

“Non-linguistic” Browning: Meter and music in “Pietro of Abano”

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Abstract. Sapir (1921) suggests that Robert Browning’s poetry is “non-linguistic” in the way he uses the English language to convey thought. We explore the meter of a much criticized example of his poetry, his “Pietro of Abano” (1880), and conclude otherwise. The poem is in trochaic metre with extensive and systematic catalexis, i.e. unrealized metrical constituents possible only at phrase boundaries. We show that Browning locates phrase and even word boundaries so that they work sometimes for, but also sometimes conspicuously against these requirements, thus drawing attention to them. We also look at one of the poem’s most curious features, a musical score where the poem’s final lines would be expected to be, and note that rather than resolve these issues, it likewise accentuates them. We conclude that Browning’s poem draws attention to linguistic form, thus allying his practice more with Jakobson’s (1960) approach to poetry than Sapir’s.

Keywords. text-setting; meter; catalexis; music

1. Introduction. In the final chapter of his 1921 book *Language*, Edward Sapir turns to the relation between a specific language and its verbal art. The verbal artist, he suggests, has access to some kind of personal experience which is either non-linguistic or in some generalized language, and which the artist aims to transform into a specific language, such as English or German. Some artists successfully “fit or trim the deeper intuition to the provincial accents of their daily speech”, he says, citing Shakespeare and Heine. Others do not, and he cites Robert Browning as an example:

Certain artists whose spirit moves largely in the non-linguistic (better, in the generalized linguistic) layer even find a certain difficulty in getting themselves expressed in the rigidly set terms of their accepted idiom. ... Their art expression is frequently strained, it sounds at times like a translation from an unknown original – which, indeed, is precisely what it is. These artists – Whitmans and Brownings – impress us rather by the greatness of their spirit than the felicity of their art. (Sapir 1921: 239-40)

Sapir adds that “the semi-failures of the Brownings” are, however, “valuable for diagnostic purposes”.

Around the same time that Sapir was writing, already the young Roman Jakobson and his colleagues (the ‘Russian formalists’) were developing an opposite view of verbal art: art generally draws attention to its medium, so literature specifically draws attention to language.² Browning’s poetry clearly does this in many ways. Here, we consider a poem which does this through meter, drawing attention specifically to a way in which meter, a purely literary form, differs from music, perhaps the quintessential art for expressing the contents of that “non-linguistic ... layer”. Our brief study thus suggests that Browning’s perspective on poetry may be closer to Jakobson’s than to Sapir’s.

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² This view is most influentially expressed in Jakobson’s (1960) account of the “poetic function”.

The poem we study we chose because it has been being judged “a semi-failure” since it first appeared, for reasons seeming of a piece with Sapir’s judgment. Browning’s “Pietro of Abano” was published in his *Dramatic Idylls: Second Series* in 1880, and picked out for particular criticism a few weeks later by the reviewer Theodore Watts-Duncan:

No poet of his time has taken such liberties with metre as Mr. Browning, but in “Pietro of Abano” he seems to go out of his way to force the rhythm of the thought into an opposite direction from that of the rhythm of the metre. (Watts-Duncan 1880)

Watts-Duncan’s objection resembles Sapir’s in its dissatisfaction with something about the poem’s match between language and thought. And, he locates the problem in the poem’s meter.

2. “Pietro of Abano”. The poem tells the story of a medieval magician called Pietro (or Peter), of Abano (Pettigrew 1980: 1078). The real Pietro d’Abano (1257-1316) was an Italian philosopher, astrologer and professor of medicine in Padua who wrote a book about Islamic medical and philosophical systems, and attributed phenomena in nature to influences of celestial bodies rather than to angels and demons. He had remarkable success as a physician and apparently commanded high prices for his services; but he was also suspected of having authored a secret book of magic rites, and was brought before the Inquisition and charged with heresy and atheism. He died in prison in 1316.³

Browning’s poem is comic, but not at Peter’s expense. It opens with Peter being abused by the townspeople of Padua in spite of his accomplishments:

(1) Petrus Aponensis – there was a magician!

