Metrical Experiments

The Genesis of *In Horis Aeternum*

Is there some way of keeping the loose swinging gait of ana-
paests within bounds? If one has used them freely in one or
more lines, does it sound too abrupt to close with a strict
iambic line — as in the final Alexandrine of:

The wind hush comes, the varied colours westward stream:
Were they joy-tinted coral, or song-light seen-heard in a
shell fitfully,

Drifted ashore by the hours as a waif from the day-wide sea
Of Loveliness that smites awake our sorrow-dream?

It is perhaps a pity that the rhythm of the first three lines
runs in such well-worn familiar channels. Is this intensified by
the sing-song of the second line, which slipped into the Satur-
nian metre lengthened out by anapaests? The third line might
possibly be taken as four dactyls followed by the spondee
“day-wide” and the monosyllabic foot “sea”. What do you
think? And would the four dactyls make the earlier part of a
passable hexameter, or would at least one spondee be needed
to break up the monotony and too-obvious lilt?

These are things decided by the habit or training of the ear.
The intervention of a dactylic (or, if you like, anapaestic) line
followed by an Alexandrine would to the ear of a former gener-
ation have sounded abrupt and inadmissible. But, I suppose, it
would not to an ear accustomed to the greater liberty — or even
licence — of latter-day movements.

I do not find that the rhythm of the first three lines is well-
worn, though that of the first and third are familiar in type. The
second seems to me not only not familiar, but unusual and very
effective.

The canter of anapaests can, I suppose, be only relieved
by variation or alternation with another metre, as you have
done here — or by a very powerful music which would turn the
canter into a torrent rush or an oceanic sweep or surge. But the
proper medium for the latter up till now has been a large dactylic
movement like the Greek or Latin hexameter; Swinburne has
tried to get it into the anapaest, but with only occasional success
because of his excessive facility and looseness, which makes the
sound empty owing to want of spiritual substance. But this third
line seems to be naturally dactylic and not anapaestic. Can one
speak of catalectic and acatalectic hexameters? If so, this is a
very beautiful catalectic hexameter.

I may say that the four lines seem to be in their variation very
remarkably appropriate and effective, each exactly expressing
by the rhythm the spirit and movement of the thing inwardly
seen. I am speaking of each line by itself; the only objection that
could be made is to the coming together of so many variations
in so brief a whole (if it had been longer, I imagine it would not
have mattered) as disturbing to the habit of the ear; but I am
inclined to think that this objection would rest less on a reality
than a prejudice. The habit of the ear is not fundamental, it can
change. What is fundamental in the inner hearing is not, I think,
disturbed by the swiftness of the change from the controlled flow
of the first line to the wave dance and shimmer of the second,
the rapid drift of the third and then the deliberate subtlety of the
last line.

Is there in recent poetry an unconscious push towards a
new metrical basis altogether for English poetry — shown by
the outbreak of free verse, which fails because it is most often
not verse at all — and the seeking sometimes for irregularity,
sometimes for greater plasticity of verse-movement? Originally,
Anglo-Saxon verse depended, if I remember right, on allitera-
tion and rhythm, not on measured feet; Greece and Rome
through France and Italy imposed the foot measure on English;
perhaps the hidden seeking for freedom, for elbow-room, for
the possibility of a varied rhythmic expression necessitated by
the complexity of the inner consciousness might find some vent
in a measure which would depend not on feet but on lengths
and stresses. I have sometimes thought that and it recurred to me while looking at your second line, for on that principle it might be read

Were they joy-tinted coral, or song-light seen-heard in a shell fitfully.

One could imagine a measure made of lines in a given number of lengths like that and each length allowed a given number of stresses; there would be many combinations and variations possible. For example (not of good poetry, but of the form),

A far sail on the unchangeable monotone of a slow slumbering sea,
A world of power hushed into symbols of hue, silent unendingly;
Over its head like a gold ball the sun tossed by the gods in their play
Follows its curve, — a blazing eye of Time watching the motionless day.

Perhaps it is only a curious imagination, too difficult and complex to realise, but it came on me strongly, so I put it down on paper.

I have written two more stanzas of the stress-scansion poem so as to complete it and send them to you. In this scansion as I conceive it, the lines may be analysed into feet, as you say all good rhythm can, but in that case the foot measures must be regarded as a quite subsidiary element without any fixed regularity — just as the (true) quantitative element is treated in ordinary verse. The whole indispensable structure of the lines depends upon stress and they must be read on a different principle from the current view — full value must be given to the true stresses and no fictitious stresses, no weight laid on naturally unstressed syllables must be allowed — that is the most important point. Thus:

A far sail on the unchangeable monotone of a slow slumbering sea,
A world of power hushed into symbols of hue, silent unendingly;
Over its head like a gold ball the sun tossed by the gods in their play
Follows its curve, — a blazing eye of Time watching the motionless day.
Here or otherwhere,—poised on the unreachable abrupt
snow-solitary ascent
Earth aspiring lifts to the illimitable Light, then ceases broken and
spent,
Or in the glowing expanse, arid, fiery and austere, of the desert's
hungry soul,—
A breath, a cry, a glimmer from Eternity's face, in a fragment the
mystic Whole.

Moment-mere, yet with all eternity packed, lone, fixed, intense,
Out of the ring of these hours that dance and die, caught by the spirit
in sense,
In the greatness of a man, in music's outspread wings, in a touch, in a
smile, in a sound,
Something that waits, something that wanders and settles not, a once
Nothing that was all and is found.

It is an experiment and I shall have to do more before I can be
sure that I have caught the whole spirit or sense of this move-
ment; nor do I mean to say that stress-scansion cannot be built
on any other principle,—say, on one with more concessions to
the old music or with less, breaking more away in the direction
of free verse; but the essential, I think, is there.

