

# Lines and Lyrics

*An Introduction to Poetry and Song*



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## CHAPTER THREE

## Rhyme

## Rhyme in Poetry, Rhyme in Music

It is impossible to use any language for an extended period of time without repeating the sounds of certain vowels and consonants. Of the forty-four phonemes commonly used in English, at least some will necessarily recur whenever we speak more than a few sentences. Most of the time we are unaware of these sonic similarities and differences. In this paragraph, for instance, I have done little to draw attention to how one word might sound similar to another. As with other didactic or functional uses of language, my emphasis is more on meaning than sound. If I had begun with the phrase "Here are four fun facts about forty-four phonemes," the sonic repetitions would be distracting; it would immediately suggest silly wordplay rather than sober academic discourse.

But drawing attention to similarities and differences need not always be silly. On the contrary, it is something that great writers have been doing for centuries. Poets and songwriters spend their lives artfully arranging words that brilliantly resonate with one another. Sometimes this involves dense clusters of similar sounds, as in the visionary poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Glory be to God for dappled things —

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings.

Sometimes it involves more subtle associations, as in the subdued opening of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach":

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone.<sup>2</sup>

An attentive listener to this poem will hear the rhyme of "tonight" and "light," as well as the alliteration in "full," "fair," and "French," or "gleams" and "gone," but Arnold does not foreground the similarities in the same way that Hopkins does. Nevertheless, in both cases, the arrangement of words draws our attention to their sound as well as meaning. There is a play of similarity and difference. Rhyme—in the broadest possible sense of the word—does this in a variety of ways.

A student sits down to write a song. She picks up a guitar, plucks a few chords, and starts humming a tune, something in a folksy, bluegrass style. Eventually, she settles on an opening line: "The day you walked away from me felt like sudden death." After singing this phrase several times, she decides to balance it with a rhyme. She tries out the following couplet:

The day you walked away from me felt like sudden death.

I dropped right down upon the ground and couldn't catch my breath.

These lyrics fit the melody somewhat comfortably, but she's not happy with the words themselves. The rhyme of "death" and "breath" strikes her as too predictable. In fact, the whole couplet suddenly feels like an embarrassing cliché. Maybe, she thinks, there's a better rhyme for "death." She checks an online rhyming dictionary and finds only three realistic options: two of them are first names (Seth and Beth) and the other is a drug (meth). All other possibilities are too obscure. ("Heth," for instance, is a variant spelling of the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet—not an easy word to incorporate into a heartfelt break-up song.)

She could use a slant rhyme—a word that sounds similar but is not a conventional rhyme (for example, pairing “death” with “wrecked”), but she doesn’t find that choice appealing either. Out of frustration, she considers rewriting her first line with a more “rhymable” word at the end, something like “die” instead of “death.” But that might lead to a whole different set of clichés. When she considers words that rhyme with “die,” she quickly conjures a tiresome wave of well-worn pop music pairings: “sky,” “high,” “fly,” and “time passing by.” At this point she begins to wonder whether she should abandon rhyme altogether. Is it really necessary? What does she lose if she writes a song without rhyme? What does she gain by embracing it?

a variety of ways.

### Types of Rhyme

The most conventional rhymes involve words that begin with different sounds but end with the same sounds. The consonants at the beginning of “blue” and “you” are different, but the vowel sound at the end is identical. Rhymes with three phonemes, such as “red” and “bed,” begin with different consonant sounds, but end with the same vowels and consonants. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* offers a useful rhyming taxonomy of single-syllable words with a “consonant-vowel-consonant” construction (CVC). As reproduced in table 3.1, this includes seven permutations, including the “standard rhyme”—number 6 on the chart—in which the opening consonant sounds are different but the other sounds are the same, as well as other familiar situations wherein, for instance, only the vowel sound is the same (assonance) or only the opening consonant is the same (alliteration). An eighth category, not shown in table 3.1, would be “zero rhyme,” in which none of the phonemes are the same.

Needless to say, words can include many more than three phonemes, which means that the possibilities for similarity and difference can quickly proliferate in ways that cannot easily be captured in a single chart. Indeed, the concept of rhyme extends far beyond the simple identification of similar or different phonemes. Among other things, rhyme includes the *placement* of similar-sounding words in a poetic line or musical phrase (for example, end rhymes versus internal rhymes). There are *accents* in rhyme, which might occur in different places (such as “below” and “meadow”). We also find larger formal *arrangements* of rhyme, especially end rhymes, which can be represented with letters, as in *abba* or *abcb*. And this is to say nothing of broader issues of meaning, syntax, and morphology, all of which can play a role in distinguishing one type of rhyme from another.

For my purposes, rhyme, in a general sense, encompasses any of the various ways that one word might sound similar to another, but throughout this book I will mostly use conventional terminology: *standard* rhymes—what some authors refer to as “perfect” rhymes—include pairs like “run” and “sun” or “feather” and “weather.” In these cases, the initial phonemes are different, but the final stressed vowel and all subsequent sounds are the same. *Slant* rhymes involve similar sounding words that do not rhyme perfectly, such as “little” and “middle” or “wall” and “bell.” Under that broad category fall other, more specific types, such as *assonance*, which happens when we hear identical vowel sounds (“flows” and “sown”), and *consonance*, which matches closing consonants (“pill” and “call”). These technical terms are important to know, but

**Table 3.1** Rhyming taxonomy of T. V. F. Brogan and S. Cushman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1185

|   |            |                                                                                                           |
|---|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | <u>CVC</u> | alliteration ( <i>bad</i> / <i>boy</i> )                                                                  |
| 2 | <u>CVC</u> | assonance ( <i>back</i> / <i>rack</i> )                                                                   |
| 3 | <u>CVC</u> | consonance ( <i>back</i> / <i>neck</i> )                                                                  |
| 4 | <u>CVC</u> | reverse rhyme ( <i>back</i> / <i>bat</i> )                                                                |
| 5 | <u>CVC</u> | [no standard term] frame rhyme ( <i>back</i> / <i>back</i> )                                              |
| 6 | <u>CVC</u> | rhyme strictly speaking ( <i>back</i> / <i>rack</i> )                                                     |
| 7 | <u>CVC</u> | rich rhyme, rime riche, or identical rhyme ( <i>bat</i> [wooden cylinder] / <i>bat</i> [flying creature]) |

much more valuable is the ability to appreciate how authors distribute similar and different sounds into larger, more intricate patterns.

### Networks of Similarity and Difference

Below is a passage from the “Burnt Norton” section of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. You can hear Eliot reading it aloud on the Spotify playlist, track 38, 7:50:

Time and the bell have buried the day,  
The black cloud carries the sun away.  
Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis  
Stray down, bend to us; tendrils and spray  
Clutch and cling?

Chill

Fingers of yew be curled

Down on us? After the kingfisher’s wing

Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still

At the still point of the turning world.<sup>3</sup>

This is a remarkable tapestry of sounds. The first two lines are balanced with simple end rhymes (“day” and “away”), and those words also rhyme with “spray” at the end of line 4. But notice that line 4 is not at all like the opening lines. It is more syntactically open (it ends without punctuation), with the effect that we are unlikely to pause long at the word “spray” (as we would after “day” and “away”). Also, the word “stray” at the *beginning* of line 4 tells us that the placement of rhymes will not be as predictable as the opening lines might have suggested. Indeed, by line 3, the poem’s syntax starts to move independently of the

poetic lines, and with it the pacing of similar-sounding words shifts toward a palpable irregularity. There is the alliteration of “bell,” “buried,” and “black,” which interacts with a different alliterative cluster: “cloud,” “carries,” “clematitis,” “clutch,” and “cling.” And interwoven with those groups is a resonant collection of three-word phrases: “turn to us,” “bend to us,” and “down on us.” The various tonal clusters culminate in the extraordinary repetitions at the end of the passage, with identical words being repeated (“light” and “still”) as well as continued networks of similar phonemes (“fingers,” “king,” “wing,” and “turning,” or “will,” “tendril,” “chill,” and “still”).

These similarities also subtly emphasize the words that do *not* rhyme in any obvious way. For instance, the word “point” in the final line strikes me as having a special significance in that it sounds nothing like any of the surrounding words. It shares the same closing *t* sound as “light” and “silent,” but the plosive *p* does not occur anywhere else in the passage, and it sounds especially forceful compared with the liquid *l*’s and sibilant *s*’s that resonate nearby. The effect reinforces the meaning. An anxious, dizzying movement permeates these lines, but they conclude with the reassuring image of a comforting light, fixed in place, at the “still point of the turning world.” Amid all the intricate webs of similar sounds, the simple word “point” cuts through and establishes itself as a singular event, a sound that the other rhymes encircle but do not directly engage. (Readers familiar with the *Four Quartets* will recognize that the idea of the “still point” is a crucial, recurring theme throughout the entire work.)

The Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina set this passage to music in her *Hommage à T. S. Eliot* (1987). It occurs as an isolated soprano solo within a larger piece for voice and chamber ensemble, and it gives us occasion to briefly consider how musical settings can either reinforce or deemphasize poetic rhymes. Listen to the beginning of Gubaidulina’s setting (Spotify playlist, track 39) and follow along with the annotated score (example 3.1). Notice how the rhymes of “day,” “away,” “stray,” and “spray” are *musically* reinforced, because at each word the soprano sings the same three-note motive (featuring an ascending major third). But notice also how that motive recurs in four other places as well, at the nonrhyming words “buried,” “sun,” “blend,” and “us.” The melody, in other words, features several repeating musical ideas—a strictly musical kind of “rhyming”—but these do not always align with the poetic rhymes in a predictable or systematic way. Both the language and the music involve complex networks of similarity and difference, which sometimes reinforce each other and sometimes do not.

The kinds of musical rhymes that we find in Gubaidulina’s music—the re-

## III

The musical score is for a soprano solo. It features several annotations: circled notes and lines connecting them to highlight specific rhyming words and musical motifs. The lyrics are: "Time and the bell", "The black cloud", "Will the ele-ma-tis", "turn to us", "bend to us", "stray down", "spray", "buried", "sun", "blend", "us", "television", "I don't owe him nothin'." The score includes dynamic markings like *mp* and *mf*, and tempo markings like *allegretto* and *moderato*.

Example 3.1. Sofia Gubaidulina, *Hommage à T. S. Eliot*, third movement, annotated opening

peated pitch and rhythmic configurations—are not restricted to the “high art” classical tradition. Listen, for instance, to the opening verse of the song “Jane Says” from the 1988 album by Jane’s Addiction, *Nothing’s Shocking* (Spotify playlist, track 40). This is a somewhat unusual song in that the lyrics scrupulously avoid rhyme in favor of colloquial speech:

Jane says, “I’m done with Sergio.  
He treats me like a ragdoll.”  
She hides the television.  
Says, “I don’t owe him nothin’.”

