

Auden and Britten's 'Night Mail': Rap before Rap

DEREK ATTRIDGE

One effect of the dominance of English metrical vocabulary and analysis derived from Greek and Latin metres has been a devaluing of the range and potential of four-beat verse. The ubiquity of four-beat rhythms in the world's popular music has often been noted, ballads and nursery rhymes typically exploit their vigorous energy, and poets have made skilful use both of the freer forms of four-beat metre and the stricter varieties that can with more justice be called tetrameter verse. One feature of four-beat verse is that it is capable of accommodating widely different stretches of language, in lines of varying length; and nowhere is this capacity more evident than in rap.

The following is the opening of Ice-T's 'The Coldest Rap' with the four beats of each line indicated as they occur in performance:

Some people claim that I'm born to play
B B B B

Cause I'm your Icetea on the sunny day
B B B B

I make the goers come, the leavers stay
B B B B

I make the lovers kiss and the workers play
B B B B

I make the runners walk, the quiet talk
B B B B

I burst so viciously, I make the blind man see
 B B B B

I'm the ladies' cream, the virgins' wet dream
 B B B B

I got that kind of movement that the young girls fiend¹
 B B B B

It will be obvious from this scansion that the beats Ice-T gives to the lyrics in performance do not always fall on the syllables which a simple reading of the lines would stress. For instance, the first line would be more obviously read as ‘**Some** people **claim**...’, and a reader would be unlikely to treat both syllables of ‘Icetea’, or both the first and last syllables of ‘viciously’, as beats. The last line read in isolation might be given seven beats, though coming as it does after several strongly stressed four-beat lines the pattern that emerges in Ice-T’s performance is fairly natural.

These lines, like thousands of other rap lines, indicate that in this metrical genre the number of syllables between the beats is hugely variable. In this extract it varies between zero (‘Icetea’ as two beats) and three (‘Cause I’m your Icetea’; ‘I make the goers’; ‘movement that the young’), and many rap lyrics expand the number even further. The four-beat lines, as is often the case with this metrical form, divide naturally into two, as indicated in many places in this transcription by punctuation. Rhyming couplets are the norm, sometimes extending to four rhymes (as in the opening lines of the extract), and partial rhymes are acceptable (‘dream’/‘fiend’). Internal rhymes can replace line-end rhyming, corresponding to the two-beat subsections of the line: ‘I make the runners walk, the quiet talk | I burst so viciously, I make the blind man see’ (hence the somewhat unnatural beat on the last syllable of ‘viciously’).

Many rap lyrics involve a more strenuous wrestle with the language in adapting to the four-beat pattern than Ice-T’s relatively straightforward verse,² but the

¹ Lyrics from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/icet/thecoldestrap.html> [accessed 24th August 2014]; recording ©1997 Okido Records.

² For some more complex examples see Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 90-95.

energy so palpable in much rap is always the product of a tense marriage between the simplest metrical form (insisted upon by the percussive accompaniment) and the dynamism of the spoken voice. The absence of melody allows the performer to invest his language with the natural tones of passionate speech while the strong rhythm and the constantly recurring rhymes nail that speech to a formal framework.

Now here is the opening of Auden's 'Night Mail', written for the GPO Film Unit's documentary of the same name directed by Basil Wright and Harry Watt for release in 1936; I have again indicated the beats as they may be heard in the performance by Stuart Legg, accompanied by Benjamin Britten's musical setting, which occupies the last few minutes of the documentary:

This is the Night Mail crossing the border,
B B B B

Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
B B B B

Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
B B B B

The shop at the corner and the girl next door.
B B B B

Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb:
B B B B

The gradient's against her, but she's on time.
B B B B

Past cotton-grass and moorland boulder,
B B B B

Shovelling white steam over her shoulder.
B B B B³

The similarities between Auden's lyrics and those of Ice-T's rap are not hard to see: four beats to a line, often clearly divided into two-beat half-lines; rhyming

³ I take the text from the booklet accompanying the British Film Institute DVD *Night Mail* (BFIVD522) (2009), which corresponds to the poem as spoken in the film and differs slightly from the text published in Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 83-84.

