English Metres

Octosyllabic Metre

The regular octosyllabic metre is at once the easiest to write and the most difficult to justify by a strong and original rhythmic treatment; it may be that it is only by filling it with very original thought-substance and image and the deeper tones and sound-significances which these would bring that it could be saved from its besetting obviousness. On the other hand, the melody to which it lends itself, if raised to a certain intensity, can be fraught with a rescuing charm that makes us forget the obviousness of the metre. 4 February 1932

Iambic Pentameter

An inspiration which leans more on sublimated or illumined thought than on some strong or subtle or very simple psychic or vital intensity and swiftness of feeling, seems to call naturally for the iambic pentameter, though it need not confine itself to that form. I myself have not yet found another metre which gives room enough along with an apposite movement — shorter metres are too cramped, the longer ones need a technical dexterity (if one is not to be either commonplace or clumsy) for which I have not leisure. 8 March 1932

Blank Verse

I have often seen that Indians who write in English, immediately they try blank verse, begin to follow the Victorian model and especially a sort of pseudo-Tennysonian movement or structure which makes their work in this kind weak, flat and ineffective. The language inevitably suffers by the same faults, for with a
weak verse-cadence it is impossible to find a strong or effective turn of language. But Victorian blank verse at its best is not strong or great, though it may have other qualities, and at a more common level it is languid or crude or characterless. Except for a few poems, like Tennyson's early *Morte d'Arthur, Ulysses* and one or two others or Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustam*, there is nothing of a very high order. Tennyson is a perilous model and can have a weakening and corrupting influence and the *Princess* and *Idylls of the King* which seem to have set the tone for Indo-English blank verse are perhaps the worst choice possible for such a role. There is plenty of clever craftsmanship but it is mostly false and artificial and without true strength or inspired movement or poetic force — the right kind of blank verse for a Victorian drawing-room poetry, that is all that can be said for it. As for language and substance his influence tends to bring a thin artificial decorative prettiness or picturesqueness varied by an elaborate false simplicity and an attempt at a kind of brilliant, sometimes lusciously brilliant sentimental or sententious commonplace. The higher quality in his best work is not easily assimilable; the worst is catching but undesirable as a model.

Blank verse is the most difficult of all English metres; it has to be very skilfully and strongly done to make up for the absence of rhyme, and if not very well done, it is better not done at all. In the ancient languages rhyme was not needed, for they were written in quantitative metres which gave them the necessary support, but modern languages in their metrical forms need the help of rhyme. It is only a very masterly hand that can make blank verse an equally or even a more effective poetic movement. You have to vary your metre by a skilful play of pauses or by an always changing distribution of caesura and of stresses and supple combinations of long and short vowels and by much weaving of vowel or consonant variation and assonance; or else, if you use a more regular form you have to give a great power and relief to the verse as did Marlowe at his best. If you do none of these things, if you write with effaced stresses, without relief and force or, if you do not succeed in producing harmonious variations in your rhythm, your blank
verse becomes a monotonous vapid wash and no amount of mere thought-colour or image-colour can save it.

28 April 1931

Blank Verse Technique

I don’t know any factors by which blank verse can be built up. When good blank verse comes one can analyse it and assign certain elements of technique, but these come in the course of the formation of the verse. Each poet finds his own technique — that of Shakespeare differs from Marlowe’s, both from Milton’s and all from Keats’. In English I can say that variations of rhythm, of lengths of syllable, of caesura, of the structure of lines help and neglect of them hinders — so too with pause variations if used; but to explain all that would mean a treatise. Nor could anyone make himself a great blank verse writer by following the instructions deliberately and constructing his verse. Only if he knows, the inspiration answers better and if there is failure in the inspiration he can see and call again and the thing will come. But I am no expert in Bengali blank verse.

30 April 1937

Building of each line, building of the passage, variation of balance, the arrangement of tone and stress and many other things have to be mastered before you can be a possessor of the instrument — unless you are born with a blank verse genius; but that is rare.

7 July 1933

It is in order to make it more flexible — to avoid the “drumming decasyllabon” and to introduce other relief of variety than can be provided by differing caesura, enjambement etc. There are four possible principles for the blank verse pentameter.

(1) An entirely regular verse with sparing use of enjambments — here an immense skill is needed in the variation of

1 The question was: “Why is so much irregularity in the rhythm of consecutive lines permissible in blank verse?” — Ed.
caesura, use of long and short vowels, closed and open sounds, all the devices of rhythm. Each line must be either sculptured and powerful, a mighty line — as Marlowe tried to write it — or a melodious thing of beauty by itself as in much of Shakespeare's earlier blank verse.