When that strange adventure happened, which I mean to tell my hearers,
Nearly had he tried all trades – beside physician,
Architect, astronomer, astrologer, – or worse:
How else, as the old books warrant, was he able,
All at once, through all the world, to prove the promptest of appearers
Where was prince to cure, tower to build as high as Babel,
Star to name or sky-sign read, – yet pouch, for pains, a curse?

(ll.1-8)

It then recounts his being visited one day by a young man from Greece who expresses admiration for him and asks him to teach him his magic, which the young man takes to be the art of fooling others into serving his own pleasure. After some reflection Peter shrugs and complies (“Well, who knows? ... shuffle cards once more!” (ll. 163-8)). He attempts to offer a benediction but is interrupted mid-word (“*Bene...*” (l.173)), and the scene shifts to the young man rubbing smoke out of his eyes (“Where am I?” l. 177). The young man soon gains all the trappings of wealth including a mansion and flatterers, and eventually becomes Pope. At various stages in the young man’s rise, Peter appears and asks for a reward, but is always rebuffed. Finally one day Peter appears, anticipating being burned at the stake, and asks for one thing, which is that his book be spared. Even that request is rebuffed, and a tussle ensues:

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro_d%27Abano accessed Feb. 26, 2022.

(2) “Help! The old magician clings like an octopus!⁴
 Ah, you rise now – fuming, fretting, frowning, if I read your features!
 Frown, who cares? We're Pope – once Pope, you can't unpope us!
 Good – you muster up a smile: that's better! Still so brisk?
 All at once grown youthful? But the case is plain! Ass –
 Here I dally with the fiend, yet know the Word – compels all creatures
 Earthly, heavenly, hellish. *Apage, Sathanas!*
Dicam verbum Salomonis–” “–*dicite!*” When – whisk! –

(ll. 401-8)

The tussle ends in line 408, when Pietro’s “–*dicite*” completes the word he started 235 lines earlier with “*Bene-*” (i.e. making *Benedicite*). The many-year story of young man’s rise thus proves to have been an illusion produced in the space of the word. In the next line, the young man finds himself back at the doorway at the time and place where he first met Peter:

(3) What was changed? The stranger gave his eyes a rubbing:
 There smiled Peter’s face turned back a moment at him o’er the shoulder
 As the black door shut, bang!

(ll. 409-11)

3. The poem’s metrical form. The stanzas quoted above make it hard not to feel that there is some justice to Watts-Duncan’s condemnation of the poem’s meter. And they are not atypical: the opening stanza in (1) is only the first of fifty-five stanzas which are in some respects relentlessly identical. Each has eight lines which vary in their syllable count as shown in Table 1. The syllables are organized unvaryingly into trochaic feet (Hatcher 1928: 155), with final syllable catalexis (i.e. omission, shown by the null symbol ‘ø’) in the fourth and eighth lines. They rhyme according to the pattern also shown in Table 1.⁵

syllables	trochaic feet	rhyme pattern
12	6	a
16	8	b
12	6	a
13	7ø	c
12	6	d
16	8	b
12	6	d
13	7ø	c

Table 1. Number of syllables, number of feet, and rhyme pattern in each stanza

Yet in spite of this repetition, it feels almost impossible to get a handle on any sense of rhythmic or metrical regularity. The metre feels in constant conflict with how one might want to

⁴ Browning is very careful to put stressed syllables in polysyllables in odd-numbered position, matching the strict trochees of the meter, so we assume that the word ‘octopus’ is pronounced here with penultimate stress, not with the antepenultimate stress it actually has, in one of his many jokes about Latin words noted further below. Browning’s is nonetheless one of the uses of the word cited as an example in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; we note that the word is not in the 1852 edition of *Walker’s Pronouncing Dictionary* (Fraser 1852).

