moment, I think, of the head type poem and then 1797 when (is that right?) when *Lyrical Ballads* by Coleridge and Wordsworth comes out, that is sort of one of the big launching moments in romantic poetry. But Wordsworth specifically, I think, re-introduces this idea that there should be a union between feelings and thoughts and the way he does that is essentially...The other thing about Milton, that you might have picked up, is that his poetry was marked the kind of ending point for a certain type of poetry and then poetry changes after that and stays that way for a while and then Wordsworth comes around and his poetry marks another end point and a new beginning. At that moment you get a reunion of head and heart but you also get, the way that he gets the heart in is he has poems that are spontaneous expressions, or at least seem like they're spontaneous expressions, and he specifies this. Like in the title he'll say, you know, I went on a walk last Sunday, I bought some McNuggets, on the way I wrote this poem, you know, the idea is he is trying to signal to the reader, you know, this kind of just poured out of me, you know. It's just spontaneous, unregulated feeling but I think that can be deceptive and I think this might be why Eliot was fooled. It can deceive one into thinking that he is just following his heart but if you read these poems and get past the prejudice that the title is trying to impose on you, you see that they are also thinky poems. They're, you know, they're, the intellect is in there. And Wordsworth doing this shaped the way people think about poetry in his moment. Very, very soon after Wordsworth people were already writing Wordsworthian, kind of spontaneous poems and the idea that that's how a poem should be hasn't really changed since Wordsworth. There have been a lot of...there have been a lot of movements I think, in one way or another, could have pushed against it but I don't think very many people have really - It's very hard to see outside of that to another way of doing poetry, very hard to see out of the spontaneous, you know, eruption of poetry and so that even if your poem is labored, even if it takes you years to do it, it has to feel as if, in some way, the poem is discovering itself as it goes along. Just as if you're talking to a friend and as you're talking whatever you're going to say is occurring to you as you're saying it. This is what we, as readers, look for in poetry now and so this is the effect that poets are trying to achieve. When I was a younger poet, when I was just beginning as a poet and when, you know, when I've talked to my friends who are younger poets or when I was and they were, I didn't recognize it at the time but the problem that we all had

was that we wrote poems often based upon ideas about feelings or ideas that arose from feelings but always, or almost always, with an idea. You know, for instance, you know, my cat died, I was sad, I'm going to write a poem about how I was sad and my cat died, you know. And when I've spoken to younger students about this it's very hard for them to see what's wrong with that and so this idea of generative distraction has been kind of bubbling in my head for a long time because I've been trying to figure out a way to tell students that that doesn't really work. The reason it doesn't really work is you've got a controlling idea when you go into the poem. That makes the poem seem, to those of us, which is everybody, who have been raised to expect poems, at least in English, to sound as if they are just spontaneously occurring. When we read these poems that the poet had an idea that they wanted to express in the beginning the poem doesn't feel spontaneous it feels like an effort to get this idea out and ends up seeming kind of inert. And so what I wanted to do to sort of clarify how this works maybe a little bit is I want to read a poem by Keats who - this poem would've been written just a few decades after Lyrical Ballads came out, so you that you can get a sense of what I mean. There's a particular part in it that will exemplify this, what I mean about the poem seeming spontaneous and then I'm going to talk briefly about ways that you can get to, even if you know what you want to say, ways that you can make it so that you can make the poem sound spontaneous even if you have an idea from the beginning. So, that said, I'm going to read, Keats wrote a series of really great odes and I'm going to read this poem called Ode to a Nightingale. A lot of people tend to think of, I mean the one that gets hot most often is Ode on a Grecian Urn but Ode to a Nightingale is just as lovely and it illustrates my point, I think, fairly well. So, Ode to a Nightingale:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,