(2) A regular iambic verse (of course with occasional trochees and rare anapaests) and frequent play of enjambement etc.

(3) A regular basis with a frequent intervention of irregular movements to give the necessary variety and surprise to the ear.

(4) A free irregular blank verse as in some of Shakespeare's later dramas (*Cymbeline* if I remember right).

The last two principles, I believe, are coming more and more to be used as the possibilities of the older forms have come to be exhausted — or seem to be — for it is not sure that they are.

24 January 1933

In English variation of pauses is not indispensable to blank verse. There is much blank verse of the first quality in which it is eschewed or minimised, much also of the first quality in which it is freely used. Shakespeare has both kinds. 30 April 1937

The Alexandrine

I suppose the Alexandrine has been condemned because no one has ever been able to make effective use of it as a staple metre. The difficulty, I suppose, is its normal tendency to fall into two monotonously equal halves while the possible variations on that monotony seem to stumble often into awkward inequalities. The Alexandrine is an admirable instrument in French verse because of the more plastic character of the movement, not bound to its stresses, but only to an equality of metric syllables capable of a sufficient variety in the rhythm. In English it does not work so well; a single Alexandrine or an occasional Alexandrine couplet can have a great dignity and amplitude of sweep in English, but a succession fails or has most often failed to impose itself on the
ear. All this, however, may be simply because the secret of the right handling has not been found: it is at least my impression that a very good rhythmist with the Alexandrine movement secretly born somewhere in him and waiting to be brought out could succeed in rehabilitating the metre.  5 February 1932

The Loose Alexandrine

I do not understand how this\(^2\) can be called an accentual rhythm except in the sense that all English rhythm, prose or verse, is accentual. What one usually means by accentual verse is verse with a fixed number of accents for each line, but here accents can be of any number and placed anywhere as it would be in a prose cut up into lines. The only distinctive feature is thus of the number of “effective” syllables. The result is a kind of free verse movement with a certain irregular regularity in the lengths of the lines.  1936

The Caesura

Voltaire’s dictum is quite baffling,\(^3\) unless he means by caesura any pause or break in the line; then of course a comma does create such a break or pause. But ordinarily caesura is a technical term meaning a rhythmical (not necessarily a metrical) division of a line in two parts equal or unequal, in the middle or near the middle, that is, just a little before or just a little after. I think in my account of my Alexandrines I myself used the word caesura

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2 "The novelty (in English) [of Robert Bridges’s “loose alexandrine”] is to make the number of syllables the fact base of the metre; but these are the effective syllables, those which pronunciation easily slurs or combines with following syllables being treated as metrically ineffective. The line consists of twelve metrically effective syllables; and within this constant scheme the metre allows of any variation in the number and placing of the accents. Thus the rhythm obtained is purely accentual, in accordance with the genius of the English language; but a new freedom has been achieved within the confines of a new kind of discipline.” — Lascelles Abercrombie, Poetry: Its Music and Meaning (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 35.

3 The “dictum” of Voltaire that the correspondent sent to Sri Aurobindo was the following: “la césure... rompt le vers... partout où elle coupe la phrase.”
in the sense of a pause anywhere which breaks the line in two equal or unequal parts, but usually such a break very near the beginning or end of a line would not be counted as an orthodox caesura. In French there are two metres which insist on a caesura — the Alexandrine and the pentameter. The Alexandrine always takes the caesura in the middle of the line, that is after the sixth sonant syllable, the pentameter always after the fourth, there is no need for any comma there, e.g.

Ce que dit l’aube || et la flamme à la flamme.

This is the position and all the Voltaires in the world cannot make it otherwise. I don’t know about the modernists however, perhaps they have broken this rule like every other.

As for caesura in English I don’t know much about it in theory, only in the practice of the pentameter decasyllabic and hexameter verses. In the blank verse decasyllabic I would count it as a rule for variability of rhythm to make the caesura at the fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh syllable, e.g. from Milton:

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(1) for who would lose
    Though full of pain, | this intellectual being, (4th)
    Those thoughts that wander through eternity,
    To perish rather, | swallowed up and lost? (5th)

(2) Here we may reign secure, | and in my choice (6th)
    To reign is worth ambition | though in hell: (7th)
    Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.
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Or from Shakespeare:

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(1) Sees Helen’s beauty | in a brow of Egypt (5th)
(2) To be or not to be, | that is the question (6th)
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But I don’t know whether your prosodist would agree to all that. As for the hexameter, the Latin classical rule is to make the caesura either at the middle of the third or the middle of the fourth foot, e.g. (you need not bother about the Latin words but follow the scansion only):
(1) Quadrupe\(p\)du|trem || cur|su quatit | ungula | campum.
   \(\text{(Virgil)}\)
   Horse-hooves | trampled the | crumbling | plain | with
   a | four-footed | gallop.

