

What have we learned about meter?

POETRY

We have learned that poetry is more than the arrangement of vowels and consonants. Like music, poetry can involve rhythm, making patterns with stressed and unstressed syllables. Poets often arrange lines so that every other syllable is stressed, or so that every third syllable is stressed. When these patterns begin with a stress, that is called *falling meter*, and when they end with a stress, that is *rising meter*. We have learned that meter is not an absolute constraint; poets often put variations in meter, grouping iambs with anapests and trochees with dactyls. They even use reverse meters, such as iambs and trochees, to get a counterpoint effect. Meter gives poets more possibility, more freedom to create.

PLATO

We have learned that the use of meter is not a modern phenomenon. Even in Plato's *Dialogues* there are references to iambic and other meters. Plato appeared to deprecate poetry, but used subtle devices to make the *Dialogues* artistic and beautiful. We have learned that despite all of our knowledge about meter, the deeper questions—about how poets know to choose one meter over another, and how poets rise above ordinary uses of meter to create masterpieces—remain unanswered. The Socratic paradox still holds.

TRUTH

We have learned through poetry that meter has something to do with truth, but the relationship is difficult to isolate. Meter is somehow a reflection of real rhythms in the world. We can imagine using the wrong meter for an idea, and we can imagine using a good meter but failing to achieve the effect we hoped for.

What would we still like to know?