

poetry features

Close-up: Syllabics

Matthew Francis on how this subtle form gives rise to complex new possibilities



Sylvia Plath's 'Metaphors' is a poem I often use to introduce students to the peculiarities of poetic language:

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

The poem is full of metaphors, each one a miniature riddle with the same answer: a pregnant woman. But form is a feature of poetic language, too, and even this points to the answer – there are nine lines, one for each month of the pregnancy, and, as the first line states, nine syllables in each line. 'Metaphors' is an example

of syllabic verse.

The iambic pentameter, as all poetry readers know, has ten syllables. Except it doesn't always: "I come to bury Caesar not to praise him" has eleven; "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance" has twelve. The defining feature is not the number of syllables, but the number of stresses (five), and an extra unstressed syllable here or there makes little difference.

Contrast this with Simon Armitage's lines from 'Before You Cut Loose':

I heard one story of a dog that swam
to the English coast from the Isle of Man,
and a dog that carried eggs and bacon
and a morning paper from the village
surfaced umpteen leagues and two years later,
bacon eaten but the eggs unbroken,
newsprint dry as tinder, to the letter.

The lines have only their ten syllables in common. The first is an iambic pentameter, the second a four-stress line with a caesura or break after "coast", the last a trochaic pentameter, where the stresses come at the beginning of each foot rather than the end. The line "and a morning paper from the village" sounds, in a good way, not like poetry at all. The effect of a greater number of unstressed syllables and correspondingly fewer stressed ones is like someone just speaking, not declaiming. All these rhythmic possibilities are opened up by writing

in syllabics.

The nine-syllable form ensures that Plath's poem contains no pentameters at all, which, if you're looking for new rhythms rather than a reprise of the old ones, seems a good reason for choosing it. More generally, choosing odd numbers of syllables makes it less likely that your poem will be scanned as some form of regular metre. Less likely, but not impossible; as my earlier comments suggest, eleven-syllable lines could contain pentameters, and in fact the poet who works in syllabics quickly comes to realize that each number has its regular as well as its irregular possibilities. Deciding when to avoid and when to embrace them is part of the fascination.

For a more complex effect, you can write heterosyllabic stanzas, like Marianne Moore:

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into
your house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

(‘The Steeple-Jack’)

The pattern here, repeated in subsequent stanzas, is 11, 10, 14, 8, 8, 3. This is harder for the poet than using a single line-length, where the brain quickly gets into the habit of counting,

and harder still when, as in other Moore poems, it's combined with rhyme. Together with the attractive patterning brought about by her use of indented lines, and an extravagant use of enjambment (between stanzas, from title to text, even in the middle of words), it contributes to a poetics that's edgily Modernist and at the same time "as formal as the scales / on a fish".

Critics of syllabics often argue that they are not rooted in the fundamental characteristics of English – unlike a stress pattern, you cannot hear a syllable count. There's probably something in that: while preparing for this article I reread a pioneering 'syllabic sonnet' by Elizabeth Daryush, and discovered not only that most of its lines were regular pentameters, but that two of them had the wrong number of syllables, facts that don't affect the power of the poem. It may be that the principal value of syllabics lies in the yardstick they offer to the poet rather than to the reader. Certainly I find them addictive. Counting to nine or thirteen under my breath, trying to decide whether 'fire' and 'tired' are one syllable or two, wondering whether the rhythm of the line I've just written feels too regular, I lose myself in the physical properties of language. And that is the moment when the imagination is set free.

Matthew Francis recently edited a new edition of W. S. Graham's Collected Poems for Faber. His latest collection is Whereabouts (Rufus Books).