Critical Rhythm: The Poetics of a Literary Life-Form. Eds. Jonathan Culler and Ben Glaser. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019

Theories of versification have often constructed rhythm as a kind of mysterious complement to meter, both the product of meter's regular recurring patterns of sound and the element which exceeds or escapes capture by those patterns. For Richard Hengist Horne, writing in 1841, the two were as inseparable as 'systole and diastole, -- meter being understood as muscle, and pulsation as rhythm, -- varying with every emotion'. Many of the essays in this collection focus on the moment in the early twentieth century when this organic link between meter and rhythm seemed to break down; Pound's pronouncements about 'absolute rhythm' are invoked by a number of contributors, and the Modernists' self-representation as heroic metrical iconoclasts is largely accepted at face value. Freed from the shackles of meter, rhythm becomes a distillation of qualities inherent in everyday language, an atavistic survival of communal rituals, or what Haun Saussy calls, in the title of his chapter, 'a technique of the body', intimately tied to the 'pulsations' of the human heart. Several contributions rely, implicitly or explicitly, on a notion of 'rhythmical competence', analogous to the linguistic competence which explains our ability to understand natural languages without understanding the processes behind them; it is this idea which underpins Derek Attridge's argument that many poets have written in a form that he calls the 'English dolnik' without being aware of it, their choice operating at a 'deep psycho-physical level' (163) prior to conscious choice. Where explicit metrical thinking of the kind engaged in by many of the most significant poets of the nineteenth century is discussed, it tends to be relegated to the category of the 'metrical imaginary', and investigated for its ideological significance rather than its ability to shed light on any of the formal features of the poetry produced during the period.

The volume is divided into four loose thematic sections. The first of these, 'Rhythm's Critiques' ('Critiques of Rhythm?') promises to engage in reflection on first principles, but, as David Nowell Smith acknowledges in his chapter, much of this section 'seems far removed from questions of prosody or versification' (51). Jonathan Culler's essay has a slightly bemused air about it, as if he is directing his attention towards this subject for the first time; there is surely no need to inform readers of a volume on this topic that popular poetry often makes use of an unrealised beat at the end of the line, or to quote nursery rhymes and limericks to make the point. It is Culler, appropriately for the author of *Structuralist Poetics*, who introduces the idea of 'rhythmical competence' in his attempt to explain how verse forms have evolved and how rhythm might function independently of meaning in poetry, though his suggestion that '[the] words of the poem may be signs for which we have to supply the signifieds, but the rhythm seems independent of us' (36) would seem to indicate some divergence from strict Saussurean principles. Simon Jarvis's lively and engaging reading of *Sordello* introduces another motif of the volume: the determination to avoid mimetic readings of metrical or rhythmical phenomena in verse. Jarvis rightly points out that the surface of *Sordello* is 'corrugated … to produce a complexity of verse texture well in excess of any possible mimetic or illustrative role for which it could be recuperated' (63), but his attempt to account for this aspect of the poem ends up reinstating mimetic effects, if not in the 'line' then in the 'design' of the poem as a whole; the description of Sordello's first poetic triumph is read as a kind of microcosm of the poem's procedure, an illustration of the 'force field' generated by the antagonistic relation between sound patterns in verse and the demands of meaning.

One of the heroes of the second grouping – which has the intriguing title 'Body, Throng, Race' – is the barely-remembered late-nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonist Francis Barton Gummere. He features in all three of the essays in this section, and might well be the single most mentioned figure in the entire volume; his name appears no fewer than 142 times. This prominence is due to his development of the theory that the rhythms of English poetry ultimately derived their resonance from the 'stamping feet and clapping hands of the throng' (133) that gave rise to them in the distant past. This version of the 'metrical imaginary' depends, as a number of writers point out, on the idea of a mythical point of

