‘People have forgotten how to hear the music’ : the teaching of poetry and prosody

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As a university teacher for over 30 years, I have become concerned at what has struck me as a declining ability on the part of students to read verse. I mean this in the most basic sense: it is common for students not only to ignore line endings, usually because they are reading too quickly, but also to emphasize the wrong syllables and to miss patterns of intonation. Broader misreadings tend to follow. For example, students often find it difficult to discuss tone or define it with reasonable accuracy, however competent they may be at identifying images or themes. There are various possible explanations for these failings, among them the widespread abandonment of reading aloud in secondary education, and the technological developments that have tended to promote a visual culture over an aural one. It is true, too, that the tone of a poem stems from a range of qualities, not only from its sound when read aloud or silently in a way that respects its aural and metrical character. Nevertheless, I had noticed that, at the same time when successive year-groups of students have become less capable of reading verse accurately, increasing numbers have entered higher education with little or no knowledge of prosody, which is the theory and practice of versification. For instance, in the Year 1 module on poetry that I teach at my own institution, the proportion of students who indicate by a show of hands in the first lecture that they have any knowledge of prosody has for some time been only about one quarter.

In order to test my sense that this was not merely a personal impression, or one limited to my own university, I conducted a survey of the teaching of prosody in higher education institutions throughout the United Kingdom. This essay reports the findings, in the form both of statistics and of a large selection from the discursive comments that many respondents generously provided. I should say at the start that, although I framed the questions in the survey in such a way as not to influence answers, my own position is that understanding metre is fundamental to any properly
critical study of poetry. That position, I am well aware, is not shared by everyone teaching in British higher education. I will return to it and the arguments behind it at the end of the essay.

The survey was conducted by circulating a questionnaire about current policies and practices in the teaching of prosody, and what colleagues across the country think about them. Mainly by using the English Subject Centre’s Course Finder, I compiled a list of 122 higher education institutions that appeared likely to offer English in some form as a degree subject, and I emailed Heads of Department or equivalent at each one to request that they either complete the questionnaire themselves or ask a colleague to do so. The questionnaire was in the form of a Web document designed to be completed online.¹ A text version was also available, and the text is summarized in Appendix 1. Launched on 3 April 2007, the survey was not closed until 27 June, although I allowed one late response in July. This long period was necessary because only 45 responses had arrived before my initial deadline of 30 April. I obtained a further 40 responses intermittently over the following weeks by emailing the questionnaire to other staff in the departments from which no response had reached me. In most cases these were course leaders or teachers of poetry identified from online staff lists, but some were people whom either I, or Elaine Hobby, my colleague and Head of Department, know personally. I am very grateful to those who responded and, in some cases, were prepared to put up with quite unreasonable persistence on my part. When I began to analyse the results, I excluded ten institutions from the original 122 I had circulated on the ground that they did not offer English Literature at least as a Joint Honours degree subject. None of these had responded to the questionnaire. The remaining 112 are listed in Appendix 2, but the 85 from which I received responses are not identified because, in conformity with Data Protection legislation, all respondents were guaranteed anonymity. If I overlooked any institution that should have been included in the survey, I apologise.

The 85 responses constitute a response rate of 75.9 percent of the 112 institutions on my revised list of contacts. One was completed by hand, but all the others electronically, including an
email from a Departmental Secretary who did not complete the questionnaire but stated: ‘We do not cover this at our university’. An initial question asked respondents to categorize their institution as pre-1992, post-1992, or other higher education. The reason for this was to obtain data on any variations in policies or practices according to type of institution. Of the 85 responses, 44 were from a total of 50 pre-1992 institutions, 36 from a total of 49 post-1992 institutions, and 5 from a total of 14 other institutions of higher education. Analysed by type of institution, these represent response rates of 88 percent (pre-1992), 73.5 percent (post-1992), and 35.7 percent (other higher education). These rates are high enough, especially from the pre- and post-1992 institutions, to give the survey reasonable claims to credibility.