The song is not structured by regular, predictable rhymes, but there are, nevertheless, a variety of ways in which the vocal melody makes sonic connections between words. Perhaps the most obvious is the descending leap at the words “Jane says,” “ragdoll,” and “she hides” (a minor third, from A to F#). None of these words rhyme, but the repeated melodic interval draws them together and transforms the prose-like language into something patterned and familiar. And there is a subtle rhyme in the way both “television” and “nothin’” end with the same “n” sound. The lead singer, Perry Farrell, draws attention to that by letting his voice slide down to a relatively low point (a D) at the end of both

words. On the page, the lyrics offer a rather unvarnished account of a woman's dismal circumstances, but the music aestheticizes and transforms the rhymed prose into lyrics that frequently chime with structured repetitions. The diction is simple, with relatively little beyond declarative sentences and quoted dialogue, and the music, with its jangling major chords and steel drum melody, seems oddly distant from everything being described. Listeners might hear these sounds as either callously uncaring or warmly sympathetic, but in either case, they transform the language into networks of similar sounds that are impossible in regular speech.

### The Pros and Cons of Rhyme

Songs like "Jane Says" are no doubt an inspiration to aspiring songwriters who feel oppressed by the pressure to rhyme. In the song "Stressed Out" by Twenty One Pilots, the singer expresses a common frustration: "I wish I didn't have to rhyme every time I sang" (a line that he delivers while self-consciously disrupting a rhyming pattern). But why would this pressure be so acute in the first place? What makes rhyme so effective that it has been used in songs for centuries? Here are a few tentative answers:

- Rhymes make language more *memorable*, which is why they are often used for advertisements, political slogans, and various mnemonic devices. For songwriters, having listeners remember the lyrics is often critical for success.
- Rhymes create *expectations*. We begin to anticipate how one word might be matched with another and it is often pleasurable when our expectations are fulfilled. It can also be pleasurable when our expectations are denied in surprising ways.
- Rhymes in English can be *challenging*. They restrict options, and it can be exciting when artists rise to that challenge. The appeal of freestyle rap is largely based on this.
- Rhymes help provide *structure*. In poetry, they interact with other elements, especially meter, to segment words into lines, stanzas, and larger forms such as sonnets. In song, they help segment the music into phrases, subphrases, and larger sections, such as verses and choruses.
- Rhymes make language more *musical* by drawing attention to sound, and if they are used well, we enjoy listening to them; a song like "Jane Says" transforms colloquial speech into music, but rhymed lyrics are *already* a form of "musical" language.

- Rhymes shape language into something that is *different* from conventional, everyday prose. Using rhyme is one of the most obvious ways to mark language as "poetic," even if it is tired or silly.

This brief list helps account for the enduring popularity of rhyme, but there are also good reasons for artists to worry about using it. Three hundred years ago, in his "Essay on Criticism," the poet Alexander Pope satirized the overuse of certain rhymes:

Where-e'er you find "the cooling Western breeze,"  
In the next line, it "whispers through the trees."<sup>4</sup>

This is an amusing critique of poetic clichés, but for many young aspiring writers, it could be genuinely alarming. After all, if certain rhymes were already considered embarrassingly trite in the early eighteenth century, how can writers expect to breathe new life into them now? Different genres, perhaps, can reanimate old rhymes, but the problems of overuse will always be an issue. Pope's criticism, for instance, has been echoed in the twentieth century by many songwriters who lament clichéd rhymes such as "moon" and "June" (a rhyme that was especially overused in the Tin Pan Alley tradition). And Adam Bradley describes "overdetermined" rhymes in hip hop, which "the MC or poet chooses not out of conscious design but out of desperate necessity or lackadaisical passivity. . . . They signal the loss of poetic control."<sup>5</sup> This might then lead to an unnerving question: Is it possible that *all* rhymes could eventually become overdetermined? After all, the English language has only so many rhymable words. How much novelty can be sustained after more than five hundred years of English verse?

This is an understandable concern, but good counterarguments can easily be found. The English language is not a fixed entity with a finite vocabulary and no potential for changes in pronunciation. If it were, the potential for rhyme would indeed be limited. But language evolves and changes, and the language of poets and songwriters changes with it. This is especially clear in the music of hip hop, which, more than any other current genre, draws heavily upon regional dialects, slang, pop culture, and other rapidly changing aspects of contemporary life. Rappers, moreover, are not afraid to bend and twist language into sounds that suit their needs. Consider what happens in Kanye West's verse from Rick Ross's "Sanctified" (Spotify playlist, track 41, 1:34):

So you can go'n and make them lies  
But I'm so sanctified

I don't sweat it

Wipe my forehead with a handkerchief.

As performed by West, the phrase “make them lies” rhymes with both “sanctified” and — more surprisingly — “handkerchief.” Like many other modern rappers, West takes words that do not rhyme and *makes* them rhyme (“handkerchief” is pronounced more like “handker-*chive*,” with West extending the final syllable and sliding up in pitch).<sup>6</sup> The lesson is clear: language progresses, and performers are free to manipulate sounds as they see fit. For an optimist, the possibilities for rhyme are endless.<sup>7</sup>

But we must also recognize that rhymes are neither good nor bad *in and of themselves*. Using a common pair of rhymed words need not be a problem, as is often assumed when songwriters warn about the dangers of rhyming “moon” with “June.” The idea is that those two words paired together are automatically doomed to failure. But this significantly misrepresents the issue. As Alexander Pope’s quote makes clear, the individual rhyming words themselves are not the cause of the trouble; rather, familiar rhymes are often paired with familiar images and sentiments, such that every aspect of a lyric, not just the rhyme, feels like a cliché. When a lyricist rhymes “high” with “sky,” it is not necessarily hopeless — there are undoubtedly many ways to rhyme those words in extraordinary, surprising, or elegant ways. But if the rhyme compels familiar images and metaphors (“I want to fly so high / I can touch the sky”) it will fail to do anything exciting or original.

Even when a songwriter does match a clichéd sentiment with a clichéd rhyme, the song may not be a failure. As with meter and diction, the success of rhyme depends on how it interacts with everything else. Compare, for instance, two rock songs that use rhyme with very different results in terms of critical and commercial success. First, listen to “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” by Bob Dylan, a song that has received a great deal of critical acclaim since its debut in 1965 (Spotify playlist, track 42). Here are some sample lyrics from the 1:57 mark:

Your lover who just walked out the door  
Has taken all his blankets from the floor  
The carpet, too, is moving under you  
And it’s all over now, Baby Blue

Now compare those lines with lyrics from a significantly less successful song: “Road of a Thousand Dreams” by the early-nineties rock band Trixter (Spotify playlist, track 43, 0:31):

Some live the life, the lap of luxury  
Where everything goes right.  
But some live so painfully  
Another day, another fight.

It might be hard to imagine many people preferring Trixter’s lyrics to Dylan’s, but it would be impossible to evaluate one over the other based solely on end rhymes. Dylan’s pairings of “door” / “floor” and “you” / “blue” are hardly original. Indeed, in isolation, one might even argue that Trixter’s rhyme of “luxury” and “painfully” is more impressive: it rhymes three-syllable words and draws attention to the opposing connotations of each. The problem with Trixter’s lyrics is not that their rhymes are clichéd but that *everything* is clichéd: the music is clichéd, the contrast of rich versus poor is clichéd, and almost every phrase in these few lines is based on a clichéd idiom (“live the life,” “lap of luxury,” and “another day, another dollar”).

The best line in the Dylan passage is also based on a familiar idiom (“having the rug pulled out from under you”), but Dylan transforms it into something far more appealing than anything in the Trixter lyrics: “the carpet, too, is moving under you.” This is a charming iambic pentameter line that matches the meter of the line that precedes it (“has taken **all** the **blankets from the floor**”). Moreover, the vowel sounds of “too” and “moving” and “you” nicely resonate with all the other “oo” sounds throughout the song (especially “baby blue”). All these verbal effects are important, but the lines are effective for reasons that have to do with far more than the poetic language, including the flow of the melody, the rhythmic syncopations, the harmonies, and the unique timbre of Dylan’s voice. The rhymes are effective — what would these lyrics be without them? — but they cannot be evaluated in isolation. Rhymes can be entirely predictable or shockingly original, but a single rhyme on its own cannot guarantee that we will find a given passage moving. It cannot, by itself, transform a song or a poem into a work that we want to experience again and again.

## Musical Functions of Rhyme

Poets often refer to the musical properties of rhyme. To an extent, this is intuitive. Rhyme draws attention to sounds and patterns and makes language into a kind of music. But this is a rather loose metaphor, and we might want to think more precisely about how rhyme functions in ways that are analogous to specific features of music rather than just being broadly “musical.” This is espe-



cially important in song, in which the linguistic functions of rhyme may or may not align with certain musical devices. Here are three important comparisons.

### *End Rhymes Are Like Cadences*

In music, cadences are generic musical formulas that signal a point of arrival (usually a point of “rest”). They can vary in their degrees of stability. Some cadences, especially those that we hear at the ends of classical pieces, are remarkably stable. The music has no need to go elsewhere. It arrives on what musicians refer to as the tonic chord, which is often compared to an arrival at home (the tonic would be C major if the piece is in the key of C major, D minor if the piece is in D minor). At other times, cadences involve an arrival on a non-tonic chord—a chord that might sound relatively stable in the moment, but is not as stable as the tonic; such cadences suggest that the point of rest is only temporary, and that the music will eventually move on.

Example 3.2 is a popular old English tune called “Roger,” which was based, most likely, on a mid-sixteenth-century Italian tune known by a similar name. (You can hear an embellished lute version on the Spotify playlist, track 44; it does not have the same notes as example 3.2, but they are similar.) As shown in the annotations above the score, there are two strong cadences: one at the beginning of measure 4 and one at the beginning of measure 8.

The first cadence, which pauses on scale degree 2 (suggesting a dominant chord), is less stable than the final cadence, which arrives on the tonic (scale degree 1). This type of phrasing is extraordinarily common in Western music, and scholars often make a grammatical analogy when explaining it: the first cadence is like a comma (a syntactic break, but not full closure), and the second cadence is like a period (full stop). In fact, musicians often refer to these phrase pairings as “periods,” making the grammatical analogy explicit. “Roger” was often performed on the lute as a purely instrumental melody, but it was also frequently matched with words in the English ballad tradition. In such cases, the cadences were reinforced with rhymes. This can be seen in the example, where the two phrases of “Roger” are matched to a rhyme in common meter:

All such as lead a jealous life,  
as bad as pains of hell,  
Bend down attentive ears to this  
which I shall briefly tell.<sup>8</sup>

**OPEN**

**CLOSED**

Example 3.2. “Roger,” cadences aligned with end rhymes

As should be clear, the cadences and rhymes reinforce one another because they share similar functions: they indicate a pause in their respective phrases (whether musical or poetic), and—if we are familiar with the conventions of their respective genres (baroque dance and Elizabethan verse)—they set up a situation in which we expect that the first cadence/rhyme will be answered by something like the second. An experienced listener who hears only the first four measures of the instrumental tune might not know *exactly* how the tune will end but will be likely to expect that the first cadence will be answered by the second (the pause on scale degree 2 will be answered by a pause on scale degree 1). Similarly, a person familiar with English poetry, when hearing the first line of the above couplet, will expect “hell” to be rhymed with a word like “tell.”