(2) O pass|i gravi|ora, || dab|it deus | his quoque | finem. \(\text{(Virgil)}\)
   Fiercer | griefs you have | suffered; || to | these too | God will
give | ending.

(3) Nec fa|cundia | deseret | hunc || nec | lucidus | ordo
   \(\text{(Horace)}\)
   Him shall not | copious | eloquence | leave || nor | clearness
   and | order.

In the first example, the caesura comes at the third foot; in the
second example, it comes at the third foot but note that it is a
trochaic caesura; in the third example the caesura comes at
the fourth foot. In the English hexameter you can follow that or
you may take greater liberties. I have myself cut the hexameter
sometimes at the end of the third foot and not in the middle, e.g.

(1) Opaline | rhythm of | towers, || notes of the | lyre of the | Sun
   God . . .

(2) Even the | ramparts | felt her, || stones that the | Gods had
   erected . . .

and there are other combinations possible which can give a great
variety to the run of the line as if standing balanced between one
place of caesura and another.

Some Questions of Scansion

Words like “tire”, “fire” etc. can be scanned as a dissyllable
in verse as well as a monosyllable, though it is something of a
licence nowadays, but a still well-recognised licence. Of course,
it would not do to do it always.

19 November 1930

You have taken an anapaestic metre varied by an occasional
Iambus or spondee. But you have inserted sometimes four syllables in a foot instead of three — this is not allowed in normal anapaestic verse which is always $\sim\sim\underline{\sim}$ and never $\sim\sim\sim\sim\sim\sim$. But I have accepted this and put occasionally an amphibrach foot $\sim\sim\sim\sim\sim$ instead of $\sim\sim\sim\sim$ as Arjava and myself are trying to vary the normal metre in this way.

In ordinary English scanion no account is taken of naturally short and long syllables. All unaccented syllables are treated as short, all accented syllables as long, thus bright-nighted day | [in a poem by the correspondent] would count metrically as bright-nighted day | in the scansion, but the variation of natural long and natural short syllables is a very important element in the beauty or failure of beauty of the rhythm as opposed to mere scansion of metre. So I have indicated the naturally long and short syllables — if you study it, you may get an idea of this important element in the rhythm. 18 October 1933

I certainly think feet longer than the three syllable maximum can be brought in and ought to be. I do not see for instance why a foot like this $\sim\sim\sim\sim\sim\sim$ should not be as legitimate as the anapaest. Only, of course, if frequently used, they would mean the institution of another principle of harmony not provided for by the essentially melodic basis of English prosody in the past; as

\[ \text{Interspersed} | \text{in the immense} | \text{and unavail} | \text{ing void,} | \text{winging} \]

\[ \text{their light through the darkness in ane.} \]

Or,

\[ \text{Interspersed} | \text{in the immense} | \text{and unavail} | \text{ing void,} | \text{scattering} \]

\[ \text{their light through the darkness in ane.} \]

I agree that this freedom would be more pressingly needed in longer metres than in short ones, but they need not be excluded from the short ones either.
Iambics and Anapaests — Free Verse

Iambics and anapaests can be combined in English verse at any time, provided one does not set out to write a purely iambic or a purely anapaestic metre. Mixed anapaest and iamb make a most beautifully flexible lyric rhythm. It has no more connection with free verse than the constellation of the Great Bear has to do with a cat’s tail! “Free” verse indicates verse free from the shackles of rhyme and metre, but rhythmic (or trying to be rhythmic) in one way or another. If you put rhymes, that will be considered a shackle and the “free” will kick at the chain.

10 December 1935

The Problem of Free Verse

The problem of free verse is to keep the rhythm and afflatus of poetry while asserting one’s liberty as in prose to vary the rhythm and movement at will instead of being tied down to metre and to a single unchangeable form throughout the whole length of a poem. But most writers in this kind achieve prose cut up into lines or something that is half and half and therefore unsatisfying. I think few have escaped this kind of shipwreck.

18 September 1936

Prose Poetry and Free Verse

Prose poetry or free verse, if it is to be effective, must be very clear-cut in each line so that the weight of the thought and expression may compensate for the absence of the supporting metrical rhythm. From that standpoint the weakness here [in two poems submitted by the correspondent] would be too much profusion of word and image, preventing a clear strong outline of the significance.

5 November 1936