"A Phonetician's View of Verse Structure" is the title of a paper by David Abercrombie presented in his book *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics* (1965). I wish to consider Abercrombie's influential essay not only for its own interest, but also as a mode of viewing verse which, in England at any rate, appears to have its origin in the eighteenth century, and which too often bedevils prosodic discussion at any time. In the second part of this paper, we shall find that the arguments embodied in "A Phonetician's View of Verse Structure" are in essence those of Joshua Steele in his *An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech* (1775).

Most of us probably understand the word "phonetics" to mean something like "the scientific study of speech sounds." Abercrombie does not use the word "scientific," but he does say: "The study of the sound of speech, in all its aspects, and of the bodily movements which produce the sound, is the province of phonetics. Phonetic techniques of observation and analysis can be applied to verse structure as successfully as they can to any other aspect of language where the sound is important" (p. 16). A phrase like "phonetic techniques of observation and analysis" makes one expect an approach which, if not "scientific," will at least be "objective" and bring with it some special competence. In practice, however, one of the problems of Abercrombie's method is that it is largely subjective and arbitrary, and, although explicitly offered as professional, wide open to attack from those who are not phoneticians.

The approach is, however, initially professional in taking for its target "the study of
the sound of speech, in all its aspects, and of the bodily movements which produce the sound."

It seems, from these words, that Abercrombie will limit himself to what is physical and tangible, and not concern himself—as a literary critic might—with the abstract or the impressionistic. And he does offer some account of "the bodily movements which produce the sound." We are told that the sounds of speech are produced by an air-stream from the lungs which is affected by alternate contractions and relaxations of the breathing muscles: each muscular contraction, and consequent rise in air-pressure, is a "chest-pulse," and each chest-pulse constitutes a syllable. Nor is this all. There is also a system of "stress-pulses," which consists of "a series of less frequent, more powerful contractions of the breathing muscles which every now and then coincide with, and reinforce, a chest-pulse, and cause a more considerable and more sudden rise in air-pressure" (p. 17).

The non-professional (i.e. someone who is not a phonetician) may or may not be impressed by these claims. When we hear someone read verse aloud, we are hardly likely to think of the exact workings of the breathing muscles in that person's lungs. We can conclude for ourselves that syllables are one thing and stressed syllables another, because we can hear the difference between a syllable and silence, and between an unstressed syllable and a stressed one. That particular kind of distinction is one which we can make without phoneticians to help us, even though we may derive some comfort from the fact that what we think we hear is likely to have a basis in a physical reality which causes the sounds coming to us to be what they are, not just as we perceive them in hearing but also through other means which might strike us as less "subjective." Even so, if we could generally agree on a sound as being "X" when heard through the ear and interpreted as such through the mind, we might think of that fact as a reality no less "objective" than one established through touch, a machine, etc. I submit that in producing and listening to speech we do agree on sounds being "X," "Y," etc., or else we could not communicate.
We may thus have reservations about the importance of "the bodily movements" which produce the sound of speech when intellectual perception via the biological or inner ear is our primary concern, as it is in the perception and analysis of the prosodic patterns of verse in English. But we should certainly be on our guard when Abercrombie shifts his attention from bodily movements to the claim that "English is a typical example of a language with a stress-timed rhythm" (p. 17). He explicitly means by this that the stress-pulses are made to recur at equal intervals of time, being isochronous. Thus he says, with reference to the utterance "This is the house that Jack built," that in his delivery (which is not presented as idiosyncratic) there are four stress-pulses, occurring on the syllables This, house, Jack, and built: "Now if I say the sentence again, and while I do so tap with a pencil on the table every time there is a stress-pulse, the taps will be unmistakably isochronous, showing that the stressed syllables are too" (p. 18).