When poets use end rhymes, they are creating something similar to musical cadences; when composers write balanced cadences, they are creating something similar to poetic end rhymes. It is no surprise, then, that songwriters have been fusing cadences and rhymes for centuries. The two have strikingly similar functions.

#### Small Rhymed Units Are Like Sub-Phrases

Example 3.3 is another popular English dance tune from the seventeenth century known as “The Merry, Merry Milkmaids,” a recording of which can be heard on the Spotify playlist, track 45. Notice how the music pauses in three places: measure 2, measure 4, and measure 8. Each of those pauses comes at the end of a two-measure motive, which occurs in different guises in measures 1–2, 3–4, and 7–8. Measures 5 and 6 are different: they are rhythmically identical to each other, but they move in different directions (measure 5 goes up, measure 6 down). The result is that the entire eight-measure phrase can be subdivided into smaller groups:  $2 + 2 + 1 + 1 + 2$ . When British balladeers matched this tune with words in the seventeenth century, they used a familiar form of light verse that we now know as the limerick (though the term was not coined until the end of the nineteenth century):

I married a wife of late,  
The more's my unhappy fate;  
I took her for love,  
As fancy did me move,  
And not for her worldly state.<sup>9</sup>

Example 3.3. “The Merry, Merry Milkmaids,” parsed with internal rhymes

Sub-phrases marked by “quick” rhymes

PAUSE

PAUSE

PAUSE

Notice how the rhymes match the segmentation of the music exactly. “Late,” “fate,” and “state” mark the pauses at the ends of every two-measure group in the music. And the “quick” rhymes of “love” and “move” create a different sub-grouping that matches the accelerated 1 + 1 musical rhyme in measures 5–6. In the music, the complete tune is a single phrase, but it contains several sub-phrases, which are segmented by various kinds of repetition. In the limerick, the entire five-line group is a complete unit, but it involves metrical subdivisions that are each capped with a rhyme.

This musical structure is not unique. Like the period form, it is a theme type that has been popular in Western music for centuries. The composer Arnold Schoenberg, who first identified this phrase design in the 1920s, called it a “Satz” and translated it into English using the term “sentence.” Composers paired these sentence forms in music with limerick-like poetry frequently throughout the seventeenth century, and it is a practice that continues well into the present. As the music scholar Michael Callahan has pointed out, these “sentential limericks” are a regular feature of the tunes in the Great American Songbook.<sup>10</sup> Here, for instance, is the opening of Andrew Sterling’s 1904 “Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis,” made famous when Judy Garland sang it in the 1944 film *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Spotify playlist, track 46):

When Louis came home to the flat  
He hung up his coat and his hat.  
He gazed all around,  
But no wifey he found,  
So he said, “Where can Flossy be at?”

Similar patterns can be heard in rock music. Tom Petty’s “Breakdown,” from 1977, is representative (Spotify playlist, track 47, 0:31):

It’s all right if you love me  
It’s all right if you don’t  
I’m not afraid  
Of you runnin’ away  
Honey, I get the feelin’ you won’t.

And the same patterns also frequently emerge in modern rap. Here, for instance, is an example from J. Cole’s 2010 hit “Who Dat?” (see near the 1:00 mark of any available recording; not currently on Spotify):

So if you’re sellin’ crack  
Or if you’re sellin’ rap

Make sure it’s mean  
So them fiends  
Keep on comin’ back.

These patterns reflect a broader principle: rhymes not only help to mark cadential boundaries in music, they also help create subphrases by segmenting passages into smaller metrical groups. And their effect on tempo and pacing is crucial. In each of the above cases, the quick rhyme of the limerick (the rhyme that occurs in lines 3–4) creates an acceleration—it builds tension as the phrase makes its way toward the final rhyme (the closing cadence).

This same effect can be achieved without limerick-like poetry, as can be heard in the opening of Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” (Spotify playlist, track 48). The song begins with two parallel phrases, which climb upward by placing harmonies on each step of an ascending scale, ultimately reaching a plateau on scale degree 5 (the dominant). The rising chords are each two beats long and the dominant chord—the arrival harmony—is held for eight beats (sixteen beats total). Table 3.2 shows what happens if we match the language with the chords.

Each segment of the phrase—each rung of the harmonic ladder—is matched with a rhyming syllable. The top of the ladder (“didn’t you?”) does not rhyme with the previous segments, but it does rhyme with the peak of the subsequent phrase:

C major (2 beats): People called  
D minor (2 beats): Said, “Beware doll  
E minor (2 beats): You’re bound to fall”  
F major (2 beats): You thought they were all  
G major (8 beats): Kiddin’ you.

The primary structuring rhyme of this phrase is “didn’t you?” and “kiddin’ you,” both of which are cadential arrivals (plateaus on the dominant chord). But the internal rhymes help segment the passage into smaller units. In this case, they help create tension: the music builds pressure simply by rising upward, but the rhymes also create a kind of tension. We know that the options for rhyming words are limited, and this means that every additional rhyme is like a circus performer adding to a set of spinning plates—it can only go on for so long before it all collapses.

Table 3.2. Bob Dylan, "Like A Rolling Stone," rhymes and chord changes aligned

|                                |                                   |                                     |                             |                        |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Once upon a<br>time<br>C MAJOR | you dressed so<br>fine<br>D MINOR | threw the bums a<br>dime<br>E MINOR | in your<br>prime<br>F MAJOR | didn't you?<br>G MAJOR |
| 2 BEATS                        | 2 BEATS                           | 2 BEATS                             | 2 BEATS                     | 8 BEATS                |

### Internal Rhymes Are Like Syncopations (Sometimes)

The opening of "Like a Rolling Stone" features a series of quick rhymes that help segment the melody into small, two-beat units. But listen closely to the recorded version and you'll notice that Dylan doesn't sing each of those rhyming syllables in the same places (table 3.3).

In fact, they each appear in a different part of their respective two-beat units: "time" appears in the middle of the second beat; "fine" appears at the end of the first beat; "dime" appears exactly on the second beat; and "prime" appears earliest—in the middle of the first beat. The word "dime" is the only rhyming word that is actually *on a beat*. The other rhymes are all syncopated.

Dylan's syncopations mostly result from his performance choices rather than from intrinsic properties of the language. It would be easy (albeit severely damaging) to rearrange the melody such that the rhyming words were all aligned exactly on beat 2. But with metrically regular verse, poets often use internal rhymes to disrupt familiar patterns and create something akin to musical syncopations. Consider these lines from "God's Grandeur," another poem by Hopkins:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.<sup>11</sup>

Table 3.3. "Like A Rolling Stone," irregular placement of rhymes in two-beat units

| BEAT 1  | BEAT 2 |       |      |     |
|---------|--------|-------|------|-----|
| Once    | u-     | pon   | a    | you |
| dressed | so     | FINE  |      |     |
| threw   | the    | bums  | a    | in  |
|         | your   | PRIME | DIME |     |

These lines are in iambic pentameter, and the iambic rhythm is clear in certain segments ("have **trod**, have **trod**"). But the internal rhymes in the second line create accents that disrupt the regular iambic patterns:

And **all** is seared with **trade**; *bleared, smeared* with **toil**.

The word "bleared" occurs at a place where we would expect an unaccented syllable. And although the pattern could have been disrupted with any other accented word ("blurred" would also have been disruptive), the rhyme draws special attention to the sense of syncopation. It ensures heavy emphasis on several successive syllables.

Rappers have been using rhymes in similar ways for decades. Public Enemy's "Louder Than a Bomb" from the 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* illustrates the point (Spotify playlist, track 49, 0:54). The first verse ends with the following four lines (slashes indicate the beginning of a four-beat unit):

/ Although I live the life that of a resident,

/ But I be knowin' the schemes that of the president.

/ Tappin' my phone whose crews abused

I stand ac/cused of doing harm . . . 'cause I'm louder than a / bomb.

Notice that the first two lines are fairly straightforward, with the rhymes of "resident" and "president" occurring on beat 4 of their respective measures. There is a strong sense of balance in this couplet, with relatively little metric disruption. But the next two lines close out the verse by piling up a series of five rhyming "oo" sounds: "whose," "crews," "abused," "accused," and "do." As shown in example 3.4, these syllables create a number of offbeat accents. They trip up and disrupt the song's earlier balance. And the tension is resolved when the whispered word "bomb" falls directly on the downbeat of the song's chorus (making a slant rhyme with "harm").

At this point, it might be useful to make a clear distinction between these last two categories: rhymes that create balanced subphrases and rhymes that create syncopation. In both cases, the rhymes segment the poems or songs into smaller units. The difference has to do with expectation and regularity. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," for example, we often hear internal rhymes that neatly divide a line into two equal halves. And as the poem progresses, these patterns become more and more predictable:

And through the drifts the snowy clifts  
Did send a dismal sheen:  
Nor shapes of men, nor beast we ken —  
The ice was all between.<sup>12</sup>

In these lines, the rhymes parse the language into small subphrases of equal length: the first line has four iambic feet, and the rhymes divide it into two groups of two. Compare that with the following rhymes from Big Boi's "Shutterbug," in which the segmentation is far less regular and far less predictable (Spotify playlist, track 50, 0:39):

I'm Sergeant / Slaughter, I keep my shit cooked to order in order  
To /satisfy my people in Georgia and 'cross the water.

The words "slaughter," "order," "Georgia," and "water" combine to create a radically destabilizing network of sounds. They break the phrases into irregular, asymmetrical chunks that keep the listener off balance, never sure where or when another rhyme might occur.

### Broader Uses of Rhyme

Rhymes in music help delineate cadences, subphrases, and syncopations by segmenting the language into smaller groups, whether regular, in the case of balanced phrases and subphrases, or irregular, in the case of syncopations. The segmentation, moreover, is based on accent: rhymes draw attention to certain syllables and phonemes because of their similar sounds, a form of accent that differs from the various metric accents discussed in chapter 2. As the poet Kenneth Koch observes, "Rhyme is more obvious than meter. It's louder. It draws attention to itself and can be heard right away."<sup>13</sup>

But how do rhymes assert themselves over larger spans of music? How might rhymes change over the course of a song? The following case studies

Example 3.4. Public Enemy, "Louder Than a Bomb," rhyme and syncopation

Tap-pin' my phone whose crews a bused I stand a cused of do ing harm 'cause I'm louder than a bomb.

Solid Lines = On the beat  
Dashed Lines = Off the beat



music, but it is usually matched with a first-person "I." In this song, "you" could certainly be heard as a *substitute* for "I," but we could also hear these lyrics as a true second-person address, with Morrison inhabiting a disembodied voice that narrates everything that happens to "you." We might even interpret "you" as referring to us (the listeners). By using this less common form of address — by potentially situating the listener in the context of the song — Morrison almost seems to take on the role of a singer-hypnotist. In a sense, the moment "when you fall" is the point at which he attempts to send "you" (the listener) into a trance.