After the initial question asking addressees to identify the type of institution to which they belonged, ten further questions followed, divided into three parts. First, addressees were asked to indicate whether their Section, Department, Faculty or School offered any separate course or module teaching the analysis of English versification. This rather roundabout form of words was used partly to avoid ambiguity, and partly because of a perhaps unnecessary misgiving on my part that the more technical terms ‘prosody’ and ‘metrics’ might not be understood by everyone. It was prefaced by the definition of ‘versification’ in Chris Baldick’s *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*: ‘the techniques, principles, and practice of composing verse, especially in its technical aspects of metre, rhyme, and stanza form’. Those who answered ‘no’ to this first question were directed to the next part of the questionnaire. Those who answered ‘yes’ were asked to list the titles of the courses or modules teaching the analysis of versification, and then to indicate whether a pass in such a course was required for students taking different types of English degree to graduate. The aim of this part of the questionnaire was to find out how many institutions attached sufficient importance to the teaching of prosody to devote whole courses or modules to it, and to make satisfactory knowledge of prosody a requirement for the award of a first degree.
The next section of the questionnaire put three main questions. Addressees were asked whether their Section, Department, Faculty or School offered any course or module in which the analysis of English versification was part of the syllabus; whether their Section, Department, Faculty or School offered any course or module in which the analysis of English versification was a normal activity; and whether, as far as they knew, versification was taught elsewhere in their institution (for example, in a Department of modern or of classical languages or literatures). Those who responded ‘yes’ to the first two questions were asked to list the relevant course or module titles. The first question was aimed at establishing to what extent prosody was part of the English curriculum at different institutions, the second at establishing to what extent it was part of normal teaching practice. By way of context, the final question sought a broad indication of policies and practices in other subject areas. A degree of overlap in these questions was deliberate, for it is quite possible, for instance, not only that versification might be an aspect of teaching practice in a module for which it is not part of the syllabus, but that, even in a module for which it is part of the syllabus, it might not be taught. This overlap should, however, have been made explicit, as it appears to have confused a few respondents.

The final section began by asking addressees to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement with five statements: ‘I believe that knowledge of versification is important to the study of English poetry’; ‘I believe that English poetry can be adequately studied at undergraduate level without knowledge of versification’; ‘I believe that students in my institution normally enter with adequate knowledge of English versification’; ‘I believe that the study of English versification is adequately taught in secondary education’; and ‘I believe that the study of English versification is adequately taught in my institution’. Five categories of response were offered: ‘not at all accurate’ (0 percent agreement); ‘not very accurate’ (25 percent agreement); ‘neutral’ (50 percent agreement); ‘quite accurate’ (75 percent agreement); and ‘wholly accurate’ (100 percent agreement). The final statement included a sixth option for respondents to indicate ‘does not apply’ if English
versification was not taught in their institutions. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to offer discursive comments on the importance or otherwise of the teaching of versification.

Analysis of returns from the questionnaire suggests that the systematic study of verse form is in danger of becoming a dying art. One clear pointer is that, of the 85 responses, each from a different institution, only 21, or 24.7 percent, indicated that their department offers a separate course or module that teaches prosody (Question 1). Seven of these came from the 44 pre-1992 institutions from which questionnaires were returned (15.9 percent), 13 from the 36 post-1992 institutions (36.1 percent), and 1 from the 5 other institutions of higher education (20 percent). The finding that courses of this type, while not common, are more frequently offered in the newer institutions may be explained by the likelihood that more of the latter have been obliged to address deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of their students. But the answer to a further question was, if anything, even more disturbing. Fourteen of the 85 respondents indicated that the analysis of versification was not a normal activity in any module. Eight of these were from pre-1992 institutions and 6 from post-1992. A further 4 respondents (1 pre-1992 and 3 post-1992) gave no answer. Including the response from the Departmental Secretary who stated that the subject was not taught at all, the result is a total of 19 institutions, or over 22 percent of the 85, in which, if the responses are valid, the study of versification is at risk of disappearing altogether.