It is difficult to see how the procedure here described has anything to do with "phonetic techniques of observation and analysis," or that anything is proven by it. The claim about isochronism appears to be arbitrary, subjective, and amateurish. We are asked to take on trust that there are equal intervals of time between stress-pulses in Abercrombie's speech, but, even if we could hear his delivery (or, as readers, somehow more or less reconstruct it), there is no guarantee that the tapping of the pencil reliably indicates stresses, leave alone that we would necessarily have to agree—in the absence of any other, firmer measurement—that it will establish the intervals between the stresses as "unmistakably isochronous." Even more importantly, individual readers might well articulate the statement in a way which is perfectly idiomatic yet quite different from Abercrombie's, in which case it may be impossible to accept the sweeping claim that "English is a typical example of a language with a stress-timed rhythm." As I pronounce "This is the house that Jack built," I am aware of stronger stresses on This, house, and Jack than on any other syllables, and to me built seems stronger.
than is, the, or that, but so much weaker than Jack that the contrast with that syllable makes built seem virtually unstressed. Probably because of this, the notion of an interval between Jack and built which would be as long as that between house and Jack hardly begins to arise for me, even if I assume that I hear a slight pause between the final consonant of Jack and the first of built.

As I hear something quite different from Abercrombie, I have asked a number of people, of different ages but all native speakers of English, to tell me what they think they hear when they pronounce the sentence. The subjects were simply given the words on paper, and not invited to listen to anyone else reading the sentence to them. My finding—although based on a small sample—is that This and Jack usually stand out as the strongest syllables. This is perhaps not surprising, since the statement is about one particular house and one particular builder. House is the third stressed syllable; and, interestingly, children do not seem to single out built as having any stress, while adults may do so, though with some hesitation. My testing suggests that the likelihood of built being thought of as a syllable with (some) stress increases when a person is aware that it is a verb: I suppose that it is knowledge of that grammatical fact (and perhaps of the word's semantic importance, or even of the phonetic difference between k and b) which may lead a listener to believe that the word has, as Abercrombie seems to think, a stress-pulse which places it in the same category as This, house, and Jack. And I would hazard a guess that even the way an adult pronounces the sentence may be affected by linguistic considerations which would not occur to, say, a nine-year old child who is merely asked to read out the sentence naturally and to say which words are stressed.

Furthermore, none of the people whom I have asked to comment on the intervals between the stressed syllables suggested that there was an interval between Jack and built at all comparable to that between This and house or between house and Jack. Even those who
considered that *built* had stress did not disagree with the others about the matter of intervals. There was substantial agreement that the interval between *This* and *house* is the same, or roughly the same, as that between *house* and *Jack*: but such an observation cannot justify the conclusion that English has an isochronous rhythm.

So much for mental perception of isochronism in "This is the house that Jack built," the utterance which Abercrombie uses as his key example. To be fair, it is not his only example, or that of many others who share his way of thinking. But one would have expected him at least to ask other people, as I have done, whether their impression is in accord with his. In this respect, it is interesting to note a paper by a group of linguists—G. Faure, D.J. Hirst, and M. Chafcouloff—whose findings do not support Abercrombie's confidence in isochronism. In an experiment described by these authors, a number of sentences read by two British subjects were recorded and submitted for analysis to three specialists of English phonetics who independently of one another marked syllables they considered stressed. Syllables were counted as stressed if they were marked as such by at least two of the three phoneticians. (Thus the determination of the question whether or not a syllable is stressed, whatever its shortcomings, was less haphazard than Abercrombie's.) Subsequently, the duration between the onsets of succeeding stressed syllables was measured. Despite some complicating factors and a few reservations expressed by the authors about their own methods, they came to the fairly firm conclusion that "it is simply not true that stressed syllables are separated by even 'roughly equal' intervals of time," as they pointed out has been quite widely believed. They suggested that their evidence "seems to point to a fixed (average) duration for stressed and unstressed syllables" (pp. 73 and 74).

The claim that English has an isochronous rhythm thus is not, and should not be, universally accepted. Even common sense alone would suggest this. Obviously, if the intervals between stressed syllables are not equal, there is no reason for supposing that, for
example, it will take just as long to utter three unstressed syllables between two stresses as just one. The assumption that the intervals are equal would have to be grounded firmly in observable facts (as it has not been) for it to have real worth. Even mere mental perception via the ear does not support its validity: if the intervals were the same at all time and the stresses outstandingly clear, spoken English would display a rhythmical regularity of which we would all be readily aware. Stressed syllables, according to the Faure-Hirst-Chafcouloff experiment, would seem to be long, and unstressed ones short. It may well be that in certain contexts three consecutive short syllables between two stresses are no longer than one on its own would be, but, if on average there is a fixed duration for unstressed syllables, it is by no means safe to assume that invariably, between two stresses, a speaker will spend as much time on one unstressed syllable as on many; such an assumption would be manifestly incorrect if the total lapse between stresses were found to vary, as it is found to do. In practice, matters like this can be settled with relative accuracy by any individual possessing a metronome.