But being too happy in thine happiness,—

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees

In some melodious plot

Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,

Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

So you can't see it but if you get a chance you should look at this poem. It's constructed with these very elaborate stanzas, very elaborate rhymes and the moment that I wanted to draw your attention to is right near the end where he says "Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" and then begins the next stanza, "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell." At that moment you can see that Keats is hearing himself and that's a sign of spontaneity. You can see that as he's writing it he's watching what he's writing and the poem is growing organically out of, or at least he's making it seem as if it is, and Keats, my understand is, did write these relatively fast. The poem is growing organically out of the moment. Now, the way I think you achieve this if you have an idea already that you want to express is finding some way to distract your mind from

that idea. I think it's essential that that idea stay within the poem itself. And what I mean by that is Keats had his elaborate rhymes that he was working with. There are many different ways that you can do it. You could say, I'm going to write a poem but I'm not going to use, you know, the letter e. There's a French novelist who wrote a whole novel without using the letter e and it was translated into English, also without the e, which is pretty amazing. You can set yourself any number of rules that you have to follow. The important thing is that the rules have to do with the making of the poem itself and by following those rules you distract yourself from what it is that you think you want to say and can find a way to say it that seems fresh because at every moment you're trying to get your thought to work within the confines of your form and so that ultimately the distraction allows you to express feelings that you, feelings and ideas that you knew you had to begin with but in a way that seems as if you're discovering them as you go along.

-My name is Richard Kenney and I've been here for the year at the Writers' Workshop and what I want to talk about is meter. I'm going to talk about fundamentals here. Meter means measure, which implies counting and numbers. In fact poetry used to be called numbers. Well, how many? Well, let me think -- one, two, three, four, five, this is my poetic line, so we will measure it as the poets' do. We have five numbers, six, as many as we need I suppose. What gets counted? Well, you could count anything I suppose, anything that you could whistle back for...in a repetitive way, so that you had a symmetrical pattern, a noticeable pattern. You could count unicorns. Five unicorns in a single poetic line would, would...well you see the problem -- it would, its sentimentality would be the least of it. What you really want to count are small things that don't have any meaning like syllables. You know where this is going. Syllables are one of the things that famously get counted in meter. What else? Well, accents or stresses, as we know, get counted. So there are syllabic meters, there are stress meters, and then the third thing, the...which is the confluence of the two, of those two traditions, and is, constitutes the great metrical tradition in English is counting both at once, which means counting feet.

What I'm going to do is illustrate how one would make a line out of, out of those...out of those simple elements and to do that, like I said, I have props. We'll do syllabics first. These represent syllables, if I have enough. Now, the simplest syllabic form -- the one that everybody's familiar with are haiku poems, right? Turnip farmer rose and with a fresh pulled turnip pointed to my road. So we have -- turnip farmer rose / and with a fresh pulled turnip (seven) / pointed to my road. Five, seven, five, easy. Stress tradition, we have, well the Anglo-Saxons, at the very root of English literature -- begin English literature wrote in stress meters. I don't, I can't speak that for you but during the Middle English period, the literary revival there was a poet called the Pearl poet who wrote Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which begins [MIDDLE ENGLISH] That's close, you can hear the bang, bang, bang, bang. There are five of those, five stresses in each line. We're going to use bolts for that. I said I wasn't going to use that word but there it is. It's five

for the English tradition. So... [MIDDLE ENGLISH]. Okay -- can you see these better if I turn them? Five! Five stresses. That, that tradition survives -- comes down to us in the nursery rhyme tradition. So hinks, minks, the old witch winks, the beggars are coming to town, some in rags and some in tags and one in a velvet gown. Hinks, minks, the old witch winks, the beggars are coming to town, the beggars are coming to town, some in rags and some in tags, and one in a velvet gown. And there you see a very famous rhythmic pattern in the literature. It's the song measure. In this case four stresses and then three and then four and then three. It can be done -- and all of them, Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon. Or, one of my favorites -- bow wow wow whose dog art thou? Little Tom Tinker's dog. Bow wow wow. Bow wow wow -- it's not very hard.

It can be done in a more complicated fashion. Gerard Manley Hopkins is famous for it. The King Fisher begins, his poem The Kingfisher begins -

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells

Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's

Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

And Hopkins is counting stresses and these are accents that fall on particular syllables in the course of a sentence. No syllables, you'll notice I'm not counting any syllables at all, they don't figure at all in this system.