It might, however, be argued that to take such a view of the matter is to see a glass that is three-quarters full as a quarter empty. The bare statistics show that over 77 percent of respondents answered ‘yes’ to the question whether the study of versification was a normal activity in any module. Thirty-five of these responses came from pre-1992 institutions, 27 from post-1992, and 4 from other institutions of higher education. Just over 75 percent also answered ‘yes’ to the question whether the analysis of versification was part of the English syllabus, in this case 32 from pre-1992, 29 from post-1992, and 3 from other institutions. But this apparently satisfying picture is unsettled by further evidence. First, the pattern of answers to the three questions discussed so far is less
encouraging. These are Question 1, whether any module is offered that teaches the analysis of versification; Question 4, whether any module is offered in which analysis of versification is part of the syllabus; and Question 6, whether the analysis of versification is a normal activity in any module. Respondents from only 15 institutions answered ‘yes’ to all three questions – 5 pre-1992, 9 post-1992, and 1 other. Second, respondents from 12 institutions answered ‘yes’ to Question 4 but either answered ‘No’ to Question 6 or left it blank. This invites two disturbing inferences: that the full content of some syllabi is either not being delivered, or is delivered without enabling its use in other modules. A third discrepancy appears much more welcome for anyone interested in prosody, at least on the face of it. This is that, even among institutions that have no separate module teaching versification, 36 respondents answered ‘yes’ both to Question 4 and to Question 6, indicating that the study of versification carries through from the syllabus into learning and teaching practice in other modules; and that 13 answered ‘yes’ to Question 6 having answered ‘no’ to Questions 1 and 4, indicating that discussion of versification takes place even where it is not formally part of the syllabus. However, the latter finding raises the question whether versification can be adequately addressed when it is not formally taught. It suggests that those colleagues who deal with versification in institutions where it is not part of the syllabus either assume adequate knowledge on the part of their students or, failing such knowledge, either make do and mend or let students without it fall by the wayside.

A second kind of unsettling evidence comes from the final part of the questionnaire, which invited opinions and comments. On the one hand, the great majority of respondents agreed with the statement that knowledge of versification is important to the study of English poetry. Out of a total of 76 such respondents, or nearly 90 percent, 62 wholly and 14 mainly agreed, with only three disagreeing (2 wholly, 1 mainly), and 4 neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 2 not responding. These views were nearly uniform across all three types of institution. On the other hand, out of 79 colleagues who responded to the statement ‘I believe that the study of English versification is
adequately taught in my institution’, only 33 agreed (7 fully agreed and 26 mainly). At nearly 42 percent, this is a disturbingly large minority. Especially significant is the fact that no fewer than 30 neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, while 4 wholly and 12 largely rejected it, with 5 respondents indicating that this statement did not apply to their institution, and 1 not responding. Here, too, the pattern of responses was very similar in all three types of institution, except that more respondents from pre-1992 institutions than elsewhere did not believe that versification was being taught adequately. Specifically, 4 respondents from the 44 pre-1992 institutions wholly disagreed with the statement, and 6 mainly disagreed, as compared with none wholly disagreeing from the other two types of institution and 6 mainly disagreeing (5 from the 36 post-1992 institutions and 1 from the 5 others). This is consistent with the finding already noted that more post-1992 than pre-1992 institutions offer separate courses or modules that teach prosody.

The second statement inviting opinions was offered as a check on those produced by the first, and the results were similar. A total of 66 respondents disagreed with the view that poetry can be studied without knowledge of versification, 38 wholly and 28 mainly; while 3 fully and 6 mainly agreed, 9 neither agreed nor disagreed, and 1 did not respond. Responses were again similarly distributed across all three types of institution, except that those from pre-1992 institutions were more vehement in rejecting the view offered. No fewer than 23 respondents from such institutions, or over 50 percent, completely disagreed with it, and 15 mainly disagreed; while, among the post-1992 institutions, 11 respondents wholly and 16 mainly disagreed, and, among the other institutions, 4 of the 5 disagreed completely. This finding presents an interesting comparison with the one that fewer pre-1992 institutions offer separate courses or modules on prosody.

Even more telling are the responses to the invitation to comment on the importance or otherwise of the teaching of versification. Of the 41 respondents who provided such comment (21 from pre-1992 institutions, 18 from post-1992 and 2 from others), 17 emphasized its importance and only 1 differed, remarking: ‘I think approaches to teaching vary widely’. The other respondents
either gave further information about their courses or commented on their experience of teaching prosody. The 17 responses on the importance of prosody included the following statements: ‘It’s become unfashionable to teach this, nevertheless I agree it’s important to maintain its presence in modules until it comes back’; ‘It is largely neglected in the study of literature at my and other institutions’; ‘It is crucial and neglected’; ‘In my School, students can go through a Single Honours degree having read almost no poetry and without ever having been examined on it’; ‘This is in my opinion one of the key areas of ignorance that holds back the development of students entering our course from A Level, but I know that not all of my colleagues would regard it as equally important’; ‘In two or three decades, people have forgotten how to hear the music (so to speak) that everyone took for granted for several hundred years’; ‘what the teaching of versification reveals is something quite horrifying unless put right: students cannot hear their own language with any accuracy’; ‘The teaching of versification is, in my opinion, a vital component of any course that purports to teach poetry’.

