

THE BASIS OF ENGLISH RHYTHM

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The Basis of English Rhythm by William Thomson

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WILLIAM THOMSON

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ENGLISH RHYTHM**

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ENGLISH RHYTHM.

BY

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SYNOPSIS.

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PREFACE.

ANY one who wishes to know the gist of what has been said on the subject of the basis of rhythm, without the labour of studying many volumes, will probably find this pamphlet useful. To say that it fully agrees with none of its predecessors is no disparagement of it, for no two of these agree with each other. It at least contains a correct record of the rhythmical phenomena of English speech as these present themselves to one who has tried to cast aside all prepossessions and foregone conclusions, and has simply listened to what he himself does and what he hears. My chief aim has been to establish the basic facts of English rhythm; the task of elucidating the relation of our rhythm and its variations, on the one hand, to thought, emotion and the expression of these, on the other, lies above and beyond my province, and it is doubtful, indeed, whether such a task can be profitably undertaken without some preliminary agreement as to the underlying facts.

The substance of the pamphlet was first put forward in January, 1889, in a lecture delivered to the Philological Section of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow. Since then many works have appeared on the subject, but the only writer with whom I have found myself in substantial agreement on the main point is Mr. Sidney Lanier. As the reader will see, however, I have attempted to correct him in some essential respects. So far as I can ascertain, nobody looks on his chief position with sufficient favour to adopt it. Whether my emendations will help on the process is doubtful. The ultimate test of the musical notation, as I have used it, is whether a person acquainted with the simpler rhythms of music can read the passages notated as I mean them to be read. I believe my notation will bear this test.

WILLIAM THOMSON.

CHRISTMAS, 1904.

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1. If an ordinary melody is deprived of its variations of pitch, and reproduced in monotone, it still retains its rhythmical movement, consisting of a succession of tones of various lengths, punctuated by accents of varying strength. A skeleton of this movement can be tapped out on a drum, or with the fingers on a table, and, if at all characteristic, is then easily identified by any one well acquainted with the original melody, the lacking continuity of tone being suitably filled in by a little exercise of the imagination. As thus defined, the movement can be represented and identified by means of the ordinary musical notation, minus the staff. By a similar process it is possible to reproduce the syllabic movement of those portions of speech which present any regularity analogous to that found in music. In this case the place of musical tones of various lengths is taken by syllables of corresponding duration. That a syllable, unlike a musical tone, is not vibrationally continuous in rate from its beginning to its end, is not a property that affects the rhythm. Thus, although the singing voice is, in speech, replaced by the speaking voice, it will still be possible, by means of the notational methods of music, to convey from one person to another the movement of rhythmical speech. And as the syllabic movement of a phrase is equally unaffected by the different phonetic constitution of the various syllables, the tapping test of rhythm may for practice and clearness be supplemented by substituting any easily pronounced syllable—say *tah*—for each of the real ones. It is proposed to apply the process thus described to the syllabic movement of English speech. The word "movement" will be used throughout in the technical sense just indicated. The thing it represents can, within certain limits of irregularity difficult to deal with, be tapped out on a drum, provided the intervals are properly filled in with speech sound. If a phrase have each of its syllables replaced by the syllable *tah*, and the resulting series of *tahs* be spoken with the same movement as the original phrase, we can form a better mental picture of the movement itself. And this picture is still further sharpened in its outlines by the process of tapping—which represents, however, not the continuous sound of the syllables, but only their beginning.

2. Now, which elements of speech are thus retained in syllabic movement, and which are excluded? Those retained are length and accent. With two corrections, these terms are used in the ordinary senses in which they are applied in a pronouncing dictionary. Dictionaries mark the supposed length of vowels only, whereas what we are concerned with is the length of syllables, whether due to length of vowels, or of consonants, or of the two combined. Moreover, dictionaries give the quantity of vowels as pronounced in isolated words, and under the two rough categories of long and short, whereas, for our purpose, the quantities or lengths of syllables in the full range of their variety fall to be considered in their proper setting as parts of organised speech.

The excluded elements of speech are pitch, including inflection, quality, timbre, speed, and syllabic burden. "Pitch" indicates that varying elevation of the voice which is due to varying rates of vibration in the vocal chords. "Timbre" is the term used when it is desired to distinguish one kind of voice from another. "Speed" or "tempo," which has nothing to do with "time," distinguishes different rates of progression over the accents and quantities of a phrase, but does not touch the lengths and accents in their relations to one another. "Quality"—an unfortunate term—marks the differences between the individual consonant or vowel sounds as determined by the positions of the organs used in their production. "Syllabic burden" is here employed to denote the varying amounts of speech-material dealt with at one effort—that is, in each syllable.

3. From any and all of the five elements mentioned it is necessary to distinguish clearly accent and quantity. The only one with which accent is apt to be confounded is pitch. This particular form of confusion arises from the common tendency of strong accent and high pitch to occur together upon the same syllable. The distinction is easily made in most cases, but occasionally the process of disentanglement is rather a hard one, and then the use of monotone is helpful. If "father" is uttered first with a rising and then with a falling inflection on the second syllable, there is no difficulty in hearing that the accent remains on the first syllable. But if the question is asked whether, in the sentence, "Take your own time, Annie," the stronger accent is on "own" or on "time," the answers are apt to be very uncertain. Whole volumes on rhythm are vitiated by failure to discern the truth in such cases. Yet the matter is very simple to a trained or an attentive ear. The higher pitch is normally on "own," the stronger accent on "time." This statement is easily put to the proof by the simple device of placing the higher pitch and the stronger accent so markedly