So the line hinks, minks, the old witch winks is the same length as a line which would begin Let me tell you a little story about a boy named Herb, his daddy was a noun and his momma was a verb. That's a ... that follows the pattern a lot of songs do. They don't need to count their syllables, they don't lose track of where they are. They know how many stresses there are because in the Anglo- Saxon tradition they would alliterate them, in music you strum the banjo and the music carries it. But that's the alliterative tradition and you're welcome to try it. It's a powerful way of writing and the limitation here is not that you can't hear it but that you sometimes have trouble deciding where the stresses fall in long lines.

Now, now we come to the great tradition, as I said, the accentual syllabic tradition where I said you count both. Well, how do you do two things at once? The obvious way to do it is to combine them and that's where my, that's where my props come in. So a stress will be coupled with a number of unstressed syllables and you call that grouping a foot. In English there are really just two rhythms that we're trying to approximate. A rhythm would be a repetitive pattern of a stress followed by some number of unstressed syllables which is always the same so that it would sound symmetrical.

So, and in English there are really just four of these. There are two rhythms, one is the heartbeat; lub dub lub dub lub dub lub dub, dub lub dub lub. This one, I'm going to couple them together. When I do that what I have is a trochee, from your position. The bolt and the nut. There's two rhythms that, that we try to approximate using these feet. One is the double rhythm and that's the rhythm of the heartbeat, it's an easy way to remember it. The heart goes, let's say the heart goes lub dub lub dub lub dub. It goes unstress, stress, so I just made an iamb here with the unstressed syllable which is the nut followed by the bold lub dub. Now, in a long string if I say lub dub lub dub lub dub lub dub and I ask Chris back there or somebody else, you know, I don't remember where I started, did I start on a lub or a dub? He would shrug and say, why does it matter? And this is the difference, the distinction between a trochee and an iamb, is really minimal. They're both trying to approximate this rhythm which is, propagates all the way through the literature.

Now, the other rhythm that the feet, poetic feet try to approximate is a, is a triple rhythm. It's called a triple because there are three syllables in it. Two of them are unstressed ----- Now, instead of, instead of lub dub I have didi dum didi dum didi dum and these can be strung together in nursery rhymes - hey diddle diddle the cat and the fiddle has a bunch of them, a bunch of these in it. It could be, literature also particularly in former centuries uses these feet. They're called anapests and dactyls. The anapest rises up to the stress and the dactyl falls down from it. The dactyl and the trochee are the falling, the falling feet. Bum bum or bum bum bum and the anapest and the iamb are the double and the triple rising feet and out of these, out of these props you can build a poem. \

There are two measures which are common. One is the pentameter line, the long line, which resembles/sounds like speech and the other is the short line or the song measure and songs are in it and many serious poems too.

Okay, so this goes, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. Alright, it works. I'm tired of love, I'm still more tired of rhyme but money gives me pleasure all the time. That works. The opening lines of Keats' famous odes,

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Excuse me. That sounded really foolish and that's, that's sort of the point of these meters. The meter is purely mechanical and it isn't a feeling creature, it's really a robotic sort of mechanical thing made out of nuts and bolts like this. It only... It only knows stressed syllables and unstressed syllables and for this reason it's really important to understand that when we say stress in the context of accentual syllabic meters what we're talking about is the stress, illicit stress, or allowable stresses within a single word. So if a word accepts a stress, if a syllable in a word accepts a stress, if the dictionary says it accepts a stress, primary or secondary doesn't matter, it just gets a stress as far as the meter's concerned but you, feeling creature that you are will not read it foolishly like that in a singsong fashion. You will read it naturally and so if I read, if I read that Shakespearean line again and say, shall I, I won't, the ... my robot reads it, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Well, I would say, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? And, how many stresses is that? Well, the number of stresses that I, of actual stresses that I give it is four. So the robot reads it relentlessly and ruthlessly, giving the same amount of stress to each of the stressable syllables. The prepositions, the conjunctions get as much juice as the nouns and the verbs. They get as much stress as anything that one would wish to emphasize, when one read it in a dramatic fashion. An actor can read a line differently one day from another day, differently on Thursday than he does on Tuesday. Meter never changes. The meter is always ticking along underneath the surface, simply striking every allowable syllable, every syllable which can, which the dictionary will, in which the dictionary will permit a stress whereas you will read it normally. So in a, in a line like that, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Shall I compare thee to a summer's day. We have four, four rhetorical stresses, four voice...voice stresses, or rhythmic stresses we would say, but there are five metrical stress. Don't worry about it.