The survey also brings to light a widespread conviction that students entering from A Level are impeded by ignorance about versification, as in one of the comments just quoted. In response to the statement ‘I believe that students in my institution normally enter with adequate knowledge of English versification’, only 1 colleague, from a post-1992 institution, expressed full agreement, and 6 broad agreement (2 from pre-1992 institutions, 4 from post-1992), while 5 neither agreed nor disagreed and 1 did not respond. However, the respondent who fully agreed with the statement may have given the wrong code for the response, as he or she indicated broad disagreement with the next statement, ‘I believe that the study of English versification is adequately taught in secondary education’. The remaining 72 differed (48 wholly, 24 mainly) – a majority of nearly 85 percent. The view that secondary-level teaching of versification is adequate was disputed by the same number, 46 wholly and 26 mainly, with only 1 colleague, from a pre-1992 institution, expressing full agreement and 3 broad agreement (1 from a pre-1992 institution, 2 from post-1992). Furthermore,
various discursive comments reinforced the same point. Comments to this effect range from the mild (‘The students enter with a very mixed knowledge’), through the concerned (‘Students arrive with some knowledge of stanzaic form, basic knowledge of phonemic patterning and zero or less than zero knowledge of rhythm and metre’; ‘most students – especially from the maintained sector – don’t have any formal knowledge of how to read verse’), to the damning, as with the remark already cited on versification as a key area of ignorance from A Level, along with the assertion: ‘In my experience very few students have encountered any aspect of versification during their education at secondary school’.

Some of the discursive responses also specify other barriers to the teaching of prosody. Part of a response to which I have already referred several times – ‘not all of my colleagues would regard it as equally important’ – is echoed by several respondents, including one who also raised much larger issues: ‘I personally think [it] is a crucial issue facing the discipline. Not just versification, but poetry in general is dropping out of the curriculum, as academics for various reasons decide that it’s easier to teach theory and (loosely interpreted) “historical” readings of texts – and as their cynicism is confirmed by the RAE and universities’ panicked submission to it, which makes teaching as a whole a low priority.’ Another view is that timetable pressures are to blame. One respondent, for instance, wrote: ‘The 2 hrs per week over a semester rationing does not provide a sufficient opportunity for the reinforcement and practice that such a skill requires, and I think students are too inhibited, too distracted to do all they might for themselves.’ Though agreeing that changes in the curriculum were partly responsible, a further respondent proposed a broader perspective. Expressing the hope that ‘the rise of English Language and Literature at A level and then at degree level might bring about the reintegration of English as a subject previously interested in language, style and aesthetics’, he drew attention to what he called ‘its current manifestation as a highly popular general or liberal studies subject, as keen to introduce students to history or Continental philosophy as to English Literature’.
Still another opinion is that the teaching of versification is losing a battle for priority with other English skills: ‘There is a feeling that students can’t be burdened with versification [at] first-year level because we are already so busy trying to teach more basic skills. Therefore versification is only taught on a 2nd-year option module on poetry. I personally suspect that many lecturers who specialise in prose wouldn’t know how to teach versification or don’t even have a good enough grasp of it themselves.’ The suspicion in the comment just quoted has probably also occurred to others. If it is valid, it may in part account for the fact that relatively little discussion of versification occurs in other modules. For example, one email response from a colleague who did not complete a questionnaire (another colleague in the same institution had done so), was: ‘I make a point of teaching my own poetry students what I can about form, metre and so on, but it’s a battle against hopelessness really, and they virtually never use what I “teach” them in their essays.’ This suggests that knowledge of prosody is not reinforced elsewhere. Similarly, another respondent commented: ‘I would suspect that some of my colleagues will “cover” aspects of versification, as I do, but this is not done systematically or in any comprehensive sense. There is no testing of such knowledge either, as far as I know, though it is something which I believe most of us would consider important to an English Literature degree.’