For if the impression which Abercrombie gained from his pencil-tapping were right, the ticking of a metronome would systematically coincide with the stress-pulses This, house, Jack, and built, which, he claims, exist at regular intervals in his pronunciation of the sentence (a pronunciation not offered as eccentric, but representative). What I observe when using a metronome does not support Abercrombie's case. For example, if one records an average speaker's utterance of the sentence on a tape-recorder or any such device, one will find that the metronome will indicate a much longer gap between This and house than between Jack and built: the distances are not even roughly equal. The extent to which one will hear this phenomenon will depend on the speed of the utterance, and that fact can also be made obvious in another way, viz. by setting the metronome at various speeds and asking speakers to "keep time" with it. It will be found, particularly if the metronome is
operating at low speed, that the speakers do not even remotely "keep time," or that if they do, the interval between Jack and built will seem absurdly long both to them and to oneself.

It might be suggested that if one simply asks a subject to pronounce the sentence "This is the house that Jack built" all by itself—whether once or repeatedly—one might not obtain a "natural" pronunciation, or at least not in all cases. To avoid this risk, I asked another small group of subjects, all of them children ranging between the ages of nine and thirteen, to read out the full text of the nursery rhyme. I was particularly interested in hearing what might happen in the articulation of a passage like the following:

This is the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog, that worried the cat,
That killed the rat, that ate the malt,
That lay in the house that Jack built.

The first three lines appear to have four stress-pulses each, at fairly regular intervals; indeed, the regularity would seem to be exact between cat and killed, killed and rat, rat and ate, and ate and malt, so that we might well come to the last line with the expectation that it will be isochronous. If we moreover had the sense that there should be four stresses in each line, we would put them on lay, house, Jack, and built. If the isochronism of what immediately precedes the last line were in any way compelling, one would suppose a child to maintain the same rhythm until the end. In practice, the children I have listened to must have felt that the rhythm of the last line does not resemble that of "That killed the rat, that ate the malt," for invariably their voice tends to fall away after Jack—the more so,
presumably, because a passage like this asks to be spoken in one breath.

There certainly are more or less isochronous phrases in English, and of course one can, as to an extent happens in this nursery rhyme, exploit that fact artistically. But the existence of such phrases, or any special grouping of them, in no way establishes the truth of the claim that English is intrinsically and systematically isochronous. Yet Abercrombie's view of verse structure is based on exactly this assumption.

Indeed, his desire for regularity leads him to find what he calls a "silent stress-pulse," which he claims occurs in his pronunciation of "A funny thing happened to me, on my way here this evening." It is of course possible to read a pause between me and on, but I see no reason for believing that that pause would in fact be a stress-pulse. Nor, if the sentence is spoken fairly quickly, is it at all necessary to have even a pause. It is significant that, in writing, the comma which Abercrombie uses is dispensable: "A funny thing happened to me on my way here this evening" would be quite normal. To Abercrombie, however, there is no doubt about the objective existence of such "silent stresses," which, he asserts, "are not a matter of chance, nor of the speaker's whim" and which are "an integral part of the structure of English verse" (p. 20).

Abercrombie proceeds to argue this position with reference to the history of English poetry. He claims, for example, that since the appearance of Coleridge's preface to "Christabel" in 1816 "theories of prosody have been largely transformed":

What Coleridge said in his preface was, "The metre of 'Christabel' is ... founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables"; and he goes on to say, "In each line the accents will be found to be only four."

(p. 21)

One cannot, I believe, legitimately deduce from such a statement that "theories of prosody" in general have been transformed as a result of it, or—to the extent that they have been—that there was justification for the
transformation. Coleridge is not quarreling with the prosodic theories of his predecessors; indeed, his belief that his own metre was founded on a "new principle" suggests that he saw his poem as, in practice, based on a different theory, the essential difference between him and earlier writers being that they counted syllables in composing, while he counted accents.

