

Where to put the pause?  
or  
the “*Elocutionary Word*”

*The most difficult thing to learn in reading is properly to distribute the time, to be deliberate, to pause frequently and naturally. The accomplished reader always takes plenty of time. Nor must this deliberation appear in anything but in the frequency and in the length of the pauses. It must never appear in any drawling or dwelling on the words; they must always come clean-cut and sharply defined. Pausing properly does more than anything other one thing to make one’s reading natural and realistic. – Alfred Ayres*

You would not say this:

How-with-this /// rage-shall /// beauty-hold-a-plea

But perhaps you would say something like this:

How /// with-this-rage /// shall-beauty /// hold a-plea?

What you have identified in the second reading is four grammatical segments which are termed “clitic phrases” in linguistics. They are also termed “elocutionary words” in prosody and the “oratorical word” by one elocutionist.

Early elocutionists such as Thomas Sheridan observed that unaccented syllables tend to “lean into” the central accented syllable in an accented word. An accented word and the unaccented words most closely connected to it cluster together to form a grammatical segment larger than the word but smaller than the grammatical phrase. These “phrases,” or elocutionary words, are separated by micro-pauses. There is an increased cohesion within the elocutionary word, so that each elocutionary word feels like a single

speaking gesture: How /// with-this-rage /// shall-beauty /// hold a-plea?

Thomas Sheridan the elocutionist (not Richard Sheridan the dramatist) calls the elocutionary word the “demi-caesura,” and explains it this way:

What I have advanced upon this species of verse, will contribute to solve a poetical problem, thrown out by Dryden as a crux to his brethren; and which, though often attempted, remains to this hour unexplained: and that is, to account for the peculiar beauty of that celebrated couplet in Sir John Denham's poem on Cooper's Hill, where he gives a description of the Thames --

Tho' deep | yet clear || tho' gentle | yet not dull

Strong | without rage || without o'erflowing | full --

in which the chief beauty of the versification lies in the happy disposition of the pauses and semi-pauses, so as to make a fine harmony in each line, when their proportions are compared, and in the couplet, when one line is compared with the other. But this solution could never occur to those who never once dreamed of the demi-caesura, and the happy effects which it may produce in verse.

Sheridan explains the role of these micro-pauses as follows:

I have already shewn that words are sufficiently distinguished from each other, by accent; but to point out their meaning when united in sentences, emphasis, and pauses, are necessary.

Accent, is the link which connects syllables together, and forms them into words: emphasis, is the link which connects words together, and forms them into sentences, or members of sentences; but, that there may be no mistake to which emphasis the words belong, *at the end of every such member* [i.e. every elocutionary word] of a sentence, *there ought to be a perceptible pause*.

Why emphasis alone will not sufficiently distinguish the members of sentences without pauses?

We are pre-acquainted with the sounds of words -- and cannot mistake them -- but we are not pre-acquainted with the meaning of sentences, which must be pointed out to us by the speaker; and as this can only be done, by evidently shewing what words appertain to each emphatic one, unless a pause be made at the end of the last word belonging to the former emphatic one, we shall not be able to know at all times, whether the intermediate words, between two emphatic ones, belong to the former, or the latter.

Whereas, by the use of accent and emphasis, words and their meaning being pointed out by certain marks, at the same time as they are uttered, the hearer has *all trouble saved, but that of listening*; and can accompany the speaker at the same pace that he goes, *with as clear a comprehension of the matter offered to his consideration, as the speaker himself has*, if he delivers himself well.

You recognize these elocutionary words by pronouncing their syllables closely together, and slightly pausing between them. It is actually more about a quick, crisp cohesion *within* the phrases, rather than stopping for long between them. When you read them this way, what you do is recognize the syntactical integrity of these word clusters. Your reading thus highlights the syntactic structure of the lines, and therefore makes it easier for your listener to process the grammar of these lines. Your listener will thus process and understand the poem very easily. The lines will seem clear. Your listener might even understand a difficult poem perhaps on the very first hearing, if your reading is sufficiently explanatory. Your listener “can accompany the speaker at the same pace that he goes, *with as clear a comprehension of the matter offered to his consideration, as the speaker himself has*, if he delivers himself well.”

The test, to know if you have chosen these pauses correctly, is when you can extend the pause *indefinitely*, and it still sounds right.

For example, consider this line from Yeats’s “Prayer for my Daughter”:

Once more // the storm // is howling //

Read the line with these pauses exaggerated beyond all reason. Take a sip of coffee between them. Go for a walk. They should still seem like natural pauses. The same does not hold true in a case such as “once // more the //

storm is howling.” The natural pauses have a solid reality to them; that would seem to be the test.

Here is my reading of the first two Yeats verses with the elocutionary words marked, along with the emphasis in italics:

Once more // the storm // is *howling* //  
And *half hid* // under this *cradle hood* // and *cover lid* //  
*My child* // *sleeps on.* // There is *no obstacle* //  
But *Gregory’s wood* // and *one bare hill* //  
Where- by // the hay- stack- // and *roof-lev- elling wind,* //  
*Bred* on the Atlantic, // can be *stayed;* //  
And for an *hour* // I have walked and prayed //  
Because of the *great gloom* // that is *in my mind.*

I have walked and prayed // for *this young child* // an *hour* //  
And *heard* // the *sea-wind* // *scream* // upon the *tower,* //  
And under the arches // of the bridge, // and *scream* //  
In the elms // above // the flooded stream; //  
Imagining // in excited reverie //  
That the future years had come, //  
Dancing to a frenzied drum, //  
*Out* // of the *murderous innocence* // of the sea.

Since *brass*, / nor *stone*, / nor *earth*, // nor *boundless sea*, /  
But sad mortality o'ersways their power, //  
*How* / with this *rage* / shall *beauty* / hold a plea, /  
Whose action is no stronger / than a flower? /  
O how shall summer's honey breath / *hold out* /  
Against the *wrackful* siege / of *batt'ring* days, /  
When rocks *impregnable* / are *not so stout*, /  
Nor gates of *steel* so strong / but *time decays*? /  
O fearful meditation: / where alack, /  
Shall *time's best jewel* / from *time's chest* / lie hid? /  
Or *what strong hand* / can *hold* / his *swift foot back*, /  
Or who / his *spoil* / of beauty / can forbid? //  
O none, // unless *this* miracle have might, /  
That *in black ink* / my *love* / may *still shine bright*.