⁵ Most lines also have internal alliteration, though in no specific pattern.

speak the line aloud; it is elusive in spite of being straightforwardly describable as in Table 1. All critics seem to feel the same. A century after Watts-Duncan's review, Rowena Fowler (1976: 47) approvingly cites Browning's biographer Edward Dowden, who says:

[F]ew persons except the Browning enthusiast, who is not responsible for his fervour, will assert that either the jest or the frankly cynical moral of 'Pietro of Abano' compensates for the jolting in a springless waggon over a rough road and a long. (Dowden 1904: 350)

Fowler herself says, "[t]he whole is couched in the most obscure metre Browning ever invented."

Fowler describes that obscure meter as a "first paeonic tetrameter with the second and fourth feet of odd-numbered lines regularly comprising only two syllables". Her 'paeonic foot' has the four syllable pattern [/ x x x] and her trochaic foot the two syllable pattern [/ x]; thus, the 16 syllable lines have four paeons, the 12 syllable lines alternate such paeons with trochees, and the 13 syllable lines have three paeons followed by one catalectic trochee. In its recognition of the importance of four-syllable groupings alongside the two-syllable ones emphasized by Hatcher (1928) Fowler's approach shares some properties with our own below; but as it stands it suffers from the flaws Halle and Keyser (1966) identified in all traditional approaches to metrical description within English literary criticism which conflate a meter with the language that instantiates it.⁶

Still, what is of greatest interest in Fowler's proposal is her reason for it, which is the unique way in which the poem ends. The fifty-five stanzas described above are followed by a final one which begins with four lines in the usual pattern (lines 441-444), but after them, instead of the expected next four lines, there is a musical score composed by Browning, as shown in Figure 1:⁷

(4)

Scarce the sportive fancy-dice I fling show "Venus":
Still – for love of that dear land which I so oft in dreams revisit –
I have – oh, not sung! but lilted (as – between us –
Grows my lazy custom) this its legend. What the lilt?

⁶ Specifically, it is incompatible with a consistent and independent linguistic description of stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables, and it is not embedded in an explanatory theory that accounts for why some concatenations and patterns of feet are found and not others. Our approach comes from a more parsimonious theory of meter, which distinguishes it from linguistic form and does not allow four-syllable feet.

⁷ Browning was an enthusiast for music, wrote several poems about music, and seems to have composed non-surviving musical scores for some poems (Greene 1947, Duncan 1953, Clarke 2017). His poems were sometimes set by composers to music, but Stokes (2016: 462) suggests that in this type of dramatic poetry, "the rhythms are more virtuosic, his language rougher and more colloquial than Tennyson's, his syntax more convoluted – which has severely reduced the number of wholly satisfactory Browning settings". Though like Fowler we focus on the rhythm of this score, it is worth noting Browning's rather eerie and unstable melody, which starts out in G major and appears to end in C major, with the final note C giving the impression that the melody is incomplete, perhaps because it is always about to start again, repeated for every four lines of the poem. The unsettled effect is not unlike that of the rhyme scheme of abac rather than the more usual abcb.



Figure 1. The final stanza, with a musical score where its last four lines would be.

Fowler says that the metre she proposes, “grotesque as it is in itself, corresponds almost exactly to Browning’s musical rhythm”. Browning’s point, she suggests, is to draw a contrast between the “outlandish” meter which she says is “difficult to sustain” and the “commonplace” rhythm of the music which she calls “quite natural” (Fowler 1976: 53).

We agree that Browning’s point is a contrast between meter and music, but not that that contrast is about outlandishness in one and naturalness in the other. We suggest rather that it an exploration of a particular formal property that is potentially different in meter and in music, and therefore calls attention to language. This formal property relates to the distribution of empty beats and constraints on where these can occur in a meter, which depend on linguistic phrasing.