So, contrary to what Abercrombie thinks, Coleridge did not believe that his view of the prosody in "Christabel" had any applicability beyond that poem. In truth, Coleridge's perspective was so limited that it did not, apparently, occur to him that the "new principle" could with reasonable accuracy be seen as describing the practice of much Old English verse, or poems in "ballad metre." This, however, is not of specific concern to Abercrombie, who wishes to see Coleridge's remarks as important for the whole history of English verse, and not even for certain parts of it as distinct from others. He tests Coleridge's theory against his own practice by saying that "Christabel" "usually has four stressed syllables in the line," as in

/ / / / /

'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock.

But, he observes, there sometimes seem to be only three stressed syllables:
My sire is of a noble line. (p. 21)

I should have thought, in defence of Coleridge's own claim that there are four accents in each line, that we can without undue difficulty find them:

My sire is of a noble line.

I do not mean that a reader who might come across the line in a passage of verse would inevitably think of My as stressed. In that poetry tends to be "heightened prose," however, I would think it perfectly natural for Coleridge to assume that the reader will see My as having more prominence, here, than it need have in prose, although there, too, it might have some, because surely it has more stress than of or a, and could readily be a rather formal, emphatic opening of a speech, while moreover the repetition of sound in My and sire is probably important. Furthermore, apart from Coleridge's own statement about the four stressed accents per line, it seems obvious that he is knowingly or unknowingly guided by a principle of Old English verse, viz. that the "line" actually consists of two "half-lines," with two stresses in each. This fact is brought home to us, not only by his own statement about the four stresses, but by our growing awareness of the function of pauses in the lines:

‘Tis the middle of night/ by the castle clock.
My sire/ is of a noble line.

Even if *My* has less stress than *sire* (as I believe it does), it can still readily count as having a metrical stress. Abercrombie, however, finds the fourth stress not on *my*, but in the pause between *sire* and *is*, where he claims there is a "silent stress": "the line contains three stressed syllables, but four stress-pulses, one of which, though silent, is nevertheless as much sensuously present as the others" (p. 22).

We can now see to what amazing results Abercrombie's system-building leads him. Ignoring Coleridge's statement about accents. Abercrombie comes to believe that his own notion of stress, which includes "silent stress," should be substituted for Coleridge's, who, we are asked to assume, really meant what Abercrombie had in mind ("it is perhaps possible to interpret Coleridge in this sense," Abercrombie suggests). In his desire to discover examples of "silent stress," Abercrombie not only overlooks the possibility that *My* is intended to be read as stressed, but quite arbitrarily finds a pause, which to him is actually a stress, between *sire* and *is*, yet not between *night* and *by* in ";Tis the middle of night by

the castle clock." Most of us may agree that logically the case for a pause between *night* and *by* which supposedly represents a stress-pulse is as strong in that line as it is for one between *sire* and *is* in the other line. If so, we would end up with five stresses in the longer line, in which case either Coleridge is found to vary his number of stresses from line to line or Abercrombie's system is wrong.

But Abercrombie's own faith in his system is unwavering, and the possibility of a "silent stress" between *night* and *by* is not even considered. Instead, that line, like others, next gets divided into "feet," as follows:
'Tis the | middle of | night by the | castle clock |

where the so-called foot "may be defined as the space in time from the incidence of one stress-pulse up to, but not including, the next stress-pulse." Previously, Abercrombie had assumed that there were four stresses in this line, on *middle*, *night*, *castle*, and *clock*; yet now he adds one on *'Tis*, and the status of the stress on *clock* seems in doubt. It is not clear what leads Abercrombie to change his mind about the stressed syllables, or why we should accept his divisions even if we do stress *'Tis*. To suppose that there is some break just before the next stress in each case shows a craving for abstract neatness but does not prove anything about the facts of the language, with which Abercrombie is supposedly concerned. His divisions do not correspond to what readers would have to agree on are genuine breaks: one surely has the right to maintain that the "foot" which consists supposedly of *night by the* cuts most oddly across what one may choose to see as a division between *night* and *by* which Abercrombie disregards.