couplets; and the number of syllables between the beats varying from zero ('rich, letters'; 'steam over') to three ('*Letters for the rich, letters for the poor*'; '*corner and the girl*'). Auden's lines are a little more metrically regular than Ice-T's, and the four-beat rhythm emerges easily from a reading without any accompaniment; there is no line in which the four-beat rhythm is obscured as it is in 'I burst so viciously, I make the blind man see'. But this is not to say that the rhythm is always smooth: 'Shovelling white steam' needs some care in articulation, as the important word 'white' has to be subdued so that it functions as part of the offbeat. Later in the poem we find lines in which, just as in Ice-T's lyrics, the line-end rhymes are replaced by internal rhymes marking the half-lines:

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
B B B B

Letters of joy from the girl and the boy, [...]
B B B B

Auden's poem has two of these rap-like sections of 16 and 20 lines, each followed by a shorter section in unrhymed free verse, the shift in rhythm and mood beautifully matched in Britten's setting. What makes the parallels between these two metrically regular sections and rap even stronger is the fact that Auden's words were written for a particular type of vocal performance, one that overrides the natural tones and movements of the speaking voice in favour of a chanted delivery, heavily emphasising the beats and spacing them at regular, isochronic, intervals. Moreover, in both instances the vocal performance occurs over an instrumental background that helps to articulate the four-beat rhythm, an accompaniment in which percussion plays an important part. (By chance, both 'The Coldest Rap' and 'Night Mail' begin with the sound of a wind-machine followed by drumming.)

In choosing this verse-form to replicate the rhythm of the locomotive's passage, Auden shows his customary metrical astuteness. Another poet might have opted for regular accentual-syllabic metre, on account of its strict control of syllables and stresses; but the singularity of the form Auden uses is that the variety in the offbeats (which is not entirely free, as at first sight might appear) actually increases

the insistence of the rhythm rather than weakening it. It is a verse-form sometimes known as ‘dolnik’, a term borrowed from Russian versification where it is a common metrical form.⁴ The characteristics of dolnik verse are a strong four-beat rhythm and a variation in the number of syllables between the beats such that it is impossible to classify the metre as either iambic or trochaic, anapaestic or dactylic. It is the form of many nursery rhymes and verse written for children, and often associated with music (since a musical rhythm can, as in rap, sustain the four-beat architecture even when the syllable-count varies greatly). It is, as one would expect, common in ballads, and Auden’s mastery of the form is also evident in his ballad-like poems ‘As I Walked Out’, ‘Victor’ and ‘Miss Gee’.⁵

The ending of the second dolnik section of ‘Night Mail’ shows its characteristics clearly. This time I’ve indicated the number of unstressed syllables composing the offbeats as well:

The chatty, the catty, the boring, adoring,
1 B 2 B 2 B 2 B 1

The cold and official and the heart’s outpouring,
1 B 2 B 3 B 1 B 1

Clever, stupid, short and long,
B 1 B 1 B 1 B

The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.
1 B 2 B 3 B 1 B

The number of syllables per line varies here from seven to twelve; lines may begin or end on a beat or an offbeat; and the offbeats may be constituted by one, two, or three syllables. The effect of all this variation is not, as one might expect, a feeling

⁴ I’ve discussed the long and illustrious tradition of dolnik verse in English in chapter 7 of *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ The BFI DVD of *Night Mail* includes an additional film, *Night Mail 2*, which includes the performance, without musical accompaniment, of a poem by Blake Morrison, also called ‘Night Mail’. Interestingly, although Morrison chooses free verse, every now and then the ghost of Auden’s dolniks may be heard. In fact, the poem begins with two such lines, leading the reader (or listener) to expect something close to Auden’s verse form for the whole poem; but the third line veers away from the dolnik’s steadiness of rhythm:

Far from the magnets of city and capital,
the pull of money, the gold stitched runways,
far from all crowds, across the blank plain of the Atlantic, [...]

of irregularity and metrical tension but, on the contrary, a heightened experience of rhythmicity, as the individual syllables are shortened or lengthened in order to keep the metrical pulse consistent. The insistent rhythm of the train's wheels is imitated not in the strict syllable-count of literary foot-based verse but in the rollicking tempo of its popular sibling, heightened by percussive musical accompaniment and by a strongly rhythmic performance—a powerful combination rap was to discover for itself several decades later.