Greek and Latin Classical Metres

Acclimatisation of Classical Metres in English

In the attempt to acclimatise the classical scansion in English, everything depends on whether they are acclimatised or not. That is to say, there must be a spontaneous, natural, seemingly native-born singing or flowing or subtly moving rhythm. The lines must glide or run or walk easily or, if you like, execute a complex dance, stately or light, but not stumble, not shamble and not walk like the Commander’s statue suddenly endowed with life but stiff and stony in its march. Now the last is just what happens to classical metres in English when they are not acclimatised, naturalised, made to seem even natively English, although new. It is like cardboard cut into measures, there is no life or movement of life. . . . It was this inability to naturalise that ruined the chances of the admission of classic metres in the attempts of earlier poets — we must avoid that mistake.

23 November 1933

The Hexameter in English

Former poets failed in the attempt at hexameter because they did not find the right basic line and measure; they forgot that stress and quantity must both be considered in English; even though in theory the stress alone makes the quantity, there is another kind of true quantity which must be given a subordinate but very necessary recognition; besides, even in stress there are kinds, true and fictitious, major and minor. In analysing the movement of an English line, one could make three independent schemes according to these three bases and the combination would give the value of the rhythm. You can ignore all this in an established metre and go safely by the force of instinct and habit; but for
making so difficult an innovation as the hexameter instinct and habit were not enough, a clear eye upon all these constituents was needed and it was not there. Longfellow, even Clough, went on the theory of accentual quantity alone and in spite of their talent as versifiers made a mess — producing something that discredited the very idea of the creation of an English hexameter. Other poets made no serious or sustained endeavour. Arnold was interesting so long as he theorised about it, but his practical specimens were disastrous. I have not time to make my point clearer for the moment; I may return to it hereafter.

23 July 1932

Hexameters, Alcaics, Sapphics

Lines from [an early version of] Ilion, an unfinished poem in English hexameter (quantitative):

Ida | rose with her | god-haunted | peaks | into | diamond | lustres, |
Ida, | first of the | hills, | with the | ranges | silent beyond her |
Watching the | dawn in their | giant | companies, | as since the | ages |
First began they had | watched her, | up | bearing | Time on |
their | summits. |

Triumph and agony changing hands in a desperate measure
Face and turned, as a man and a maiden trampling the grasses
Face and turn and they laugh for their joy in the dance and each other.
These were gods and they trampled lives. But though Time is immortal, Mortal his works are and ways and the anguish ends like the rapture. Artisans satisfied now with their works in the plan of the transience, Beautiful, wordless, august, the Olympians turned from the carnage. Vast and unmoved they rose up mighty as eagles ascending, Fanning the world with their wings. In the bliss of a sorrowless ether Calm they reposed from their deeds and their hearts were inclined to the Stillness.

Less now the burden laid on our race by their star-white presence,
There was a respite from height; the winds breathed freer, delivered.
But their immortal content from the struggle titanic departed.
Vacant the noise of the battle roared like a sea on the shingles;
Wearily hunted the spears their quarry, strength was disheartened;
Silence increased with the march of the months on the tents of the leaguer.

The principle is a line of six feet, preponderantly dactylic, but anywhere the dactyl can be replaced by a spondee; but in English hexameter a trochee can be substituted, as the spondee comes in rarely in English rhythm. The line is divided by a caesura, and the variations of the caesura are essential to the harmony of the verse.

An example of Alcaics from the *Jivanmukta* (Alcaics is a Greek metre invented by the poet Alcaeus):

There is | a si|lence | greater than | any | known |
To | earth's | dumb sp|irit, | motionless | in the | soul |
That has | become | eter|nity's foot|hold
Touched by the | in|fin|itudes for | ever. |

In the Latin it is:

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But in English, variations (modulations) are allowed, only one has to keep to the general plan.

Swinburne’s Sapphics are to be scanned thus:

All the night sleep came not upon my eyelids, |
Shed not | dew, nor shook nor un|closed a| feather, |
Yet with | lips shut | close and with | eyes of | iron |
Stood | held me. |

Two trochees at the beginning, two trochees at the end, a dactyl
separating the two trochaic parts of the line — that is the Sapphics in its first three lines, then a fourth line composed of a dactyl and a trochee. May 1934