Fowler’s description of the meter as a linear sequence of foot types defined by patterns of syllables and stress is unilluminating with respect to this issue. A generative description of the kind Halle and Keyser (1971) called for, in contrast, treats meter as consisting of a template and rules for mapping independently defined linguistic properties into it, or, depending on the theory, some other version of a bipartite structure (Hanson and Kiparsky 1996, Fabb and Halle 2008). A scansion is a mapping which conforms to the rules; an unmetrical line cannot be scanned. Crucially also, a generative description treats a template as necessarily having a hierarchical structure (Lieberman and Prince 1977, Kiparsky 1977). This means that generative approaches to meter, compared with traditional literary approaches which emphasize linear patterns, make meters more like the hierarchical rhythmic structures that underlie music and its phrasing (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983), and so facilitate comparisons between the two. Finally, the constituents of that template cannot be just anything: at all levels they are, we assume, binary contrasts in prominence, pairings of a weak (W) constituent with a strong (S) one.⁸

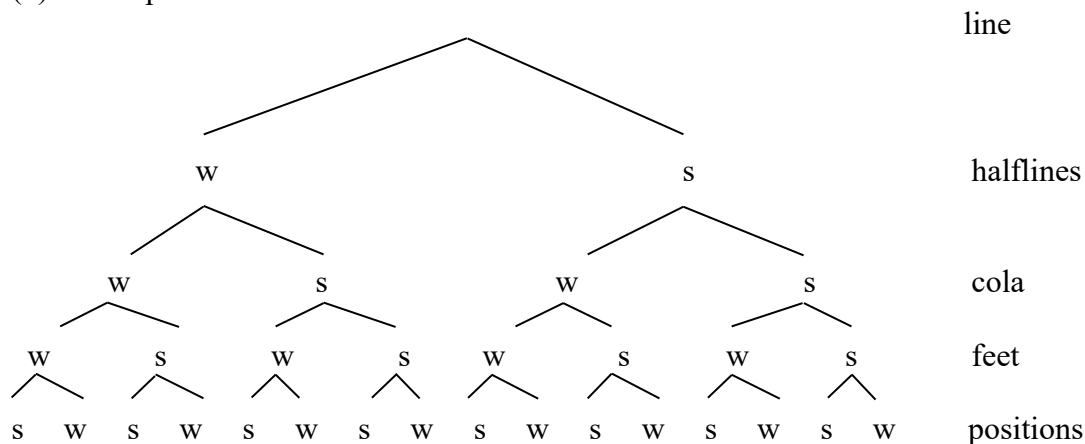
From this perspective, we assume that the template for the meter of “Pietro of Abano” is that in (5a). Sixteen metrical positions are organized into eight trochaic feet (each SW), which are organized into four cola (each WS), which are organized into two halfines (again WS), which

⁸ The hierarchical structure in Fabb and Halle 2008 allows both binary and ternary groupings; in this article we assume instead that all metrical hierarchies are binary.

are organized into a line (also WS). The difference between the falling (SW) rhythms of the feet and the rising (WS) rhythms of the higher levels requires comment: SW rhythms at every level would be simpler, and Prince (1989) suggests that consistency in rhythm across all levels is the default; but many trochaic poems in English plainly have rising rhythms across their lines, as do English phrases and sentences, and the rising rhythm at these levels is supported by our analysis below. Leaving this question and also questions of constituency aside, however, the cola can be seen to offer a reasonable enough representation of the rhythm of a pair of measures in 4/4 time, the time signature of the little score.

Assuming this template, the meter's correspondence rules are, at their most basic, those in (5b). Every position corresponds to one syllable, and no W position corresponds to a syllable which is stressed relative to another one in the same word, which is roughly to say that the primary stress of any word of more than one syllable must be in S, the standard rule for English iambic and trochaic meter (Kiparsky 1977).⁹ (There are a few exceptions to both rules to which we return below; see also note 4 above.)