And this happens in many, many lines. Any line that has a conjunction or a preposition or some grammatical word like that will... will often have fewer stresses than ...than five. Rhythmic stresses - the meter goes along underneath the surface without any problem. And that's just about the whole story really. I could illustrate with ...I could illustrate with four beat lines, I could illustrate with five beat lines but just to do a couple more. The opening lines of Keats' ... I'll do two of the odes. The Ode on the Grecian urn begins,

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme

Now, if you want to hear the robot read that. Metrically it would go like this:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

It sounds idiotic to put an accent on and. One wants to accent slow and time. Thou foster-child of Silence, slow Time. It's a beautiful line. Well that disjunction, that disharmony, that counterpointing effect is really what makes accentual syllabic poetry so thrilling because the part of your body adjusts itself, your physical nature adjusts itself to the clock of the meter and expects these stresses to come and when they don't come there's a little bit of a...little bit of a --, little bit of hair goes up on your neck a little bit sometimes. You get a... have a physical response. There's one other version of that. The next line is, Sylvan historian, who canst thus express. Now Sylvan can't be pronounced Syl-VAN but the robot wants to go, Syl-VAN historian canst thus express. Can't do it. So what do you do? Well, it's really easy. You'll just flip the iamb around into a trochee. Now, you have a trochee. Sylvan - and now we revert to iambs - historian who canst thus express and this happens all the time. It happens very often in the first position of a, of a poetic line. The opening of The Ode to Autumn is,

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun

Well, you know, you could imagine that that was made out of trochees because it starts with season. Season can't be pronounced seas-ON. Now my robot wants to say seas-ON of mists and mell-OW fruitfulness but I can't so I, again, turn the iamb around, make a trochee of it and I go Sea-son, then I revert to iambs, of mists and mellow fruitfulness and now we're done. It's okay.

Everything works out. The ... If I were to take more time, I won't, you should, you read...read poet....the great poems and you'll find these effects happening all the time.

In the context of this little chat I'm saying don't worry about it. It's okay if, if the meter gets violated occasionally it's fine as long as you get, as long as you revert to the pattern. And, again, the pattern doesn't have to be the way that one would actually say the line. The syllables which, where accents are supposed to strike, as in the case of five of them in a pentameter line, they simply have to be able to accept stress. So with these, with these props I've been trying to show how the armature can be laid out for a metrical line. What you have to do, but how does one write one? One simply speaks and moves syllables around so that they can fit the pattern and if you just have to say something and it doesn't quite fit the pattern don't worry about it as long as it- as long as you recover and return to the pattern. Is it possible to write this way and sound anything like a normal human being? Will it necessarily sound like some sort of faux Shakespearean? No, it isn't very difficult at all to do this day and night. The fact is I could speak that way for a long time without you noticing. I guess I'll say one last thing, these meters don't exist in the world. They exist in your nervous system and I'll demonstrate. That I propose that there are two rhythms, the heartbeat and the hoofbeat, I will propose that there are, of all the possible meters, and if you say there are six, there are; dimeters, trimeters, tetrameters, pentameters, and hexameters, and there are anapests, dactyls, iambs, and trochees, that should be twenty four meters that you have to memorize. It's not that way. There are really only a few that actually happen and they are, the lines, the meter which resembles song and that's called the song measure or ballad measure.

And that's, either, that's some combination of four feet and three feet and hinks minks works that way, Betsy from Pike works that way, Clementine works that way, the Yellow Rose from Texas works that way. And Tiger, tiger, burning bright in the forest of the night...many, many poems work that way. All the Christmas Carols you know, all of the ballads you know, work that way. They're some combination of four stresses and three stresses, four stresses and three stresses. Four, four, four, four, something like that. The other famous line is the, is the line which approximates speech and that's the, in English, that's the pentameter line and this is the nature of poetry. It's a ... it's a ...it's DNA is the twining of the strands of song and speech. Speech which resembles song, song which resembles speech.