Nor are his feet in actuality based on "stress-pulses," but rather, one fears, on the desire to find a certain number of feet per line. Thus the first line of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy is read as follows:

To | be or | not to be | ^ | that is the | question |

where the caret indicates a "silent stress." While one may concur that there is a pause, anyway, between the two main phrases of which the line is composed, one has every reason to quarrel with the assumption that *To* is the first foot. Why should we have to believe that
there is a stress-pulse here? The real answer is not that there is one, but that Abercrombie is determined to find the six feet of which lines "commonly supposed" to contain five are really made up (p. 23).

II

A salient characteristic of Abercrombie's approach is that he wrenches quite different kinds of writing into one and the same mould. To him, the rhythmic basis of verse is "the same as that of prose" (p. 18), and, as we have seen, he does not believe that there is any fundamental rhythmic difference between verse passages from "Christabel" and Hamlet. This tendency to treat all kinds of writing (or speech) as though rhythmically they are identical is one which Abercrombie ultimately appears to derive from Joshua Steele's An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech (1775). In Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics, Abercrombie devotes a laudatory chapter to Steele, but the extent of his likely debt to his eighteenth-century predecessor can only be understood by turning to Steele himself, although Abercrombie's account of Steele (found on pages 33-44) is illuminating. Indeed, Abercrombie's whole way of thinking, and that of many other modern scholars, becomes a good deal more intelligible by analyzing Steele's work, no matter whether Steele's influence is direct or not. For that matter, Steele's seems to represent a mode of thinking which is likely to occur at any time rather than that we need to blame him, specifically, for shaping Abercrombie's or anyone else's outlook. As Abercrombie says, Steele's views "are very far from being outmoded" (p. 38).

What, then, is Steele's approach? First of all, we must realize that he was responding to James Burnet's Of the Origin and Progress of Language (1774), who had said that "the music of our language . . . is nothing better than the music of a drum, in which we perceive no difference except that of louder or softer."
The great value of Steele's work. I believe, is that he argues persuasively that what he and Burnet call the "music" of English consists of many things besides the difference of louder or softer to which Burnet refers. Steele sees speech as consisting of "melody" and "measure." "Melody" was of great concern to Steele himself in his attempt to refute Burnet. In particular, he claimed that the melody of speech (which we would normally call intonation) moves rapidly up or down by slides, wherein no graduated distinction of tones or semitones can be measured by the ear, although this is not to say that the slides are not distinct or measurable at all: in pronouncing the interjection *Oh!* Steele judged his voice to make "a flight, up and down, through nineteen quarter tones" (p. 8). This aspect of "melody" is of some interest to us in showing how inclined Steele was to think in unwarranted musical and systematic terms, and, more persuasively, that he could distinguish between a movement "up and down" and the music of a drum. Steele saw "melody" as something different from "measure," however, and it is "measure" which is of greater importance to our analysis.

Since Burnet had thought of the music of a drum as consisting of louder or softer, we might expect Steele to regard that distinction as part of "measure." However, the loud/soft difference is, in Steele's system, another aspect of "melody." To him, "force of loudness" is something very different from "emphasis" or "cadence." Whether or not we pronounce a sound as loud or soft is optional, whereas the distinction between emphatic or non-emphatic is intrinsic in the language, the two being "periodically alternate" (p. 12).

"Measure" (or "rhythmus") is "of motion and rest" distinguished by (i) quantity (long and short) and (ii) cadence (heavy and light), as Steele succinctly explains in an overview of his system (p. 24).

Steele was convinced—as a matter of belief rather than proof—that speech, like music, was naturally sub-divided into "bars" (also confusingly called "cadences") of equal duration. This belief derives from the notion that there must be a close connection between

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the supposed movement of speech and that of our pulse, or our feet in walking. On the analogy of
the distinction between "the walk of a sound or perfect man" and "the halting of a lame man" (p.
21), Steele claims that speech is either in common or triple time, or a combination of the two.