But how might something like that be achieved? The art of hypnosis is strongly linked with the art of repetition ("That's when you fall . . . that's when you fall . . ."). It is the vehicle by which Morrison conjures a meditative, dream-like state. Perhaps most important, it is the first hint of the way the song itself will eventually fall apart — how all those early, well-built lyrical structures will dissolve into repetitive fragments. This does not happen immediately — the song continues, after this initial hypnotic event, with more familiar *aaab* patterns — but the moment nevertheless reveals that the song can and will get stuck in obsessive loops of repetition and rhyme.

The crucial turning point, at which things truly begin to "fall," occurs at about the three-minute mark when Madame George hears what she assumes to be the police:

And then from outside the frosty window raps  
She jumps up and says, "Lord, have mercy I think it's the cops"  
And immediately drops everything she gots  
Down into the street below

And you know you gotta go  
On that train from Dublin up to Sandy Row  
Throwing pennies at the bridges down below  
And the rain, hail, sleet, and snow

The first four-line group repeats the familiar *aaab* pattern, but does so with palpably slang-oriented slant rhymes: "raps," "cops," and "gots." This is a subtle but meaningful change in diction — it gives voice, in a way, to Madame George — and it triggers a disruption in the rhyming patterns. The last line ends with "below," which then becomes the basis for the end rhymes of the entire subsequent group. The sense of leave-taking here, the retreat away from Dublin, is echoed in the disintegration of the previous pattern. It is a decisive

moment, at which the lyrics begin to get lost in repetitive rhyme ("below," "go," "row," "below," "snow").

What we hear next are lines that will continually recur throughout the remainder of the song:

Say goodbye to Madame George  
Dry your eye for Madame George  
Wonder why for Madame George

For Greil Marcus, this repetition resists the implication of the words. The lines tell us that it's time to leave, but the song won't let go. Familiar sounds recur again and again: "bye," "dry," "eye," "why," and especially "Madame George." The singer is "commanding himself," according to Marcus, to say good-bye, but he "has to keep saying it, and in that way . . . the song doesn't end."<sup>15</sup> By this point, Morrison has begun to fully initiate the process by which the song will finally unravel into repetitive loops. But before that, one last bit of text wraps up the song proper (the 4:28 mark). These are the last words we hear before the song fixates entirely on repetition:

And as you leave, the room is filled with music  
Laughing, music, dancing, music all around the room  
And all the little boys come around, walking away from it all, so cold  
And as you're about to leave she jumps up and says, "Hey love, you forgot your glove."

For the first time in the song, Morrison sings lines without end rhymes. There is repetition, of course, but it is no longer structured with balanced rhymes. The sense of lineation begins to break down. What I find most fascinating, however, is that this long, dizzying passage, which has lost end rhyme as a structuring device, nevertheless concludes by bluntly articulating a rhyme of almost childlike simplicity. Indeed, it is arguably the silliest, most "forced" rhyme of the entire song: "hey love, you forgot your glove." The music will go on for several minutes, but these are the last real lyrics of the song. All else is just repetition, echoes, and minor exhortations ("get on the train"). And given that people experience this song with such extreme profundity, it is truly remarkable that the last full line — the last words spoken by Madame George — would be so absurd.

"Love," of course, is ubiquitous in poetry and song, but it is not an easy word to rhyme. In the Elizabethan period, it was common to pair it with words that

are spelled similarly but do not share the same vowel sound in modern pronunciation (for example, "love" would be rhymed with "move" and "prove"). In more contemporary settings, the common options would be "dove," "glove," and "above" ("shove" is also available but less likely). Of these possibilities, the "glove" / "love" pairing might be the hardest to work with, especially if the writer wants to avoid clichés about how a person's love "fits like a glove." Morrison's rhyme — "hey love, you forgot your glove" — has a certain playfulness to it, but it also sounds remarkably self-conscious, a rhyme for rhyme's sake. And that, perhaps, is the point. It is the definitive moment when the song begins to embrace the repetition of certain sounds *as an end in itself*.

But notice that, in addition, these are the only words in the song that are spoken directly by Madame George to "you." Up until this point, rhyme and repetition had been established as the primary vehicle by which Morrison, playing the role of singer-hypnotist, conjured ecstatic, trance-like states. But here it is the voice of Madame George that triggers the hypnotic event. And it has an immediate effect, sending Morrison spinning at the 5:10 mark with a repetitive whirlwind that almost sounds as if he's begun speaking in tongues: "the love that loves the love that loves the love that loves the love" etc.

For Bangs, Morrison is on a quest here for nothing short of "illumination." When he is at his best, Bangs argues, "The most mundane overused phrases are transformed," and Bangs zeroes in on this repetition of "love" in particular.<sup>16</sup> It is the quintessential case of an unpoetic statement ("hey love, you forgot your glove") being transformed into an extraordinary musical moment. Morrison lets the words ring out again and again, with a repetition that quickly becomes enveloped in the loose, improvisatory undulations of the studio musicians (especially the acclaimed bass playing of Richard Davis). For much of the song, rhyme plays an essential role in holding the lyrical architecture in balance, but it is also the agent of the song's undoing, the device that allows a transformation from vivid imagery to hypnotic trance. For several minutes after Madame George speaks, the song simply dissolves in repetition and rhyme.

#### Edward Elgar's "Where Corals Lie": Rhyme, Balance, and Closure

Rhymes might indeed be "loud" in poetry, but composers can choose to soften them, alter them, or amplify them in a variety of ways. To get a better sense of how they might do so, let us look, first, to the end rhymes of a poem by Richard Garnett called "Where Corals Lie" (1859):

The deeps have music soft and low  
When winds awake the airy spray,  
It lures me, lures me on to go  
And see the land where corals lie.

By mount and mead, by lawn and rill,  
When night is deep, and moon is high,  
That music seeks and finds me still,  
And tells me where the corals lie.

Yes, press my eyelids close, 'tis well,  
But far the rapid fancies fly  
To rolling worlds of wave and shell,  
And all the land where corals lie.

Thy lips are like a sunset glow,  
Thy smile is like a morning sky,  
Yet leave me, leave me, let me go  
And see the land where corals lie.<sup>17</sup>

This is a tightly structured poem. The four stanzas of iambic tetrameter display a rigorous pattern of end rhymes: *abab / bcb / dbdb / abab*. There is also a great deal of repetition here. Besides the continuously thumping iambic pattern (iambic pentameter . . .), we see the repeating refrain ("And see the land where corals lie"), as well as a constant recurrence of the long *i* sound at the end of every even-numbered line, and the circular return to the *abab* rhyme scheme in the final stanza.

If we were to hear this poem read aloud, we would almost certainly notice that end rhymes mark the conclusion of each four-beat line: "spray . . . lie . . . high . . . lie." The rhymes are among the most salient aspects of the poem. A composer, however, need not adhere to the rhyming accents in a slavish, predictable way.

Edward Elgar's setting of this poem can be heard on the Spotify playlist, track 52. It is the fourth song from his *Sea Pictures*, op. 37. The rhymes are noticeable, but we do not experience them the same way when listening to the song as we do when listening to a reading of the poem. Most obviously, the song takes more time; each stanza is stretched out over nearly forty seconds, much longer than it would take to read the words aloud. But we can find other differences as well. The rhythm and pacing of the language are more erratic

in the song. Some of the rhymes can be heard clearly, but others are far less salient than they would be in a spoken version.

As shown in example 3-5, Elgar sets the first two lines with balanced two-measure phrases in which the final words in each line — “low” and “sprit” — are accented in at least three ways: they occur on a downbeat, arrive at a melodic peak, and are accompanied by a stable harmony (B minor).

The subsequent rhymes, however — “go” and “lie” — are less marked in the music. To begin with, they are noticeably set apart from the previous lines by an “unnecessary” measure that occurs between the second and third phrases. But more important, the rhymes occur on “weaker” beats (beat 4 instead of beat 1), and they are accompanied by unstable harmonies. They are also compressed in time. The first two lines were spread out over two measures apiece, but the next two lines are condensed into a single measure. The accelerated pace might suggest the “lure” of the ocean depths, but notice that Elgar calls for an expressive *allargando* (slowing of the tempo) here, which creates an odd effect: the music speeds up in one sense, but the performers resist the acceleration by slowing down. This compression creates temporal and harmonic effects that work against the language of the poem. In the text, the end rhymes create a sense of closure and balance. But in the song, the words “go” and “lie” are *unbalanced* and *unstable* in comparison with “low” and “sprit.” They create neither closure in the music, nor a sense of equilibrium. Indeed, the music is so open ended after the last line of the stanza that Elgar needs to repeat it, though with an adjustment: he places the end rhyme (“lie”) on a downbeat and accompanies it with a stable chord. This “corrected” version of the line offers a resolution of the earlier tensions, but the final word “lie” nevertheless feels removed from its rhyming word “sprit” seven measures earlier. In the poem, the rhyming words are tightly bound. In the music, the poetic balance is reshaped into a more complex, dramatic unfolding.

If the end of the first phrase achieves a certain degree of stability, it is only partial. The vocal melody at the phrase “where corals lie” in measures 13–15 suggests that the voice will settle into a relatively positive major key (D major, to be specific). But the piano undercuts that conclusion by arriving on a B-minor chord rather than the expected D major (musicians sometimes refer to such progressions as deceptive; see the annotations at the final cadence in example 3-5). The disjunction between piano and voice creates a sense of unease, and thus the refrain — “And see the land where corals lie” — further undermines the poem’s relative stability. The music, unlike the poem, projects an unsettling duality right from the start. It does this by combining folklike melodic

Allegretto, ma non troppo = 56

The deeps have music soft and low

When winds awake the air

y spry

lie

Beat 1, stable chord

Unnecessary "extra" measure

expresses allargando

D major implied

B minor piano

mf

ddd

marcato a tempo

Rhymes occur on weak beats with unstable chords

Repetition of the final line "corrects" the rhyme but piano undermines D-major implication of voice



one last passage beyond the vocal cadence, and returns to the key of B, only now offering a brightening B *major* rather than the pervasive hints of B minor that we had heard earlier. The song continues to undo and revise all previous attempts at closure, even after the voice has stopped singing. And the changes in harmony and key, the continual vacillation between opposite moods creates a dramatic trajectory that not only *differs* from that of the poem; it alters and undercuts some of the poem's balance, which is based primarily on repetition and rhyme.

■ When we think about aspiring songwriters, such as the hypothetical student from the beginning of this chapter, it is not hard to sympathize with their potential frustrations. Rhymes, like almost every other element of music and poetry, can easily lead to lifeless banality. This is also true of harmonic patterns, rhythmic groupings, formal designs, and much else. Great art often involves familiar devices ingeniously rearranged, but beginners frequently produce art that is just plain familiar, and tiresomely so.

When we study rhymes in great poems and songs, then, we may wonder why they work as well as they do. Rhymes can create a wide variety of effects, often productively interacting with the other attributes of a poem or song.