And those are the two...the two principal measures or line lengths. The short line, the long line and the two rhythms are the heartbeat and the hoof beat. The hoof beat is only really used nowadays for...it's used principally in light verse, in humorous verse. But I started to say the meters exist, they don't. They're often talked about as though they're in the world but they're really just ways of talking about things that happen in the world which are strings of rhythmic

patterns which appear in speech. And so the line, shall I compare thee to a summer's day, pentameter line, is it really? Well, in the, if the next line is - thou art more lovely and more temperate and the poem, rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, yes it's a pentameter line but if that poem were to have continued, let's say, shall I compare thee to a summer's day, thou art too prim and arch more like February, say, complaining into March. Okay, now we have, shall I compare thee to a summer's day, no, thou art too prim and arch (four, three) more like February, say, complaining into March.

Now we've, I've made a little ballad out of that. Does that mean that this ballad measure has one pentameter line? No, it just has, it has a stressed tetrameter line that just has a few extra syllables in it. What I'm trying to propose is that, is that I began with counting and numbers, just like professors always do and it's not about numbers and counting at all. That's just the mind trying to understand it at a level of detail which is, in practice, all but irrelevant. The truth is, these things are biological effects. They're happening in the body and music is the proof of that. If you find yourself moving to music then, then you know that this happens in a very immediate kind of way.

I left the question of, the journalist's questions of who, what, when, where, why, how, I tried to concentrate a little bit on what and how but the who, where, when? Everybody, always, that's who and when. There's no, it's a cultural universal. The anthropologists haven't found a culture where this doesn't exist. One presumes, there are bone flutes that go back to the caves, one presumes that this kind of thing was going on from the beginning. It's everywhere. Where? It's not only in poetry it's, in fact, over the last century metrical verse, having dominated the tradition and probably all, all the Western poetic traditions in England, the only ones I know anything for, since the beginning. In the last century meter took a backseat to some other poetic effects but the advertisers and the --- shamans didn't leave it behind.

We often, we hear metrical constructions probably more often in advertising than, than, at least average people out there on the street probably hear them in that context and the context of music more often than they do in the context of poetry. Why? Well, the advertisers know that counting gets peoples' attention. The music people know that we're all drinking wine, aren't we, why wouldn't we want to be here? We like it. You sometimes hear the meter's used because it, it enhances, meter was a technology or a method which enhanced memory, okay. It's not untrue, it's true. It strikes me, it's true in the sense that groceries enhance digestion. One presumes, there are bone flutes that go back to the caves, one presumes that this kind of thing was going on from the beginning. It's everywhere. Where? It's not only in poetry it's, in fact, over the last century metrical verse, having dominated the tradition and probably all, all the Western poetic traditions in England, the only ones I know anything for,

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-I love thinking about form. I think that form, you know, it can be a little daunting. It can feel like maybe it's constraining, but I think it can also be very freeing. And I think that's one of the things that I think these poets kind of have shown us. As we'll go back to Marvin Bell again, "Rhyme and meter, too, can be experimental," he says in his 32 statements. And I think that is very true. I think that one of the fun things about form is that you know within that structure you can find ways of playing around, of making it your own, and also of exploring the topic that you have chosen to write about in a new way that maybe wouldn't have occurred to you before. I think that can be very experimental, very freeing.

-And I'm just thinking that Rick Kenney once taught a workshop to my students, and he gave them the most diabolical exercise imaginable, which was to write a poem of ten words in which each word had one letter more than the previous word. And I thought, oh that's impossible. And then I started driving home that night, and I thought, "I am the mare night forgot." And I realized I was on my way to a poem, and what a formal constraint can do is to channel the imagination in ways that you had not expected. And I love the fact that you were bringing up the pantoums and made me think of, we can write pantoums, we can write... our former faculty member here at Iowa Donald Justice had "Pantoum of the Great Depression," which in the wake of the Great Recession feels strangely contemporary. And there are sestinas. We were speaking earlier about John Ashbery's "Farm Implements and Rutabagas," you can go almost anywhere writing in different forms.

-Yeah, I think it's true. And I think that it can push you to, as you were saying, you know, that exercise that seemed impossible can push you into places that you would never have got to go before and can open you up in a way that maybe you didn't know you could be opened up to I think is one of the really great things about it.

-That's why we like to write poems.

-Exactly. Onward!