It is here, in the claim that speech consists of bars-in-time derived from natural motion and
similar to those in music, that Steele's thinking about "measure" becomes bizarre and fanciful.
Several of his distinctions, as such, are no doubt right and valuable, like that between "quality" and
"cadence" (although we may have some difficulty distinguishing between heavy/light on the one
hand and loud/soft on the other). As in the case of melody, it is Steele's systematization which
fails to convince—notably the unproven assumption that "quantity" and "cadence" are somehow
neatly brought together within the confines of the "bar."

As for quantity, Steele is thus led to argue as follows: "the sub-division of bars or cadences
may be, at the pleasure of the composer, in any fractional parts, the sum of which will make up the
whole quantity of the bar or cadence, provided that the denominators of the said fractional parts are
always, either sub-duples or sub-triples, or the whole number of the bar or cadence. And also all
measured rests or pauses are as significant in computation of time and in value of place, respecting
cadence or the heavy and light, as express notes of sound" (pp. 24-25).

The counting of pauses, in particular, guided as it is by the wish to find bars of equal
duration, is conspicuous to anyone who comes to Steele from Abercrombie. The result of this
procedure is that verse-lines of ten syllables must, in Steele's system as in Abercrombie's, consist
of more than the conventional five feet: "whoever would pronounce our heroic lines of ten
syllables with propriety, must allow at least six cadences, by the assistance of proper rests, to each
line, and frequently eight" (p. 26).
However, the make-up of an individual bar (or "foot" in Abercrombie's language) is not purely a matter of the duration of "fractional parts," including pauses, but also one of the placing of the emphases. Here, again, it becomes obvious how Abercrombie echoes Steele, who argues:

The *thesis* or *heavy* note or syllable, on which the hand or foot beats time, is always the first in the bar; and if in that place, instead of an express note of sound, there should be marked a rest, then the thesis or heavy part of the cadence falls on that rest: the last note in a bar (or in that extent which we allow to a cadence) is always *light*.

(p. 27)

The principle remains the same no matter whether we look at a reading of "To be or not to be" by Abercrombie or one by the actor David Garrick as recorded by Steele. Abercrombie's version was:

\[
\text{To | be or | not to be | } \wedge | \text{that is the | question |} \\
\]

while (in a similar notation derived from Steele's system) the Garrick-Steele reading is

\[
\text{To | be | or | not to be | } \wedge | \text{that is the | question |} \\
\]

(p.47)

We may think that the differences are striking, but to Steele and Abercrombie the similarities are more important. In order to be quite clear about their way of thinking, it is
useful to summarize the main points that are relevant at this juncture:

1. The different number of "feet" (or "bars") in these two readings of Hamlet's line is, in the Steele-Abercrombie view of things, immaterial. Both versions (Abercrombie's and Steele's) are in principle legitimate; nevertheless, whichever way one reads the line (or any verse or prose in English), one will automatically reveal that English consists of feet of equal duration.

2. A foot may consist of a pause, which is of the same duration as all other feet. The pause has "silent stress" (Abercrombie), since, as Steele explains, "The expressions or rather the affections of heavy and light are necessarily the governing principle of rhythmus; for they are as constantly alternate and periodical as the pulse itself, and they must be continued, by conception in the mind, during all measured rests or pauses ..." (p. 68).

3. Each foot thus contains stress, and indeed starts with stress. In Steele's interpretation of Garrick's pronunciation (p. 47) a silent stress precedes To, which itself has "light" stress; in principle, however, the structure of this foot is identical to that of question. Both of these feet are in "common time"; a foot like not to be is in "triple time," starting with stressed not, followed by "lightest" to and "light" be. Feet in "common time" may be intermixed with those in "triple time," and all are equally long.