One of the most significant of these interactions is the relationship between rhyme and lineation. In chapter 2, we saw that lines of verse are often defined by regular patterns of accent, whether the common meter of a Dickinson poem or the iambic pentameter of a Shakespeare sonnet. But rhyme can also play a vital role in articulating a poetic line—it often tells us, more clearly than any other poetic feature, that a line ends *here* as opposed to *there*. Nevertheless, much else shapes how we perceive lines beyond meter and rhyme. In the next chapter I tackle this issue with a special focus on the relationship between lines and syntax.

The image displays a musical score for the song "Where Corals Lie." It features two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is D major (two sharps). The first system is labeled "Cadence in D major" and the second is labeled "Cadence in B major." The lyrics "The land, the land, where corals lie." are written below the vocal line. The piano part includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *rit.*, *dd*, *al tempo*, *mf*, and *f*. The score illustrates the relationship between the poem's structure and the music's cadences.

Example 3.7: "Where Corals Lie," ending

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Lines and Syntax

A student sits down to write a poem. He is aware that modern poets constantly seek new ways to express their ideas, sometimes arranging words into pictures, tweets, or heavy blocks of prose, but he prefers to write in *lines*. He enjoys the way lines can seize and steer the readers' attention, affect tempo and pacing, draw them toward beats and rhymes, patterns established and patterns broken.

The student knows that lineation is one of the most powerful tools that he has at his disposal, but he finds the options overwhelming. He first considers a traditional approach, a poem in iambic pentameter. But even then questions arise: Should his lines be "end-stopped" (concluding with punctuation) like the rhymed verse of Alexander Pope?

Is there no bright reversion in the sky,

For those who greatly think, or bravely die?<sup>1</sup>

Or would that be too neat and tidy? Too balanced and predictable? Should he dispense with rhyme, perhaps, and let his sentences flow with surprising *enjambements*—line endings that offer no natural break in the syntax—as appears throughout the blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) of Milton's *Paradise Lost*?

And now their mightiest quelled, the battle swerved

With many an inroad gored. Deformed rout

Entered and foul disorder. All the ground

With shivered armor strewn and on a heap . . .<sup>2</sup>

The student marvels at Milton's coiled tensions, the way a fixed pattern of pulsing pentameter is counterpoised against a free-wheeling syntax. The syntax propels readers forward, telling them to move through the line endings and quickly shift their eyes back to the left and let the prose-like pace guide their

reading, but the lines hold them back, asking them to pause and relish the last word in each neat iambic row.

This push and pull is appealing. But the student wonders if he should dispense with metric regularity altogether and allow an even greater freedom and flexibility into his lines. They could be short, like some of his favorite poems by William Carlos Williams:

The stroke begins again —

regularly

automatic

contrapuntal to

the flogging

like the beat of famous lines

in the few excellent poems

woven to make you

gracious.<sup>3</sup>

Or they might be long and flowing, extending outward like the irrepressible verse of Walt Whitman:

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,

O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps he should blend these styles together, letting each project itself in sharp relief against the others.

He considers the options but decides not to choose—not just yet. First come up with some interesting sounds, he thinks, then see where they lead.

### Lineation in Poetry

When we see lines on a page, we immediately think, "This must be poetry."

Lineation transforms language into something that readers instinctively perceive as "art," even in instances when they recognize it as *bad* art. The effect is not unlike taking an everyday object and placing it on a pedestal in a museum. Here, for instance, is the first sentence of this paragraph, rewritten in "verse" lines:

When we see

lines on a page,

we immediately

think, "This

must be  
poetry.”

This is not poetry, of course. But it *looks* like it. Poetry, after all, involves extraordinary uses of language, and the act of organizing sentences into discrete lines is *not ordinary*. The very presence of the lines tells us that something unusual is happening.

Is lineation, then, a mere gimmick? A cheap way to elevate everyday language into an artistic statement? In the hands of bad poets, the answer is certainly yes. But any poem worthy of our attention is likely to use lineation in subtle and sophisticated ways, often creating complex interactions with the other elements of the poem, including meter, rhyme, syntax, and diction.

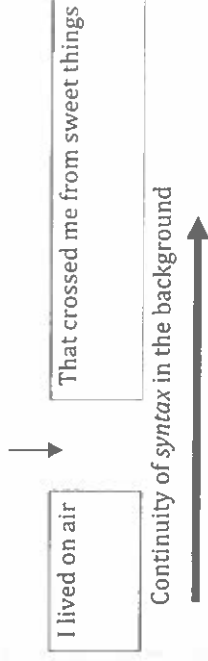
Lineation evolved in poetry for specific reasons. As discussed in chapter 2, poetic lines often create recurring patterns of accent: trimeters, tetrameters, pentameters, and so on. And lines can be punctuated by rhyming words to create a sense of structure. These effects are crucial, but lineation can do much more. In this chapter I focus especially on the relationship between lines and syntax, a relationship that might seem rather dry in the abstract, but that provides vital energy to many of the greatest poems and songs.

In the opening of Robert Frost’s “To Earthward,” something jarring happens as the poem moves from the first stanza to the second:

Love at the lips was touch  
As sweet as I could bear;  
And once that seemed too much;  
I lived on air  
That crossed me from sweet things,  
The flow of— was it musk  
From hidden grapevine springs  
Downhill at dusk?<sup>25</sup>

What do we do when reading the word “air”? Frost clearly prepares the moment as a possible endpoint for the stanza. It seals off an *abab* rhyme scheme, a closing gesture that reinforces the stanza division. In addition, each of the first three lines has three accented syllables, but the fourth line has only two, leaving an empty space—a missing pulse—that might be heard as a kind of punctuation. Relatedly, the end of the first stanza *might* have been the conclusion of a complete grammatical sentence; indeed, it will probably sound that way to a first-time reader of the poem (“I lived on air”). All these devices cre-

Foreground line divisions



Example 4.1. A line-oriented reading of Robert Frost’s “To Earthward”

ate the overwhelming feeling that the word “air” marks a point of closure. The poem, however, remains stubbornly open: there is no literal punctuation after “air,” and the syntax continues with a surprising enjambment, which spans the chasm between the two stanzas: “I lived on air / that crossed me from sweet things.” How, then, should we read this poem aloud?

Two possibilities might be employed. Option 1, a *line-oriented* reading, exaggerates the poem’s meter and rhyme scheme and allows for a significant pause after the word “air”:

Love at the lips was **TOUCH** [short pause]  
As sweet as I could **BEAR**; [short pause]  
And once that **seemed** too **MUCH**; [short pause]  
I lived on **AIR** [long pause]

That **crossed** me from sweet **THINGS**

With this option, we clearly hear the stanza’s pattern of stressed syllables (3 + 3 + 3 + 2) and the simple *abab* end rhymes. But the syntax is violently fractured at the end of the first stanza. What happens is that we foreground certain *predictable, consistent* patterns in the lines, thereby disrupting the more *irregular* syntactic flow, which we only hear in the “background,” so to speak (example 4.1).

In option 2, a *syntax-oriented* reading, each syntactic unit is read as naturally as possible, almost as if the poem moves into a kind of irregular free verse:

Love at the lips was touch  
As sweet as I could bear;  
And once that seemed too much;  
I lived on air that crossed me from sweet things,  
The flow of—  
was it musk from hidden grapevine springs downhill at dusk?

Foreground continuity of the syntax

I lived on air : That crossed me from sweet things

Line divisions in the background

Example 4.2. A syntax-oriented reading of "To Earthward"

With this reading, the first stanza elides directly into the second without any pause whatsoever. And the same strategy applies to the question at the end of the second stanza, which is read continuously without interruption. A reader who chooses this option will foreground the *irregular* syntactic flow and hear it against the *predictable, consistent* patterns of the line divisions in the background (example 4.2).

Needless to say, we need not choose between these extreme possibilities; many readers will prefer to find a balance between the two options by subtly emphasizing the meter and rhyme scheme but also allowing for a clear, flowing movement as the syntax stretches across the stanza's boundaries. Indeed, hearing the counterpoint between line and syntax can be one of the greatest pleasures of reading verse.<sup>6</sup> And though we might think of the enjambments in Frost's poem as a "problem"—something that frustrates our ability to read the poem with ease—it would be better to think of them as exquisite, irresolvable tensions. Developing a keen ear for such tensions is part of what it means to become an adept reader of poetry. How, then, might such tensions be translated into song?

### Lineation in Popular Music

Composers arrange the words of every song into various chunks. Because singers need to breathe at regular intervals, most songs have perceptible rests between phrases. These phrases often comprise a complete syntactic unit, and they often end with a rhyme. This is what happens, for instance, in the chorus of Whitney Houston's "How Will I Know?" (Spotify playlist, track 53, 1:29):

How will I know if he really loves me?  
I say a prayer with every heartbeat.

When we hear melodic phrases like this, which are both clearly bracketed off from other material and conclude with a rhyme and an implied punctuation mark, it makes sense to think of them as lines, even if the lyrics were never written down on paper. Indeed, we talk about lines in pop songs all the time, and for good reason. Many song lyrics have been published in the form of written poetry, and when handwritten lyrics from great songwriters are preserved, they frequently show that the lyrics were conceived in lines and stanzas, much like a poem. For that reason, we still talk about musicians *writing* lyrics, because the act of putting pen to paper still feels like a vital aspect of the enterprise, even if some musicians now create songs entirely in studios without ever writing anything down.

Not all songs, however, are parsed as neatly as the Houston lyric above. What if the pauses in the vocal line were not aligned with rhymes or complete syntactical units? What if the phrases were deployed with irregular, unpredictable lengths? How can we know what constitutes a line, especially if we do not know what the songwriter might have had in mind? In the appendix ("Transcribing Lyrics"), I go into considerable detail addressing these questions, especially in relation to a lyric by Cole Porter. But for now, I simply want to acknowledge a basic fact: "lines" in pop songs are not especially stable entities. When faced, for instance, with a song like Björk's "Triumph of a Heart" (Spotify playlist, track 54)—a song that avoids clear end rhymes and predictable melodic phrases—five different listeners might transcribe the lyrics in five different ways (just as listeners at a reading of free verse poetry might struggle to recognize where lines begin or end). Given this uncertainty, how can we speak of a tension between lines and syntax? How can we identify enjambments if we cannot first identify a line?

These questions expose a very real problem, but one that is rarely unmanageable. Most songs offer clear signals about what might qualify as a line. Indeed, the reason we can speak of enjambments and other syntactic tensions in pop music is that the songs often *teach* us how the lines work. They do this by establishing patterns against which we hear later deviations. This is not unlike the Frost poem, which established regular metrical and rhyming patterns that eventually came into conflict with the poem's syntax.

Consider Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line" (Spotify playlist, track 55):

I keep a close watch on this heart of mine.  
I keep my eyes wide open all the time.  
I keep the ends out for the tie that binds.  
Because you're mine, I walk the line.