(5) a. Template:

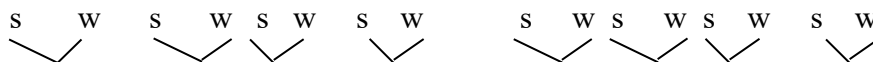


b. Correspondence rules:

- i. Position: Each position corresponds to one syllable.
- ii. Prominence: No W position corresponds to a syllable which is stressed relative to another syllable in the same word.
- iii. Alignment: The beginning of every line corresponds to the beginning of a phrase.

Scansion of those lines which have sixteen syllables – the second and sixth of each stanza – is then straightforward. (6) shows the scansion of a full 16-syllable line (line 2) from “Pietro of Abano”:

(6) When that strange adventure happened, which I mean to tell my hearers,



The question is: what happens with the lines that have fewer syllables? The answer involves the well-established metrical device of catalexis, or unfilled constituents at edges of lines, already noted in connection with Fowler's analysis. It is so normal for trochaic meter to have its

⁹ It is very possible that a stronger rule holds for this and other trochaic poems; see Hayes' (1989) analysis of the meter of “Hiawatha”, for example.

final position catalectic that lines like (6), which do not, are a bit abnormal. Browning's earlier poem "A Toccata of Galuppi's" (1855) illustrates this catalectic norm in a trochaic meter. The poem consists of 45 lines of trochaic octometer, organized into rhyming triplets. In all lines, the final W position is catalectic, marked in (8) by 'ø' added to the text of the line:

- (7) Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
 I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
 But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!
 (Browning "A Toccata of Galuppi's", ll. 1-3)

- (8) Oh Galúppi, Bâldassáro, this is very sad to find! ø
 s w s w s w s w s w s w s w s w
-

Catalexis has been recognized since the earliest metrical theories, and empty beats more generally have been important to various accounts of English meters, perhaps most recently those of Derek Attridge (1982). Within generative metrics, metrical catalexis has led to discovery of catalexis-like phenomena in language (Kiparsky 1991), which in turn illuminate its use in meter. It is a kind of fraternal twin of extrametricality, like it, a mismatch between some language and some element of structure (Kiparsky 1977, Hayes 1982, 1995), and subject to some similar conditions, as well as similarly being available at all levels of structure: positions can be catalectic, as can higher constituents such as feet and even cola. We therefore take the general conditions on metrical catalexis to be as follows:

- (9) Catalexis:
 A metrical constituent may be *catalectic* (empty, i.e. unmatched to any phonological material) only if (i) and (ii) hold and either (iii) or (iv) holds:
 (i) it is W
 (ii) it is peripheral
 (iii) it occurs at the beginning of a metrical constituent whose beginning is aligned with the beginning of a phrase in the language.
 or
 (iv) it occurs at the end of a metrical constituent whose end is aligned with the end of a phrase in the language.

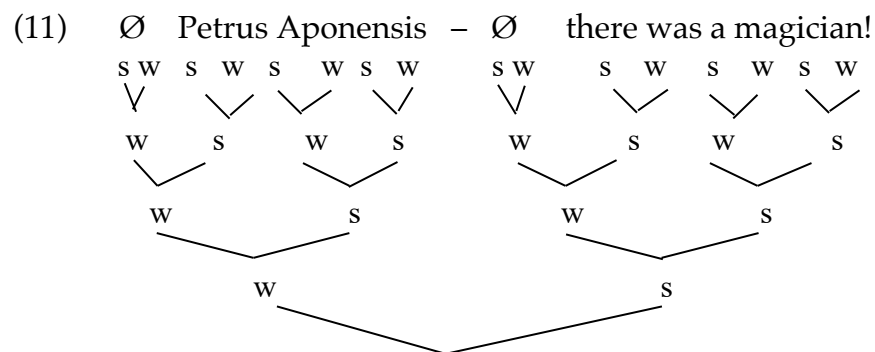
Formally, then, extrametricality (the extra syllable marked with '<>') allows configurations like (10a,b) in rising and falling constituents, respectively. Catalexis (the missing syllable marked with ø) allows (10c,d) in rising and falling constituents, respectively. In both, the brackets '[' and ']' represent beginnings and ends of phrases, respectively:

- (10)
- | | | | |
|-------------------|--|------------|--|
| Extrametricality: | | Catalexis: | |
| a. | | b. | |
| c. | | d. | |

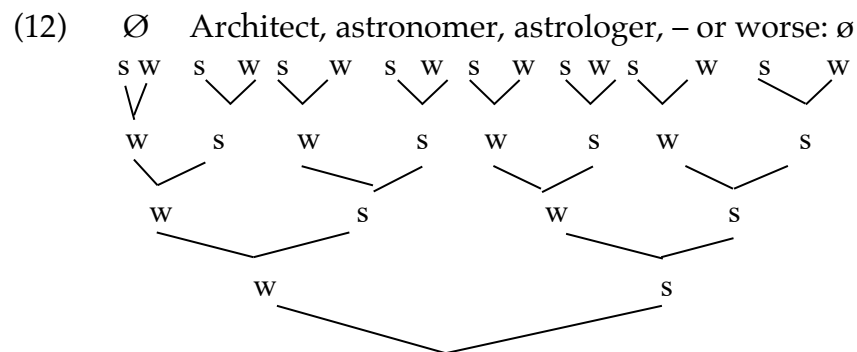
When catalexis occurs line-finally, it has been explained by its allowing lengthenings which make endings more prominent; for example, a syllable before a catalectic position may be lengthened. When catalexis occurs line-initially, it makes beginnings more prominent (Young 1921), for example allowing certain initial syllables in an iambic meter to be stressed. In both

cases, then, catalexis enhances prominence at phrase boundaries. Clearly, the catalectic final w positions in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s” as in (8) fit this description.

The hierarchical form in (5a), however, defines a fuller set of metrical constituents which can be catalectic. The entire first foot of the line (which is also the first foot of the first halfline) can be empty, being the weakest of all. So can the first foot of the second halfline, being the second weakest. Having both these feet be catalectic can thus be the basis of a 6-foot line, like line 1, scanned in (11) as having its two missing feet empty, as represented by Ø in the text:¹⁰



Alternatively, having just the first foot of the first halfline catalectic, as well as the final position of the second half line, can be the basis of any of the 7ø lines, like line 4, scanned in (12):



Similar possibilities are entirely routine in the English metrical tradition. The half-lines in “Pietro of Abano” are structurally similar to the four foot (“4”) and three foot (“3”) lines which are the basis of hymn and ballad meters, as illustrated in (13) below. What is not routine in “Pietro of Abano” is the order in which its catalectic lines occur. The specific combinations of line lengths found in hymns and ballads have been studied most thoroughly by Hayes and MacEachern (1998), and common ones they find among folk songs, illustrated here by hymns, are as shown in (13). Of special interest, given the falling rhythms of “Pietro of Abano”, are their three foot lines with extrametrical (“feminine”) endings (“3f”) as in (13d):

¹⁰ The halfline-initial w foot still contains two positions, s and w, because the template remains always unchanged. However the entire foot is empty of linguistic content. The unchangeability of the metrical structure is one of the features of most linguistic approaches to meter which differentiate them from the traditional literary approach which allows the metrical representation (as a sequence of feet) to be changed to match the linguistic form of the line.

- (13) a. All people that on earth do dwell, 4
 Sing to the LORD with cheerful voice. 4
 Him serve with mirth, his praise foretell, 4
 Come ye before him and rejoice! 4
 (lyrics trans. by William Kethe, 1561)
- b. Awake, my soul And sing 3
 Of Him Who died for thee 3
 And hail Him as thy matchless King 4
 Through all eternity 3
 (lyrics by Matthew Bridges & Godfrey Thring, 1851)
- c. O God, our help in ages past, 4
 Our hope for years to come, 3
 Our shelter from the stormy blast, 4
 And our eternal home. 3
 (lyrics by Isaac Watts, 1798)
- d. All glory, laud, and honour 3f
 To Thee, Redeemer, King! 3
 To Whom the lips of children 3f
 Made sweet Hosannas ring, 3
 (lyrics trans. by John Mason Neale, 1851)