Further evidence to similar effect is the view stated by several respondents that, while some students already have or acquire a grasp of metrical terms, they often use them merely for purposes of description. As one put it, the principle should be: ‘no “brownie points” for correctly identifying a trochaic tetrameter, unless you can draw out its implications, explain how the formal device articulates meaning etc’. Having described a first-year poetry module, another respondent remarked: ‘However, the students do then fail by and large to link descriptions of metre to analyses of poetic language, and so our first year work on metre often then falls by the wayside.’ Two comments, both from pre-1992 universities, understood this as a problem stemming especially from secondary-level teaching. One observed: ‘Students straight from school seem to be quite good at
giving a phonetic account of verse without linking it sufficiently [to] metrics and versification’. The other responded at greater length: ‘The curious thing I’ve noticed in the past few years when marking the [practical criticism] exercise which we set A-level students when they come for interview is how many of them have a quite impressive knowledge of the technical aspect of the subject, but absolutely no understanding (or a very limited one) of how it might have an effect on one’s understanding of a poem’s meaning or what it is like to read it. After three years of practice with us, when they sit their finals and take the [practical criticism] paper (as most have to), they have a better sense of how their technical knowledge may usefully be deployed, but there is still a sense in many cases in which it is kept separate from a concern with meaning or poetic effect.’

Even in the latter case, university-level teaching was evidently not succeeding in its aim to enable students to connect poetic form and meaning, and several others stated that it was failing to do so. Examples are: ‘We teach basics of versification (eg differences between various kinds of sonnet) but students still aren’t comfortable with poetry, shy away from it, and struggle to grasp accurately versification and connect it to meaning’; and ‘The course team is very conscious that heavy study of metre can make students even more intimidated. The battle is to get students to realise that formal choices / poetic artifice effect meaning. Prolonged focus upon metre at this first year level can reinforce a sense that simply stating the metre of a poem is enough: it is rare to see knowledge of metre at this level to actually inform textual analysis.’

Several respondents, especially from post-1992 and other institutions, echoed the view just quoted – and reflected in some of the other remarks cited above – that some students find metrical analysis daunting. One email correspondent, now retired, who passed the questionnaire to another colleague, remarked: ‘I suspect that the answer is that it is not taught; I don’t actually remember a time that it was – at least not with conviction. The idea always seems to have been that students ought to know blank verse, couplets and ballad metre, a kind of basic kit like being able to boil an egg or sew on a button but that more than that and they would get frightened.’ The strongest
expression of such a view was from another respondent at a post-1992 university: ‘In my experience (spanning 30 years at this level), students find poetry intimidating, and formal versification is the most intimidating aspect for them. One spends more time trying to dispel the feeling of intimidation than in actually teaching it (at least that’s what it feels like). A textbook is absolutely necessary (I use the Poetry Handbook by John Lennard), but even that can’t encourage students to hear a poem or feel its pulse as they read (silently).’ Other respondents expressed more confidence, for example: ‘there is nothing forbidding about versification; there are great satisfactions to be had from mastering it; it provides critical confidence and an approach to analysis which is always fruitful and likely to establish critical independence’; ‘Having taught one session on the villanelle and the sestina, students said they had never been taught technicalities before, that they welcomed it and would be interested in more’; ‘I think it is very important, and by and large students enjoy it’; and even ‘It’s fun, both for the students learning a skill and for the staff who teach it’. Three of these comments came from pre-1992 institutions, the third from a post-1992 institution.

One respondent put the case for prosody with particular clarity: ‘The teaching of versification is, in my opinion, a vital component of any course that purports to teach poetry. Students who are not taught versification at secondary or university level are deprived of a set of essential analytical tools not simply for the understanding of formal verse but also for the understanding of verse that either refuses or responds to formalism. Many students are familiar with rhyme and rhythm from music, and teaching versification can discipline and give a vocabulary for skills and activities in which they are already relatively adept (if sometimes unconsciously so).’ Another took a less categorical view: ‘I think English poetry can be “adequately” studied without deep knowledge of metre, but as with music, one understands it all differently if the technical basis is appreciated.’ However, while the questionnaire used the word ‘adequately’, the quotation marks around it may suggest caution, and this is reinforced by the analogy with music. No one would seriously argue that
music could be properly studied even at secondary level without knowledge of the ‘technical basis’. I suggest that there is an equally strong argument for teaching the technical analysis of poetry, even at secondary-school level. This view would not have been thought controversial a generation ago. That it now needs to be argued is a further sign of the de-skilling of students and teachers reflected by the survey.