Each of the first three phrases is a complete sentence ending with a rhyming word. The rhymes occur within the space of eight equally spaced beats in the music, and clear pauses punctuate the ends of each phrase. Once we have heard this opening, we can reasonably make a basic assumption: the “lines” in this song are eight beats long and end with a rhyme. As a result, when Cash sings the culminating phrase — “Because you’re mine, I walk the line” — we are likely to hear it as a single “line,” despite the caesura and the internal rhyme. We do so because the song has *taught us* exactly how long we should expect lines to be (eight beats). It would be irrelevant, in that sense, whether Cash or anyone else transcribed this song differently, perhaps breaking the final line into two separate lines: “Because you’re mine / I walk the line.” Such visual differences are not entirely insignificant, but they are not decisive either — the musical organization is far more meaningful than any written arrangement. The song creates patterns and deviations, and it encourages a basic awareness of lineation even if we do not see the lines on the page.

### Enjambments in Rap: Line Versus Syntax

Our two options for reading the Frost poem involved a conflict between predictable, consistent patterns and irregular syntactic groups. Which do we emphasize in the foreground? Which do we push into the background? In some rap music, especially in the genre’s early years, this conflict does not arise. Rhyming couplets typically occur within four-beat measures, and they are often complete syntactic units. The following lines from Run DMC’s “King of Rock” (1984) are representative (Spotify playlist, track 56, 1:37 — the bolded syllables are stressed by the performers, but they are also supported by audible percussive beats):

It’s / **not** a trick or **treat** and it’s **not** a **April fool**  
It’s / **all brand new** never **ever** old **school**.

As with the Cash example, the song lets us hear quite clearly that each line is tethered to a predictable group of beats. And, similarly, there is no tension between the syntax and the lines.

In the late eighties, however, rappers started experimenting more frequently with different types of rhythmic flow, often resisting predictable patterns. This was especially prominent in the music of rappers like Big Daddy Kane and Rakim in the late 1980s, and it frequently occurs in modern rap as

well. Listen, for instance, to a passage from Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” (Spotify playlist, track 57, 3:25). These rhymes appear in the song’s third verse, the longest and most virtuosic of the three:

/ All the pain inside amplified by the  
/ Fact that I can’t get by with my nine-to-  
/ Five and I can’t provide the right type of  
/ Life for my family.

If you tap your foot or clap along to the beat, you will quickly notice that each of these lines occurs within a regular pattern — four beats, each punctuated by end rhymes on the fourth beat: “by the,” “nine-to” (pronounced “nine-tuh”), and “type of” (pronounced “type uh”). You will also notice a distinct pause at the end of each line, which palpably interrupts the syntactic flow; the pause in the middle of the phrase “nine-to-five” is probably the most conspicuous. What happens, then, is similar to the “line-oriented” reading of the Frost poem: Eminem foregrounds the *predictable*, consistent patterns of the “line” (the four-beat pattern), which disrupts the *irregular*, backgrounded flow of the syntax. This creates a vital tension in the music, one that perhaps reinforces our sense of syntactic continuity precisely because it so vigorously disturbs it; the surprising disruption in the language draws attention to the fact that it “should” be continuous.

But listen now to a different kind of tension in the opening of Outkast’s “Da Art of Storytelling” (Part 2) (Spotify playlist, track 58):

/ Baby did you hear that? Yeah, baby I heard it too  
Look / out the window, golly, the sky is electric blue  
/ Mama earth is dyin’ and cryin’ because of you  
Rainin’ / cats and jackals all shackles disintegrate to resi-/due.

Here, the first three lines end with a rhyme on the fourth beat of a four-beat pattern: “too,” “blue,” and “you.” The moment I am most interested in, however — a moment that might require several hearings to fully process — comes in the fourth line, where the last syllable of “residue” spills past the four-beat grouping and into the next measure. As with the Eminem example and the Frost poem, we have a case in which the syntax pushes past a boundary point. But this is different from the Eminem passage because there is no decisive pause or rhyme at the end of the fourth line. Instead, the flow simply spills past the four-beat boundary so that the rhyming syllable appears exactly one beat

later than expected. This is an obvious case of music reflecting meaning: the “shackles” of the line seem to “disintegrate,” leaving a “residual” rhyme after the expected beat.

This Outkast example, then, is analogous to the “syntax-oriented” reading of the Frost poem: a way of foregrounding the *irregular* syntax against the *predictable*, consistent patterns of the four-beat measure. This type of tension is crucial in rap and is memorably explained by Jay Z in his *Decoded* (2010): “When a rapper jumps on a beat, he adds his own rhythm. Sometimes you stay in the pocket of the beat and just let the rhymes land on the square so that the beat and the flow become one. But [other times,] the flow chops up the beat, breaks the beat into small units, forces in multiple syllables and repeated sounds and internal rhymes, or hangs a drunken leg over the last *bar* and keeps going, sneaks out of that bitch.”<sup>7</sup> The word “enjambment” is derived from the French word for leg (*jambe*) and Jay Z references its etymology with his evocative metaphor of a “drunken leg” hanging over the last beat in a four-beat pattern. This is not unlike a similar metaphor that the poet Robert Pinsky uses in *The Sounds of Poetry*, in which he describes enjambment as a moment when “the syntax throws its leg over the hedge or low wall of the line.”<sup>8</sup> With both authors, the metaphor suggests a transgression of boundaries, an encroachment beyond a point of closure.

#### Similar Tensions in Art Songs and Pop

Rap musicians write original lyrics that may or may not create tension with the accompanying musical beat. But composers of art songs face a different challenge: How might the inbuilt tensions of a poem be translated into song? Theodore Roethke’s poem “The Waking,” for instance, was set to music by Ned Rorem in 1961. Each line in the poem’s opening tercet is a complete sentence, all in clear iambic pentameter.<sup>9</sup> Line, syntax, and meter are fully in sync:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
I learn by going where I have to go.<sup>10</sup>

As the poem proceeds, the syntax changes somewhat, with lines frequently divided into smaller sentences or clauses (for example, “God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there.”). But the regular procession of end-stopped lines makes the mild enjambment in the fifth tercet especially surprising by comparison, perhaps even a bit unsettling:

Great Nature has another thing to do  
To you and me. So take the lively air.

A sensitive reader will recognize a distinct tension, when reading these lines naturally, between the organization of the lines, with their regular stress patterns and end rhymes, and the flow of the syntax, which stretches here beyond the end of the line (“to do / To you and me”).

In Western art songs, composers frequently set poems in which each line is a distinct syntactic unit. More often than not, they transform these lines into discrete melodic phrases. This is what happens at the beginning of Rorem’s setting of “The Waking” (Spotify playlist, track 59). Each syllable is matched with an almost mechanical regularity to a simple, recurring pulse, and all accented syllables are placed on accented beats (example 4.3).

What happens, then, when Rorem sets the enjambment in the fifth tercet? As you can hear at the 1:41 mark of the audio recording, the voice maintains *exactly the same* rhythms of the previous phrases. Indeed, these phrases are direct repetitions of vocal melodies from earlier in the song, except they were used for unenjambed lines. What Rorem is doing, then, is choosing a “line-oriented” grouping—he is foregrounding the pentameter lines and thereby disrupting the syntactic continuity (example 4.4).

Someone who was unfamiliar with Rorem’s poetic sensitivity might wonder whether he simply failed to recognize the enjambment in the poem. Why else would he break the syntax so sharply? But the piano accompaniment makes clear that he was well aware of the syntactic flow. Try listening to this passage again (the 1:41 mark), this time focusing specifically on the piano, and compare it to the song’s opening. You will immediately recognize how active the piano becomes at this moment. It bridges the gap between vocal phrases by rising up to a dissonant clash in the highest register of the piece and then dissolving into loose contrapuntal tissue immediately thereafter. The vocal melody ignores the enjambment, but the piano does not.

Ultimately, the piano line reinforces the tension in the vocal part by drawing attention to its odd regularity, a regularity that interrupts the continuous flow of the syntax. The song’s persona eerily repeats the same mechanical rhythms of the poetic lines, as if caught in a hypnotic, somnambulist state. As with the Eminem example from “Lose Yourself,” this approach arguably *accentuates* the syntactic continuity precisely because the vocal groups so strongly disrupt it.

Similar tensions can appear in popular music as well, as exemplified by “Little Talks,” a hit song by the Icelandic group Of Monsters and Men (Spotify playlist, track 60, 0:45). The passage shown in example 4.5 is crucial. It occurs

Example 4.4. "The Waking," a line-oriented enjambment

42

*d* *mf*

Great Na-ture has an - oth - er thing to do To you and me; so take the live - ly air. And.

Asymmetrical syntactic groups

Symmetrical melodic phrases

Example 4.3. Ned Rorem, "The Waking," mm. 1-4

*p* *molto legato*

upbeat

Strong beats in bold:

4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

1 wake to sleep and take my wak - ing slow. 1

Syntax aligned with complete twelve-beat phrase

at the end of each chorus and eventually concludes the entire song. The melody parses the language in a way that strongly disrupts the continuity of the syntax, similar to my earlier line-oriented examples. A syntactically aligned grouping, however, might look like this:

'Cause though the truth may vary  
this ship will carry  
our bodies safe to shore

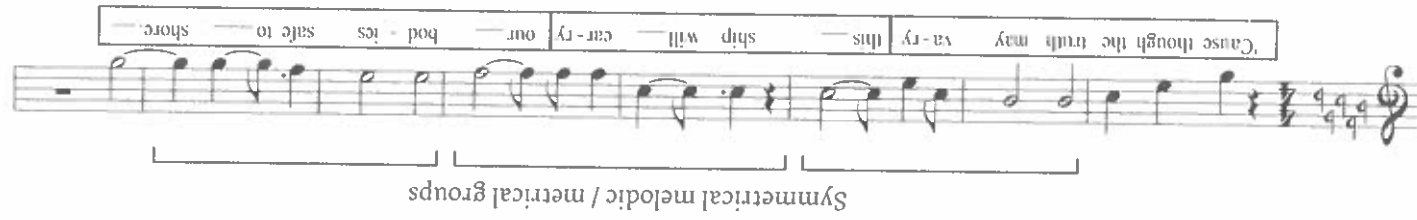
Yet as we see in the example, the melodic grouping parses the words like this:

'Cause though the truth may vary this  
ship will carry our  
bodies safe to shore.

Over the course of the phrase, the melody gradually relaxes into a secure, stable resting point. The musical enjambments—the way the language is jarringly interrupted at simple function words (“this” and “our”)—create a sense of anticipation, a need for syntactic closure. This places the passage within a long tradition in Western music in which cadences—moments of arrival on a stable chord or note—are often preceded by some type of rhythmic or harmonic uncertainty, something tense and disruptive to make the cadence sound more stable and secure by contrast (similar to what we saw in the Kendrick Lamar and Thomas Campion songs in chapter 2). Here it produces a clear case of what is known as word painting, as the phrase eventually settles into the protected harbor of a stable major chord, bringing the melody “safe to shore.”

It also has a more specific effect on the vocal melody. The similarity of “vary” and “carry” comes across clearly, but the rhyme is nicely inflected by the subsequent words (“vary this” versus “carry our”). In addition, the syllable “our” is transformed into “ore” at the cadence. This arrangement results in a string of descending vowel sounds at the end of each unit, matching the descent of the melody: “this,” “our,” “ore.”<sup>11</sup> The disruptions in the syntax, in other words, allow us to hear a variety of sonic associations that would disappear if the enjambments were removed or altered.