Hayes and MacEachern analyze such stanzas as being, like the lines of “Pietro of Abano”, thoroughly binary, with three foot lines being essentially four foot lines with catalexis, and successive lines forming couplets. Crucially, in their analysis, in such couplets a shorter line, if there is one, always comes last, allowing 44, 43, or 33, or 3f3 as in (13). These couplets can thus be compared to the octometer lines composed of tetrameter halflines in “Pietro of Abano”, which taking catalexis into account, can be understood as, for example, 44 as in (6), or 33 as in (11). In the hymns and ballads, though, when these couplets are combined, Hayes and MacEachern find the most common combinations to be 4444, 4343, 3343, as well as 3f33f3. The hymn stanzas in (13) exemplify these characteristic distributions of line lengths. Other imaginable combinations do not occur in the folk song corpus Hayes and MacEachern explore, and are even sometimes perceived as “crashingly bad” in experiments they construct. One such non-occurring combination is the 3344 sequence which is the best parse of the first two lines of “Pietro of Abano”, which therefore gets the meter of “Pietro of Abano” off to a very odd start.

The abnormality of greatest interest to us, however, presents a different obstacle to assimilation of the short lines to the template in (5a). It is the problem of where phrase boundaries in the lines fall in relation to the condition on catalexis in (9iii). In the first two lines of the poem, a six-foot line is followed by an eight-foot line, and as noted, the lines can be divided easily into halves, with 3+3 feet (interpretable as $\emptyset 3 + \emptyset 3$) in the first, and 4 + 4 feet in the second, as in the first two lines of the poem, quoted in (1), and scanned in (11) and (6):

Petrus Aponensis – there was a magician!
 When that strange adventure happened, which I mean to tell my hearers,

This might immediately lead us to assume that the six-foot lines will in the remainder of the poem be divided into two catalectic half-lines ($\emptyset 3 + \emptyset 3$, with a missing foot at the beginning of each half-line) followed by two non-catalectic half-lines (4+4). But any such hopes are immediately dashed by line 3, also in (1):

Nearly had he tried all trades – beside physician,

This line has the expected six feet as in the first line, but it does not have a phrase boundary in the middle as catalexis would require according to (9iii); the strongest one falls after the seventh, not the sixth syllable of the line. Line after line dashes our hopes in this way, even as they alternate with lines confirming our assumption that the template is as in (5a). This is shown in (14) where we have taken a selection of six-foot (12 syllable) lines from throughout the poem, and put a vertical bar at the middle of the line as defined by the template in (5a), together with the rules for catalexis in just (9i,ii). If we were right in our initial assumptions, then theoretically a pause would be expected at this bar, satisfying also (9iii); but only the first line as shown in (14a) has a linguistic structure which allows this:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| (14)a. Pietro Aponensis – there was a magician! | (l. 1) |
| b. Nearly had he tried all trades – besides physician! | (l. 3) |
| c. Therefore, on a certain evening, to his alley | (l. 41) |
| d. Foolishly I turned dis gusted from my fellows | (l. 273) |
| e. As he up and down, one noonday, paced his closet | (l. 297) |
| d. As he stood one evening proudly – (he had traversed | (l. 369) |
| e. Peter faltered – coughing first by way of prologue | (l. 385) |
| f. What was changed? The stranger gave his eyes a rubbing | (l. 409) |
| g. Scarce the sportive fancy- dice I fling show “Venus” | (l. 442) |

4. Interpretation. Why would Browning do such a thing? At the very least, the inability to find a phrase boundary when we need one makes us aware that we need one. On this, we agree with Sapir:

No sooner, however, does the artist transgress the law of his medium than we realize with a start that there is a medium to obey. (Sapir 1921: 240)