origin for English poetry in its Anglo-Saxon and Germanic past, and on the idea of a continuity between that past and the present community of English readers and writers. Virginia Jackson grapples with 'the problem of reclaiming that abstract, white, and impossible idea of rhythm for actual and non-white communities' (100), focusing on the seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of Arthur Symons's 'The Crying of Water' with the opening bars of the spiritual 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen' on the title page of W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. (It is not, incidentally, the case, as Jackson asserts, that Symons's poem appeared only in the United States; it can be found earlier in his *Poems* [1902], published in London by Heinemann.) Previous commentators have read the Symons poem, with its enigmatic comparison between the speaker's troubled heart and the sea, as an oblique commentary on the traumatic legacy of slavery, but Jackson reads it instead as the sign of a 'graphic rhythmic dissonance' (102) which highlights the difficulty of inserting the black experience into the template of English lyric. Not all of the poems cited by DuBois in *Souls* are, Jackson suggests, 'as lyric or as white or as odd' (102) as 'The Crying of Water', but there is no attempt to derive this supposed 'whiteness' from the poem itself; the idea of 'whiteness' risks being reified here into a version of the 'metrical imaginary' every bit as tendentious as the one it is intended to supplant. The theme of the exclusive nature of a poetics which construes its own experience as universal is continued in Haun Saussy's pleasant saunter (or *onioi*, to use the word he teaches us in his chapter) through the ways in which rhythm has been conceptualised as the counterpart of natural, organic processes. His argument is enlivened by a comparison between the treatments of the 'Song of the Bowmen of Shu' offered by Pound and Fenellosa; Pound's disruptive and angular rhythm contrasts strikingly with the 'confident marching iambics' (119) of Fenellosa's much more conventional rendering, emphasising the rhythmically parochial nature of the latter.

One of the points at issue throughout the volume is the historical and ideological specificity of the various schemes for understanding rhythm proposed throughout literary history; Attridge's 'dolnik' is in one sense an attempt to sidestep this legacy by finding a new and hitherto unrecognised pattern in English versification. His chapter appears in the third section, entitled 'Beat and Count', a title which draws attention to two of the ways in which rhythm has been understood, as either an effect of the 'ictus' or beat, or as a phenomenon linked in some way to the length of time taken to pronounce the verse. In her contribution to this section Meredith Martin examines some poetic experiments produced according to the latter principle, arguing that the 'syllabics' of Robert Bridges and Adelaide Crapsey deliberately frustrate attempts at conventional accent-based reading and force the reader instead to 'picture' the verse by apprehending the pattern underlying it visually rather than aurally. The difficulties of communicating this organising principle to readers are illustrated by Martin's reading of the verse; the features (such as elision) that she accounts for by appealing to the principle of syllabic regularity can just as easily, and more plausibly, be explained as part of an accentual or beat-based reading. These experiments, like Frost's attempts to communicate 'tone' through his rhythms, are the result of the dissociation of rhythm from meter, and the corresponding collapse of rhythm into what Natalie Gerber, in the title of her chapter on Frost, calls an 'investment of belief in sounds'. Such a belief rests either, like Frost's, on a misplaced confidence that the reader will be able to 'hear' the verse as the poet hears it, or else on an equally illusory connection between poetic rhythm, as an autonomous element of verse, and some fundamental principle of human psychology or physiology. A number of contributors appeal to the latest findings of experimental psychology in the attempt to explain the persistence or dominance of certain kinds of rhythm over others, seemingly unaware of the lengthy history of failure of such attempts to tie aesthetic responses to fundamental physical or psychological reflexes; Ogden and Richards were equally confident about the reality of the 'engram-complexes' they identified behind responses to poetry in *The Meaning of Meaning*.

Gerber's contribution appears in the final section, 'Fictions of Rhythm', alongside essays on Sappho by Yopie Prins, and on Coleridge's 'Christabel' by Ewan Jones. Prins's chapter in fact nicely illustrates the fictional, or, as she puts it, allegorical character of the supposed relation between physiology and rhythm in its overview of the parallels that have been drawn between the Sapphic

stanza (or at least its first three lines) and the beating of the human heart. The essays in this section are distinguished from many others in the volume by their detailed close attention to the verse-texture of the poems they discuss, something which is strikingly absent from some of the earlier chapters. Erin Kappeler's essay on 'Constructing Walt Whitman', for instance, includes almost nothing by way of analysis of Whitman's verse, quoting just a line or two from the poems themselves. Even accepting that the focus of the essay is on the early Modernist construction of Whitman as the father of free verse and the creator of a distinctively American rhythmical tradition, the absence of any direct engagement with the poetry itself is remarkable, and reveals something about the orientation, and perhaps also the limitations, of the volume as a whole. Kappeler and many other contributors suggest that our literary histories are made up entirely of 'imagined continuities and lineages' (146); as Simon Jarvis notes towards the end of his chapter on *Sordello*, however, '[a] poem's most powerful relationship to history lies in those supposedly purely technical but in fact intimately historical materials, the verse sentences, manners, repertoires, and formulae it inherits and on which it works by changing them' (82). Without detailed attention to the history of these 'verse sentences, manners, repertoires, and formulae' – to the material history of the medium of verse itself, in other words -- the choice of one 'lineage' over another becomes a matter of pure ideological preference.