

In good prose, rhythm never stumbles, slips into accidental doggerel, or works against the meaning of the sentence. Consider the following sentence permutations. (For my convenience, assume that the ice has been established by context and may be omitted when we like.)

1. The pig thrashed and squealed, then lay helpless on the ice, panting and trembling.
2. After thrashing and squealing, the pig lay helpless, panting and trembling.
3. Thrashing and squealing, then panting, trembling, the pig lay helpless on the ice.
4. The pig thrashed and squealed, then, panting, trembling, lay helpless.

Rhythmically, item 1 seems not entirely satisfactory. The final phrase, "panting and trembling," comes as a kind of afterthought—we don't feel propelled into it by all that has gone before—and its faint echo of the earlier rhythm, "thrashed and squealed," feels slightly awkward. Item 2 is worse: The echo of "thrashing and squealing" is now much too obvious, giving the sentence an offensive clunky symmetry. Item 3 is better. The echoing phrases have been brought together in the same part of the sentence, allowing the close of the sentence to smooth out and run free; and by dropping the word "and" from the phrase "panting and trembling," the rhythm of this segment is slowed down ("panting, trembling") and the echo is to some extent suppressed. And 4 is better yet. Slowed by the phrase "panting, trembling," the sentence winds down, like the pig, in the word "helpless." Sound now echoes sense.

By keeping out a careful ear for rhythm, the writer can control the emotion of his sentences with considerable subtlety. In

1 = stressed syllable — = unstressed but long syllable  
 2 = lightly stressed Δ = unstressed but close to stressed  
 3 = unstressed Λ = hovering stress

my novel *Grendel*, I wanted to establish the emotion and character of the central-character monster in his first utterance. After some brooding and fiddling, I wrote:

The old ram stands looking down over rockslides, stupidly triumphant.

Part of the effect, if the sentence works, is of course the choice of words. It would be different if I'd written, "The old cow sits . . ." But part of it is the handling of stresses. The opening juxtaposed stresses, intensified by near rhyme, give appropriate harshness; the alliteration of an essentially nasty sound ("stands," "stupidly") maintains this quality; and the rhythmic hesitation of the long syllable at the end of the first phrase

rockslides

followed by the tumble into difficult-to-manage supernumerary unstressed syllables

stupidly triumphant

gives a suggestion—I hope—of the monster's clumsiness of thought and gait. (We scan the words, I think, as

stupidly tri umphant

rather than as dactylic and amphibrachic. Thus "tri" functions—or would in metrical verse—as a rider, and, given our habits of expectation in strongly rhythmic prose as in verse, the syllables fall clumsily.)

The good writer works out his rhythms by ear; he usually has no need of the paraphernalia I've invoked here for purposes of discussion. Yet occasionally it proves helpful to scan a line with metrical analysis marks, as an aid to determining where some new, strong beat should be inserted, or some pair of un-

stressed syllables suppressed or added.