This is definitely a poem in which we notice the language, a poem which would have appealed to the Russian formalists for exactly the reason that Sapir would have criticized it. In addition to the ostensive pauses distributed without apparent attention to the metrical form of the line, Browning rather gleefully moves phrases around within sentences, and uses occasional odd words such as *pouch* in stanza 1. Elsewhere in the poem Browning borrows words and phrases from other languages, jokingly, as in the Pope’s expostulations while struggling with Pietro. Line 310 as shown in (15), for example, borrows the Latin word ‘hactenus’ and claims to lengthen the ‘e’ in support of the trochaic metre, in flagrant violation of the Latin phonology of the word which actually has a short vowel there, and stress on the first syllable, like *octopus* in line 401 in (2) mentioned above:

- (15) Ten long years your march has moved – one triumph – (though e’s short) – hactēnus,

But there is also the contrast with music. Returning to the score at the end, if each pair of measures in it corresponds to a line, then each note on the score corresponds to a syllable, and the four lines together correspond to the missing four lines with their pattern of 12-16-12-13 syl-

lables. If each measure comprises eight beats, with each beat corresponding to an eighth-note, and the quarter-notes held over two beats, then the score could be a setting for recitation of the lines, an instruction as to what syllables should be lengthened in performance. It looks as though this is Browning’s intention, with his reference to having “not sung, but lilted” in the lines in (4), and Fowler assumes that it is.

But that does not really solve much of anything. In folk forms like the hymns above, the relevant conditions on where lengthening is possible are not that different from those in meter. In art songs, there is much greater freedom in what syllables can be held across several beats; but with regard to those, the little score when matched to the poem has only the loosest relation to contemporary text-setting practice in the 1880s. Typically in scored poems at this time, accented syllables tend to fall on strong beats (such as beats 1 and 3 in the 4/4 time of Browning’s poem), but also long notes tend to coincide with accented rather than unaccented syllables, which is not the case here, where the mid-line and line-final pairs of long notes match with a trochee, consisting of an accented followed by an unaccented syllable. Here for example is how the penultimate line would be set with ‘sung’ and ‘but’ and ‘tween’ and ‘us’ all twice the length of the other syllables:

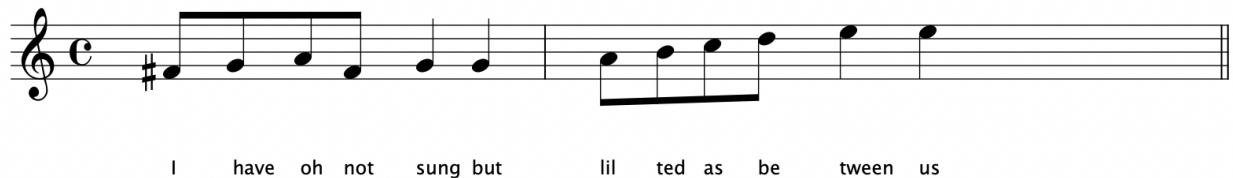


Figure 2. The penultimate line set to the score.

What then is the relation between the various component parts of the poem pertaining to rhythm – the language, the meter, a performed rhythm suggested by the musical score and whatever further possibilities a musical score might suggest? In our view one part does not provide a solution to a puzzle posed by another (e.g., the score does not solve the meter). The fact that they differ is instead a source of aesthetic complexity, and its point.

The poem is about illusion: what seems, and what is. It is about a magician who makes a young man think something is happening when it is not. It is also by a poet who makes us think something is happening – metrically – when it is not. The discrepancy has a comic force, resembling a jocular folktale in its narrative, in which the comedy of the content is matched to some extent by an almost slapstick relation between rhythm and meter.

Moreover, the joke is on us not just as readers, but as metrists. From the theoretical perspective we have adopted, there is a sense in which the poem is unmetrical. Yes, it has rules, but ones that the theory does not allow. But noticing that discrepancy requires attention to what the theory *does* allow. Browning’s “semi-failure” may be unmetrical, but it is not non-linguistic. It is, perhaps, rather a little too linguistic for Sapir’s artistic taste.

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