The Rorem and *Of Monsters and Men* examples relate to the line-oriented reading of the Frost poem, because in both the music disrupts the syntactic flow in order to reinforce certain regular predictable groupings. But what about syntax-oriented phrases—passages like the Outkast example—in which a foregrounded syntactic flow actually fights *against* regular groupings in the music?



Example 4.5. *Of Monsters and Men*, “Little Talks,” tension between melodic groupings and syntactic groupings

One of the best examples of this comes from the eminent song composer Hugo Wolf, in a phrase that is both clear enough and beautiful enough to warrant a brief detour into the complexity of late-nineteenth-century German lieder. Wolf's "Auf eine Christblume I" sets a poem by Eduard Mörike that has twenty-eight lines, twenty-five of which are end-stopped. The first enjambement comes in the poem's fifth stanza. Up to that point, Wolf has contained each of the poem's iambic pentameter lines within regular phrase groupings. Listen, for instance, to the 0:41 mark of Spotify playlist, track 61, a short passage from the song's second section (example 4.6).

This is a simple rhyming couplet with each poetic line separated into two clearly balanced musical phrases (the rhyming words are "blühstest" and "hütest"; a rough translation is "Whose hand helped you bloom here, / I do not know, nor whose grave you guard"). The poem's fifth stanza, however, begins with an enjambment:

In deines Busens goldner Fülle gründet  
ein Wohlgeruch, der sich nur kaum verkündet;

Deep within the golden abundance of your bosom lies  
a fragrance, which barely makes itself known. (Translation mine.)

Readers unfamiliar with German will understandably struggle with this language, but I call attention to a simple, crucial feature: there is no distinct syntactic break after the word "gründet." A natural, syntax-oriented reading of the poem would flow past the endpoint of the line: "gründet / ein Wohlgeruch." Wolf sets these lines against the backdrop of simple balanced phrases, but he lets the words "goldner Fülle gründet" luxuriate beyond the rigid confines of the previous musical groupings (see the 2:33 mark of the Spotify recording; example 4.7).

The first pentameter line casually meanders into the space of the second. It oversteps the expected boundary, creating a tension between the vocal melody and the recurring two-measure units (the piano continues to articulate predictable groups). This is analogous to the tensions that would occur with a syntax-oriented reading of the poem. But in the poem the syntax stretches beyond the end of the line and we can emphasize that by reading it aloud with a continuous flow, whereas in the Wolf song, the *line itself* stretches past a musical boundary (a boundary erected by metric groupings in the music that can persist independent of the poetic lines). This is an entirely different way of drawing attention to syntactic continuity.

Pentameter lines contained in two-measure groups

Example 4.6. Hugo Wolf, "Auf eine Christblume I," pentameter lines in two-measure groups

We should recognize, however, that Wolf's decision to set this particular poem to music was unusual. Most composers and songwriters avoid setting texts that feature complex enjambments. Giuseppe Verdi was explicit about this issue while working on his operas. He sometimes recommended that his librettists rephrase their lyrics so the line endings would correspond more closely with syntactic closure. Here he is, for instance, explaining why he would have to alter a particular passage in a poem by Goffredo Mameli for the patriotic hymn "Suona la tromba": "It will be necessary to have the question in the fourth line of the second verse eliminated *and to make the sense end with the line* [my italics]. I could set the lines as they are, but then the music would become difficult, thus less popular."<sup>12</sup> The implication is clear — unbalanced poetry leads to unbalanced phrases, and unbalanced phrases do not always appeal to the masses. As we saw above, enjambments do appear in popular music, but Verdi's concerns are understandable nonetheless.

### Songs That Obscure Poetic Tensions

Thus far, we have looked at two primary types of tension among lines, phrases, and syntax. These often arise when composers set poems that involve complicated syntax and lineation. But composers sometimes obscure poetic tensions by downplaying the regular attributes of the poetic line in metrical verse. As a representative example, consider the "Sonnet" from Benjamin Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, op. 31. This music sets the poem "To Sleep" by John Keats, which we looked at briefly in chapter 1. It begins with a single, eight-line sentence:

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,  
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,  
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,  
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:  
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close  
In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,  
Or wait the "Amen," ere thy poppy throws  
Around my bed its lulling charities.<sup>13</sup>

The poem evokes the traditions of Greek prayer. It begins with an incantation, a calling forth, to the deity of sleep, who, like other deities, must be carefully named, described, and praised. But the extended "naming" of Greek prayer is typically followed by a command: for example, "come forth," "protect me," or

Enjambed pentameter line spills  
beyond two-measure group

zart und ausdrucks-  
voll

Exemple 4.7: "Auf eine Christblume I" a syntax-oriented enjambment

"avenge me." The command in Keats's poem is withheld until the end of the fifth line: "close / In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes."

This is a forceful enjambment because it introduces the main verb of the sentence (the lines boil down to a single imperative: "close . . . my eyes"). But it is also jarring because it occurs after four lines that end with punctuation marks. Any composer setting the poem must make a choice about how to handle this passage in the vocal melody. For Britten, the solution was to foreground the syntax rather than the line, cleaving off the word "close" from the end of the poem's fifth line and using it to launch the sixth (Spotify playlist, track 62, 1:05; example 4.8).

This passage projects an effortless, idyllic beauty. It has none of the tension we found in the previous examples. The syntax is not in conflict with the vocal groupings (the line-oriented option), nor are these melodic phrases in conflict with any previously recurring musical groups (the syntax-oriented option). The entire song moves so slowly—forty beats per minute—and aligns the melody and syntax so thoroughly, that we never feel a strong sense that the phrasing disrupts our expectations. Other types of tension occur, of course—such as the unnerving dissonance between the strings' harmony and the voice at "O soothest Sleep!"—but the song lacks significant conflict between phrasing and syntax.

There is, however, one tension that we might still perceive: a tension between the song and the poem. I imagine that many listeners, especially modern listeners, might not recognize the rhyme scheme and pentameter lines of Keats's sonnet. Britten diffuses the language so thoroughly into flexible, slow-moving syntactic groups that it nearly transforms the poem into a kind of free verse. But listeners who are familiar with Keats's poem, or with sonnets generally speaking, might be able to hear the poem *through* the music. We might hear those pentameter lines pulsing in the background, despite the fact that Britten frequently separates them into smaller syntactical units. And we might still hear the end rhymes, even though the rhyming words do not always appear at the end of a given phrase. To hear this as a genuine tension requires sensitivity to the poem. But such tensions offer their own pleasures. And since many art songs, especially in the twentieth century, shape the music according to the poetic syntax rather than the line, it is a tension that appears frequently, even if it is imperceptible to many listeners.<sup>14</sup>

Melodic divisions in Britten setting

Line divisions in Keats poem

O sooth - est Sleep! if so it please thee, close In midst of this thine hymn my will - ing eyes. (Or

espress.

dd

Example 4.8. An enjambment in Benjamin Britten's "Sonnet," from *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*

### The Rhythms of Syntax

The examples thus far have focused primarily on enjambment. But there are many other ways to think about poetic syntax. A reader might trace the rhythm of sentences and clauses in relation to one another; the idiosyncratic deployment of subjects, objects, and verbs; or the syntactical interruptions and complications that are sometimes contrasted with sudden, dazzling simplicity. All these can be relevant to song, and although the possibilities are too numerous to cover here in any comprehensive way, a few specific examples will be useful.

#### *Outkast and Anne Sexton's "The Truth the Dead Know"*

Anne Sexton's poem "The Truth the Dead Know" begins:

Gone, I say and walk from church,  
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,  
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.  
It is June. I am tired of being brave.<sup>15</sup>

Sexton reads this poem on the Spotify playlist, track 63. The first three lines are a single sentence, but she parses them into four-beat groups that subtly change as they go. The first line is rigidly trochaic, and Sexton marks the heavy stresses with a marching rhythm: "**Gone**, I say and **walk** from **church**." It is assertive and direct, a clear, fixed, duple pattern: ONE and TWO and THREE and FOUR. By line 3, however, the poetic rhythm moves much more fluidly, and we can hear a sense of acceleration as Sexton produces a wave of light, dactylic triplets: "**Letting the dead ride alone in the hearse**." The "stiff procession" of the first line is disrupted (or "refused") in the second line and completely transformed into a waltz by the third line: ONE-and-uh-TWO-and-uh-THREE-and-uh-FOUR. But the real power of this quatrain comes at the end, when the long unspooling sentence of the first three lines is contrasted with two, shorter sentences that slam on the brakes: "It is June. I am tired of being brave." This is a disruptive shift, and it fittingly rejects the dreariness of the opening, funeral-march rhythm. The midline caesura in particular stops short the flowing triplets of the previous line. Sexton's reading, with her matter-of-fact pronunciation of "June" and "tired," drives home the point. The whole stanza enacts a subtle rebellion against the "stiffness" of the opening line.<sup>16</sup>

None of the lines in this stanza is enjambed. They all end with punctua-

tion. But the rhythm and pacing of the syntax plays a crucial role in generating tension and drama. Such tension can be vital in song as well. Just because a melodic phrase ends with syntactic closure does not mean that it will not have any interesting attributes regarding syntax generally speaking. Let us return, for instance, to Outkast's "Da Art of Storytelling" (Part 2).<sup>17</sup> In the earlier discussion, I focused on the way the rapper's flow in the fourth line of the song charges past the expected four-beat grouping:

Rainin' / cats and jackals all shackles disintegrate to resi-/due.

But notice that there are also *internal* syntactic tensions in the three preceding lines:

/ Baby did you hear that? Yeah, baby I heard it too  
Look / out the window, golly, the sky is electric blue  
/ Mama earth is dyin' and cryin' because of you

All these lines end with strong syntactic closure, and each is punctuated by an end rhyme on beat 4 of the measure. They also have the same consistent vocal rhythm: each syllable is articulated as a string of equally spaced pulses (four per beat). If we mark off each *beat* with double lines, the grouping of the first line would look like this: "|| ba-by-did-you || hear-that-yeah-ba-|| -by-I-heard-it || too." The language pours forth in an unchecked flow, even though the syntax is remarkably varied. Line 1 features dialogue, which, if read naturally, might sound like this:

PERSON ONE: Baby (pause), did you hear that? (pause)  
PERSON TWO: Yeah, baby (pause), I heard it too (pause)

But this is not natural speech, and André 3000, the rapper on this track, delivers the line with an unbroken, machine-gun precision. There is a wonderful tension, in other words, between the symmetrical string of equally spaced syllables and the asymmetrical grouping of the syntax. The same thing happens in the next line, but now the syntactical groups are slightly varied, though still presumably in dialogue (PERSON ONE: "Look out the window"; PERSON TWO: "Golly, the sky is electric blue"). The third line, however, consists of a continuous syntactic flow issued by a unitary voice ("Mama Earth is dyin' and cryin' because of you"). And the momentum from that unbroken syntax arguably generates the necessary energy to catapult the next line beyond its four-beat boundary (as happens when it "disintegrates to residue"). Internal rhymes play a significant role in these effects. The first two lines have no

obvious internal rhymes. The third line, where the syntax begins to flow more steadily, speeds up with a short, simple internal rhyme (“dyin’ and cryin’”) and the fourth line, where things fall apart, careens ahead with a much more complex mouthful of rhymes (“cats and jackals all shackles”).<sup>17</sup> In some ways, this acceleration is the opposite of what happens in the Sexton poem: there the lines featured a continuous syntactic flow at the beginning leading to small broken sentences at the end; here the passage begins with small syntactic units that become longer and more continuous at the end. These two examples have many other differences as well, of course (among other things, the former involves irregular speech rhythms while the latter is tethered to a metronomic grid), but in both cases the syntactical groupings create powerful tensions even when they do not involve enjambments.