It will be seen that Abercrombie's system, though less elaborate than Steele's, is most probably derived from it, and is likely to be understood better by someone familiar with
Steele's work than one ignorant of it. For our purposes in this paper, the most central concept shared by Steele and Abercrombie is that of "feet" of equal duration into which, it is claimed, English naturally and inescapably divides itself. This particular concept of "feet" is surprisingly similar to that of George Saintsbury in his *A History of English Prosody*, and just as unfounded. A case for isochronism is in no sense proven, and I hope to have shown that it is easily refuted. The notion that we shall find the imputed "feet" (or Steele's "bars") by identifying the stresses runs into problems unless we can all agree (as of course we cannot) where those stresses are, including the silent one which Steele thinks precedes *To*. A literary reader may find it simpler to believe that, even in ordinary speech rhythm, the feet readily group themselves into what classical prosodists call iambs in *To be/or not/ to be; that is* then constitutes a trochee (to be thought of as a substitute for an iamb), with *the question* forming an iamb followed by an "extra" eleventh syllable. This interpretation does justice to the facts of the language as normally spoken, and seems to me to have the advantage of suggesting that Shakespeare is, as has most commonly been believed, thinking in terms of iambic pentameters.

Presumably what Garrick actually said (if I understand Steele correctly) could be indicated as follows, in an attempt to suggest his stresses and pauses without thinking of "feet" of any sort:

/ / / / / / /

To be/ or/ not to be// that is the/ question/

(Steele does not mark a stress on *or.*) There is no need, and no justification, for attempts to
systematize this reading by introducing a division between To and be (where Steele does not record a pause), by inventing a silent stress before To, etc.

Indeed, one of the major dangers of Steele's approach is that it is likely to distort the intentions of individual poets. Neither he nor Abercrombie takes into account any evidence other than that provided by passages examined in isolation, as though the existence of a tradition of e.g. iambic pentameter verse is a mere figment of the imagination of wayward minds. Yet the very evidence of texts produced by poets as literature should have led Steele to conclude otherwise. He is, admittedly, aware of peculiarities of early spelling (for example -ed vs. -'d in participle endings) that might militate against his case. But, pressing his own notions of what poets should do against such oddities, he asserts that if the rhythmical and metrical rules set forth in his treatise "are attended to, there will be little or no occasion for clipping off syllables in any good poetry, which our best authors have hitherto practised, though, as I think, needlessly" (p. 75). Strikingly, what the poets actually present is of less interest to him than what they ought to offer according to his theory. He goes on to wonder why in a pentameter line containing clear indications of elision like "To all inferior animals 'tis giv'n" (so printed, p. 75) the typographical facts should not be altered so as to produce "To all inferior animals it is given," quite ignoring that the three offending forms which he wants to expand are obviously part of a line meant to have no more than ten syllables.

Thus theoretical enthusiasm totally obscures very real practical differences, and all kinds of verse—or prose—are reduced to something which will meet the demands of a system. Ultimately, the flaw of that system appears to lie in the rash assumption that poetry resembles music in having "bars" of equal length. It is not hard to see that, as it turns out, Abercrombie's notion that English is isochronous is ultimately very akin to Steele's theory about the "music" of English, in which isochronism is an essential component without which...
the whole fantastic structure would collapse. This is not to say that everyone who conceives of
isochronism somehow does so under the influence of musical awareness. While it is very
common for poetry and music to get confused, someone may well imagine that language is
isochronous without thinking of music at all. But in any case the tendency to see English as
isochronous, or as musical in Steele's sense, is on quite unsure ground, and must be
considered indicative of the wish to find a system rather than as proving the existence of one.
Perhaps even more striking is the fact that system-building of the phonetician Abercrombie
appears to have so much in common with that of the musician Steele as well as that of the
man-of-letters Saintsbury, suggesting that in all three instances we encounter a particular habit of
mind rather than a special expertise which either supports or refutes the speculative theories put
forward. This does not mean that we do not need expertise; but in the study of prosody we should
probably learn as much as we can of all aspects of the matters with which we are concerned, and
we must obviously resist the temptation to let a particular theory dominate us to the detriment of
good sense.

NOTES

1. Published in London by Oxford University Press. All subsequent references to
Abercrombie's discussion are by page numbers and incorporated in my text.

2. There is a reprint by Scolar Press (Menston, 1969), to which I refer in the course of this
eyessay, using Steele's page numbers.

3. See Linda R. Waught and C.H. van Schooneveld, eds., The Melody of Language
4. Quoted by Steele, p. 3.

5. The first edition of Saintsbury's book (in 3 vols.) dates back to 1908, and there is a revised second edition of 1923; this version also exists in a facsimile reprint by Russell & Russell (New York, 1961).

WORKS CITED