Any advanced study of poetry must of course engage with other topics than versification. Such topics include figurative language and rhetorical patterns at the formal level and questions of theme and genre at the level of content – though genre often involves formal qualities too. But, while these topics are also fundamental to the study of literary texts that are not in verse, one of the properties of verse is metre or some alternative sound-pattern involving stress or the arrangement of syllables.3 The question then becomes the importance or otherwise of a poem’s versification. If the verse form of a poem were insignificant – if, that is, the poem would have approximately the same meaning and effect if it were written in a different verse form – then its versification would be worth no particular notice. But I do not believe this is true, even for nearly all conventional and nondescript poems. To cite some obvious examples, a poem in heroic couplets has a completely different movement from one in blank verse, and a poem in tetrameter couplets has a different movement from one in pentameter. The two forms invite the use of different syntactical and other structures; equally important, they tend to carry different associations. In the eighteenth century, for instance, heroic couplets are likely to be associated with qualities of order and restraint, blank verse with those of individual self-discipline and liberty.4 Similarly, when Wordsworth wished to write poems in ‘a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation’ presenting ‘the primary laws of our nature’,5 he chose as the basis for most of them the popular form of the ballad. The poems that resulted would not only have read but meant differently if they had been in tetrameter or pentameter couplets.
The ability to distinguish tetrameter or pentameter couplets from blank verse or ballad measure might be accepted as necessary or, at least, desirable even at secondary-school level. Whether more sophisticated abilities are needed, especially at tertiary level, is another question. Key evidence that they are needed are the gains in understanding that they enable. For instance, a student who can recognize the shifts between iambic and trochaic metre in Blake’s ‘London’ or the tensions between the same metres in ‘The Tyger’ is in a position to discuss the differences in tone and emphasis they produce. To cite a less well-known example, a student who notices the shifts between trochaic and iambic metre in Dyer’s ‘Grongar Hill’ can begin to think about their effect in providing variety and emphasis. The first such shift, in line 4, ‘Beyond the noise of busy man’, introduces the theme of urban bustle and distraction from which the poet is escaping to the Welsh countryside; and the poem’s opening sentence ends with the second as a rhetorical climax: ‘Now while Phoebus riding high / Gives lustre to the land and sky!’ Further examples of the importance of versification could be supplied very easily. Richard Bradford provides many in his book *Augustan Measures*, in which he compares the movement of different kinds of couplet with that of different kinds of blank verse. And analysis of many sonnets can go only so far without knowledge of prosody.

But the extent to which this kind of technical knowledge can extend understanding of poems is not all that is at issue. The respondent who remarked that the teaching of versification reveals that ‘students cannot hear their own language with any accuracy’ made a crucial point. Above all, he helps explain why students lacking any formal knowledge of verse tend to read it aloud so badly. While in everyday activities such as walking or even riding a bicycle it is not necessary to analyse the movements performed to carry them out adequately, reading poetry aloud is now so unfamiliar to most students that they simply do not know how to do it. A native speaker will be able to pronounce an English sentence correctly, but the same speaker without an awareness of metre is likely to mispronounce, and misread, a line of verse. Teaching metrical analysis is one way of
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dealing with this handicap. The teaching of English language at anything other than an elementary level requires the ability to analyse grammar. Similarly, the teaching of poetry at any fairly advanced level requires the ability to analyse metre. A student who has that ability will be better able to understand poems, read them aloud with reasonable accuracy and also write his or her own verse. As a reader of verse, a student without that ability will be functionally illiterate. With it, the same student has the opportunity to benefit in the other ways I have tried to illustrate. This does not mean, as several respondents to the survey commented, that the ability to scan and recognize different metres is enough. The ability to connect verse form with meaning is also necessary. On the other hand, such connections require evidence and argument. Impressionism of the kind that Samuel Johnson illustrated through Dick Minim’s efforts at close reading deserves the debunking he gave it.9