#### “Closer” by the Chainsmokers

In 2016, the Chainsmokers, a duo of American DJs, released the song “Closer,” which became a massive pop hit with its especially catchy chorus (Spotify playlist, track 64, 0:49):<sup>18</sup>

So / baby pull me closer  
in the / backseat of your Rover  
that I / know you can't afford.  
Bite that / tattoo on your shoulder.  
Pull the / sheets right off the corner  
of the / mattress that you stole  
from your / roommate back in Boulder.  
We ain't / ever gettin' older.

This sounds nothing like the Outkast example, but the words are articulated with a similar equally spaced regularity. There are exactly two syllables per beat for the entire chorus with only two exceptions (a brief pause after the words “afford” and “stole”).

I have transcribed the lines into four groups of two because the repeating chord loop is two lines long (eight beats total). But notice that this chord-based grouping—2 + 2 + 2 + 2—is only one way to parse these lines. The first complete grammatical sentence is three lines long, followed by a one-line sentence. That pattern then repeats, which yields a grammatical grouping of 3 + 1 + 3 + 1.<sup>19</sup>

So / baby pull me closer  
in the / backseat of your Rover  
that I / know you can't afford.  
Bite that / tattoo on your shoulder.  
Pull the / sheets right off the corner  
of the / mattress that you stole  
from your / roommate back in Boulder.  
We ain't / ever gettin' older.

Notice also that the rhyme scheme draws our attention to a very *different* grouping. Three lines end with perfect rhymes (“shoulder,” “Boulder,” and “older”) and three lines end with related slant rhymes (“closer,” “Rover,” and “corner”). The only pauses in the melody occur after the lines that end *without* rhyme — “I know you can't afford” and “mattress that you stole” — lines that draw attention to negative attributes. If we group the chorus according to rhyming lines versus nonrhyming lines (making no distinction, for the moment, between slant rhymes and perfect rhymes), we get the following grouping: 2 + 1 + 2 + 1 + 2.

So / baby pull me closer  
in the / backseat of your Rover  
that I / know you can't afford.  
Bite that / tattoo on your shoulder.  
Pull the / sheets right off the corner  
of the / mattress that you stole  
from your / roommate back in Boulder.  
We ain't / ever gettin' older.

There is a palpable tension, then, between at least three different grouping mechanisms: the chord loops, the grammatical sentences, and the rhyme scheme. An underlying complexity persists despite the fact that, in many ways, this is an extraordinarily simple chorus. The melody focuses obsessively on just three notes, and it is supported by a straightforward, highly formulaic three-chord loop. If the lyrics had been written with more predictable syntax and rhymes, this simplicity might have been fatal to the song's success. But as it stands, the tensions between symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns infuse

the track with an energy that no doubt contributes to its widespread appeal. None of these lines features especially strong enjambments, but we can still trace syntactic rhythms that operate in tension with other musical and linguistic groups.

#### "Alexander Hamilton"

The opening number of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has been justifiably celebrated for its wordplay and elaborate rhyme schemes, but it is also remarkable in the way its syntactic rhythms unfold. The text of the first four measures, including the anacrusis (Spotify playlist, track 65), reads:

How does a / bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a  
/ Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten  
/ Spot in the Caribbean by Providence, impoverished, in / squalor,  
Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?<sup>20</sup>

This is a dense, complicated sentence, and its complexity starts with the word "bastard." That might have been the only descriptive word applied to Hamilton, in which case the sentence would have been quite simple and short: "How does a bastard grow up to be a hero and a scholar?" Instead, "bastard" is the first of several modifiers that allow the sentence to branch off into vivid descriptors of unequal length. It starts with three nouns: "bastard," "orphan," and "son." But the word "son" triggers a prepositional phrase that stretches the sentence out farther: "son of a whore and a Scotsman." After that there is a shift toward adjectives — "dropped," "impoverished," and "in squalor" — but "dropped" is modified by a string of prepositional phrases that sends the sentence careening even farther outward: "dropped (in the middle) (of a forgotten spot) (in the Caribbean) (by Providence)." It then returns to shorter units with "impoverished" and "in squalor." If we represent the word "bastard" and its modifications in separate lines, it looks like this:

- Bastard
- Orphan
- Son of a whore and a Scotsman
- Dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by Providence
- Impoverished
- In squalor

We can easily see that the units expand and contract irregularly, and also how they push against the boundaries of the four-beat measures. It is almost as if the sentence itself enacts the improbability of what it describes. Hamilton's unlikely path from the humble to the heroic is mirrored in the twisting, maze-like path of the syntax, which takes several complex turns before reaching a conclusion.

But equally important, sentences such as these contrast with sentences of differing length and complexity. The initial verses of this opening number, sung by the character Aaron Burr and others, tend to be long, like the excerpt above. But the complexity of those opening sentences puts a spotlight on Hamilton's signature entrance (1:18):

Alexander Hamilton.  
My name is Alexander Hamilton.

The simplicity of this — the meekness and humility of the moment — is bolstered by its contrast with the earlier linguistic complexity. If the musical had opened with these lines, it would have been far less effective. And the contrast does not end there. The character Eliza brings back a layered, syntactical intricacy — "When he was ten his father split, full of it, debt ridden . . ." — but the entire set piece ends with a climax of short, direct sentences from a variety of characters (3:31):

Me? I died for him.  
Me? I trusted him.  
Me? I loved him.  
And me? I'm the damn fool that shot him.

The brevity of the sentences creates a series of punctuated conclusions. And the difference from the earlier grammatical complexity is essential.

This is a musical number full of contrasts — contrasting characters, contrasting styles of singing, contrasting musical textures — and one could easily see how variations in linguistic syntax might not be the first thing a listener would attend to. But the language of *Hamilton* is one its greatest sources of pleasure, and the rhythm of the music is fully intertwined with the rhythm of the syntax.<sup>21</sup>

### "Under Pressure"

As a final example, let's consider an exceptional moment at the end of Queen's 1982 hit "Under Pressure," a duet between Freddie Mercury and David Bowie. The song peaks with a stadium rock climax about two and a half minutes into the song when Mercury belts out a repeated question: "Why can't we give love one more chance?" Bowie then responds with a single, extended, run-on sentence, remarkable for its sheer extravagance (backslashes indicate the beginning of measures; lines are organized according to four-measure phrases; Spotify playlist, track 66, 2:52):

'Cause / love's such an / old-fashioned  
/ word and love / dares you to / care for the / people on the  
/ edge of the / night and love / dares you to / change our way of  
/ caring a- / bout ourselves.

Most of the sentences in this song are short, sometimes reduced to simple fragments (for example, "people on streets" or "no man ask for"). But this is something entirely different: a run-on sentence that not only stitches together several subphrases but also radically—and ungrammatically—shifts pronouns from "you" to "our." As transcribed above, the sentence features the same kind of enjambments that I have discussed throughout this chapter, fitting itself un- easily against a grid of four-measure groups. But it also stands out for its lin- guistic oddity. Bowie's voice cannot match the virtuosity of Freddie Mercury's, but he offers instead a soulful counterpoint to Mercury's vocal pyrotechnics. And the moment is exquisitely staged. It represents an apotheosis of sorts, a culminating gesture in which the sprawling syntax heightens a variety of com- plex musical tensions.

Three attributes, in particular, stand out. First, we see a metrical tension that arises when the melody begins grouping pulses into asymmetrical units of  $3 + 3 + 2$  (example 4.9). This is not an uncommon rhythm in popular music—it is ubiquitous in the blues/rock tradition, and it also appears in the music of many other cultures, probably originating in West African drumming—but Queen's use of it here is especially suggestive in the way it creates a sense of struggle, an almost limping gait. The tension is particularly poignant when paired with a second tension, namely, the wedge-like contrary motion be- tween the voice, which goes up, and the bass, which goes down (table 4.1).

The bass features a continually looping descent of four notes, D, C#, B,

| 1      | 2 | 3 | 1    | 2 | 3 | 1  | 2 | 1    | 2 | 3 | 1     | 2 | 3 |
|--------|---|---|------|---|---|----|---|------|---|---|-------|---|---|
| Love's |   |   | such |   |   | an |   | old- |   |   | fash- |   |   |

Eight pulses, divided asymmetrically as  $3 + 3 + 2$

Eight pulses, divided asymmetrically as  $3 + 3 + 2$

Example 4.9. Asymmetrical groupings in Queen, "Under Pressure"

and A (only part of which is represented in table 4.1), and the voice struggles upward against that descending energy. After Mercury's high-pitched climax, Bowie rises up with an almost oracular pronouncement, sometimes clashing with the bass notes by continually fighting upward. When he reaches "word" (see the table), we hear an especially dissonant interval (a major seventh); the melody is seeking the note D, but it does not reach it on the downbeat and only resolves on the next beat at "and."

These two tensions—the staggering, asymmetrical rhythm and the clash- ing, contrary motion—account for much of the expressiveness of this mo- ment. But a third tension, this one syntactical, is also relevant. Much like the melody itself, Bowie's syntax keeps pressing ahead, using the word "love" as a recurring launch pad: "love's such . . . love dares . . . love dares . . ." What starts with an almost accusatory "you" transforms into a communal "our": "love dares you to change our way of caring." Moreover, when Bowie takes a breath, this too creates a tension with the syntax, but in a way that differs from the other aspects of musical phrasing (such as the four-measure phrases). You can hear audible inhalations, for instance, at the following moments: "'Cause love's such an old-fashioned word (breath) and love dares you (breath) to care for (breath) the people on the (breath) edge of the night (breath)." Little of this is predictable, and it clearly cuts against the syntactic groupings, almost like the labored breath of a person who tries to speak after climbing a flight of stairs. The entire passage, then, unfolds as a physical achievement, gradually rising upward despite palpable obstacles.

Yet the heroic aspects of the passage are potentially undercut by the pes- simistic implications of Bowie's lyric. His words seem to suggest that we *won't* give love another chance, not only because it is "old-fashioned," but also be- cause it asks us to do too much; the final lines of the song are "This is our last dance / This is ourselves under pressure." I suspect, however, that many