Two other objections to the teaching of prosody require consideration. Both appeared in responses to the survey, some respondents remarking that students find the conventional terminology of versification off-putting, others that, because it is based on classical verse that works differently from verse in English, it is unfit for purpose. But neither of these objections is convincing. First, the terminology is not difficult, and it can be learned quite easily. No one in any discipline other than English would seriously suggest that students need to be protected from analytical concepts and vocabulary, and in this case, I have argued, they are fundamental to knowledge of the subject. The second objection ignores the fact that classical terminology has long been naturalized in English, even though quantitative metre is quite different from verse that is accentual, accentual-syllabic or syllabic. It also forgets that it is the terminology used by poets themselves since the early modern period. Those students who master it and then want preciser concepts and vocabulary can be referred to linguists such as Otto Jespersen or George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr.10 An alternative is to introduce students to prosody through a different system
of analysis, such as those developed by Philip Davies Roberts or, at a much greater level of rigour and precision, by Derek Attridge. These can also be effective.

To return to the survey, the large number of responses that emphasize the importance of versification make it all the more surprising that few institutions formally require the teaching of prosody. Only 17 of the 85 respondents indicated that a pass in any course or module teaching prosody was necessary for a Single Honours degree in English. This is a minority of exactly 20 percent, made up of 5 pre-1992 universities (not much over 11 percent of the 44 such institutions from which returns arrived), 11 post-1992 (30.6 percent of 36), and 1 other (20 percent of 5). For Joint Honours degrees, such a requirement obtained only at 10 institutions (4 pre-1992, 6 post-1992); for Combined Honours, at 7 (3 pre-1992, 4 post-1992); for English as a Minor Subject, at 5 (2 pre-1992, 3 post-1992); and, for any other degree programme involving English, at 3 (2 pre-1992, 1 post-1992). Although, of course, not all institutions offer all these types of degree programme, the fact that so few require a knowledge of prosody must in part explain its decline, and also the widespread dissatisfaction with students’ competence in the reading and analysis of poetry. These findings even raise the question whether institutions that do not have prosody as part of their syllabus may be failing to satisfy properly one of the principles of the Quality Assurance Agency’s Benchmarking Statement for English. Although the Statement rightly recognizes diversity of practice in the teaching of English in higher education, it includes as a defining principle the need to take into account ‘the form, structure and rhetoric of texts’ (1.2). It also stipulates that an undergraduate education in the subject should ‘promote the understanding and practice of verbal creativity and the formal and aesthetic dimensions of literary texts’ (1.3); and it specifies that graduates in English should be able to demonstrate, as one of their competencies, ‘knowledge and understanding of the distinctive character of texts written in the principal literary genres, fiction, poetry and drama’ (3.1). One respondent declared: ‘Students and many critics in my view are far too keen to rush to interpretation in poetry, to the extent that sometimes it is treated as
transactional prose.’ To the extent that this is the case with students – a proposition that the survey’s findings support – institutions are failing in a key part of their educational responsibilities as defined by the Benchmarking Statement.

The aim of this essay is to start a debate on the teaching of poetry and prosody, especially in higher education. If poetry is to be taught adequately at advanced secondary and at tertiary level, its curriculum must, I believe, include prosody. This essay presents evidence and arguments for that position. Some of the evidence points to a decline in the teaching not only of prosody but of poetry itself. That decline, I am arguing, can only be checked and then reversed by embedding the study of poetry and prosody in higher education syllabi on a national basis. In plain terms, the study of poetry, including prosody, should be a formal requirement for any degree involving a significant proportion of English literature. It should also, of course, have a proper place in secondary education. But restoring skills that are beginning to be lost has to begin at tertiary level, because it is only there that there are sufficient numbers of suitably qualified staff to teach them. Once they are widely re-established, it will be possible to revive them in secondary education, as students become teachers in their turn, although that too will entail that they are specified as requirements in the curriculum. The alternative is the dismaying prospect that fewer and fewer people will be able, as two of the respondents put it, to ‘hear the music’ or even ‘their own language’.

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Notes

1. I am greatly indebted to Chris White, who produced the electronic form of the questionnaire and set it up as a Web page. Acknowledgements are also due to the anonymous reader of the first version of this essay for suggesting corrections and improvements.


4. By ‘heroic couplets’ I do not merely mean rhyming iambic pentameter couplets, but only those that are typically closed and for the most part in an elevated stylistic register in keeping with a serious subject. Milton’s prefatory note on ‘The Verse’, added to the fourth issue of the first edition of *Paradise Lost*, claimed ‘ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming’ (*The Poems of John Milton*, ed. by John Carey and Alastair Fowler [London and Harlow: Longmans, Green, 1968], p. 457).


8. E.g., an adequate understanding of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 20, ‘A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted’, is not possible without appreciating the significance of the hypermetrical light stresses at the end of every line.


Appendix 1. Summary of the questionnaire

Please indicate the type of institution to which you belong: pre-1992 university, post-1992 university, or other tertiary institution.

1. Does your Section, Department, Faculty or School offer any separate course or module that teaches the analysis of English versification? If the answer to this question is ‘NO’, please go to Part C of the questionnaire.

2. If the answer to Question 1 is ‘yes’, please list the title(s) of the course(s) or module(s) in the box below.

3. If the answer to Question 1 is ‘yes’, please indicate whether or not a pass is required in any of the course(s) or module(s) you have listed in order for students taking different types of degree course in English to graduate.
   a. Pass required for a Single Honours BA degree in English
   b. Pass required for a Joint Honours BA degree in which one of the elements is English
   c. Pass required for a Combined Honours BA degree in which one of the elements is English
   d. Pass required for a BA Honours degree in which English is a Minor subject
   e. Pass required for any other BA Honours degree
   f. No pass required for any student on any degree programme whatever

4. Does your Section, Department, Faculty or School offer any course or module in which the analysis of English versification is part of the syllabus?

5. If the answer to Question 4 is ‘yes’, please list the title(s) of the course(s) or module(s).

6. Does your Section, Department, Faculty or School offer any course or module in which the analysis of English versification is a normal activity?

7. If the answer to Question 6 is ‘yes’, please list the title(s) of the course(s) or module(s).
As far as you know, is versification taught elsewhere in your institution (e.g., in a Department of modern or of classical languages or literatures)?

Please indicate the accuracy of each of the statements below on a scale of 1 to 5. The final statement allows you to indicate that it does not apply because English versification is not taught in your institution.

i I believe that knowledge of versification is important to the study of English poetry.

ii I believe that English poetry can be adequately studied at undergraduate level without knowledge of versification.

iii I believe that students in my institution normally enter with adequate knowledge of English versification.

iv I believe that the study of English versification is adequately taught in secondary education.

v I believe that the study of English versification is adequately taught in my institution.

If you wish to add any comments of your own on the importance or otherwise of the teaching of English versification, please do so in the box below.
Appendix 2. List of the 112 institutions included in the survey

Anglia Ruskin University; Bath Spa University College; Birkbeck College London; Bournemouth University; Brunel University; Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College; Canterbury Christ Church University; College of St Mark and St John; De Montfort University; Doncaster College; Edge Hill College of Higher Education; Goldsmiths University of London; Grimsby College of Further and Higher Education; Keele University; King’s College London; Kingston University; Leeds Metropolitan University; Liverpool Hope University; Liverpool John Moores University; London Metropolitan University; London South Bank University; Loughborough University; Manchester Metropolitan University; Middlesex University; Newman College; North East Wales Institute of Higher Education; Nottingham Trent University; Open University; Oxford Brookes University; Queen Mary University of London; Queen’s University of Belfast; Roehampton University; Royal Holloway London; Ruskin College Oxford; St Martin’s College; St Mary’s University College; Sheffield Hallam University; Staffordshire University; Suffolk College; Swansea Institute; Trinity and All Saints; Trinity College Carmarthen; University College Falmouth; University College London; University College Northampton; University of Aberdeen; University of Bedfordshire; University of Birmingham; University of Bolton; University of Bradford; University of Brighton; University of Bristol; University of Buckingham; University of Cambridge; University of Central England; University of Central Lancashire; University of Chester; University of Chichester; University of Derby; University of Dundee; University of Durham; University of East Anglia; University of East London; University of Edinburgh; University of Essex; University of Exeter; University of Glamorgan; University of Glasgow; University of Gloucestershire; University of Greenwich; University of Hertfordshire; University of Huddersfield; University of Hull; University of Kent; University of Lancaster; University of Leeds; University of Leicester; University of Lincoln; University of Liverpool; University of Manchester; University of