P.S. It is with some hesitation that I write “a once Nothing”,
because I am far from sure that the “once” does not overweight
the rhythm and make the expression too difficult and compact;
but on the other hand without it the sense appears ambiguous
and incomplete,—for “a Nothing that was all” might be taken
in a too metaphysical light and my object is not to thrust in a
metaphysical subtlety but to express the burden of an experience.
In the final form I shall probably risk the ambiguity and reject
the intruding “once”. 19 April 1932

The Genesis of Winged with dangerous deity

Your model is exceedingly difficult for the English language —
for this reason that except in lines closing with triple rhymes the
language draws back from a regular dactylic ending — more still from a dactylic last foot to a stanza. It can be done perhaps in a rhymeless lyrical movement such as Arnold was fond of, taking his inspiration from the Greek choruses — a first unconscious step towards the licence of free verse. I have at any rate made the following attempt.

Winged with dangerous deity,
Passion swift and implacable
Arose and, storm-footed
In the dim heart of him,

Ran, insatiate, conquering,
Worlds devouring and hearts of men,
Then perished, broken by
The irresistible

Occult masters of destiny, —
They who sit in the secrecy
And watch unmoved ever
Unto the end of all.

But there are several snags here. Especially the tribrach is difficult to keep up: the average reader will turn it into a dactyl or amphibrach. I started a rhymed endeavour also, but had no time to pursue it; it is not easy either.

20 June 1934

The Genesis of Moon of Two Hemispheres

After two days of wrestling I have to admit that I am beaten by your last metre. I have written something, but it is a fake. I will first produce the fake.

A gold moon raft floats and swings slowly
And it casts a fire of pale holy blue light
On the drag on tail aglow of the faint night |
That glimmers far, swimming,
The illuminated shoals of stars skimming,
Overspread ing earth and drowning the heart in sight
With the ocean-depths and breadths of the Infinite.

That is the official scansion and except in the last foot of the two last lines it professes to follow very closely the metre of Nishikanta’s poem. But in fact it is full of sins and the appearance is a counterfeit. In the first line the first foot is really a bacchius:

A gold moon raft floats

and quantitatively though not accentually the second is a spondee which also disturbs the true rhythmic movement. “Slowly” and “holy” are in truth trochees disguised as pyrrhics, and if “slowly” can pass off the deceit a little, “holy” is quite unholy in the brazenness of its pretences. If I could have got a compound adjective like “god-holy”, it would have been all right and saved the situation, but I could find none that was appropriate. The next three lines are, I think, on the true model and have an honest metre. But the closing cretic of the last two is nothing but a cowardly flight from the difficulty of the spondee. I console myself by remembering that even Hector ran when he found himself in difficulties with Achilles and that the Bhagavat lays down चतुष्य्य as one of the ordinary occupations of the Avatar. But the evasion is a fact and I am afraid it spoils the correspondence of the metres. I have some idea of adding a second stanza, — this one will look less guilty perhaps if it has a companion in sin — but if you use this at all, you need not wait for the other, as it may never take birth at all. 2 July 1934

The Genesis of O pall of black Night

At first sight your metre seemed to me impossible in English, especially because of the four short syllables at the end of two lines and the five short syllables in two others. English rhythm hardly allows of that — quantitatively it can be managed, but
five unaccented unstressed syllables altogether even if it can be done once in a way causes an extreme difficulty when it is made a regular feature of the metre. But it seems that there is hardly anything impossible in the realm of metre and I succeeded after all subject to one change, the substitution of a long for a short syllable at the end of the fourth and fifth lines. I suppose I could have avoided even this concession if I had fallen back on the device of unrhymed verse, but I wanted to use rhyme. However after finishing I found my stanza right enough as metre, but poor in rhythmic opulence, something bald and lame. So I had to make yet another concession; I took the option, used in all but one line, to prefix a metrically superfluous syllable to each or any line. I give you the finished stanza below; if you want to get it such as I originally wrote it, you have only to strike off the first syllable or word in each line except the fifth; but it is better rhythm and better poetry as it is.

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O˘
| pa˘l o˘ll o˘fb l a c
Ni˘ght pa˘n|t ed w ith | thy˘ g old st a rs, |
H ág, | h án g th ý f o lds | c l o s|e r u p|o n e a r t h ' s b á r s, |
Ó d í m N í g h t ! |
Then | s l é ep s h á ll c o m e | p a r t í n g t h é | u n s e e n |
G á t e s á n d, f ár|g u á r d é d b ý | a s c r é é n |
Ó f s t r á n g e L á g h t, |
F r é e, | s á f e, m y s ó u l | c h á r í|o t é d í n | a s w í f t d r é a m |
F r ó m | e a r t h é s c á p e | s l í p p í n g | i n t o t h é | u n k n ó w n G l é a m,
Th é R á y w h í t e. |
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I hope you will find this satisfactory in spite of the two departures from your model.

P.S. In Horace’s line upon the eloquence and clear order, I have found that I dropped a word and truncated the hexameter. I have restored the full line.
The Genesis of *Thought the Paraclete* and *Rose of God*

I am sending you copies of two poems. One, *Thought the Paraclete*, is a development of four lines (now 3 – 6) originally written some time ago as an English metrical correspondence for a Bengali new metre of Dilip’s. He had asked for some more lines and I thought the four I had written good enough to warrant a complete poem. Dilip’s scheme was

\[ \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline & \sim & \sim \sim \sim | \sim \sim \sim | \sim \sim \sim | \\ \hline \end{array} \]

but in English another arrangement might be preferable, either

\[ \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline & \sim & \sim \sim \sim | \sim \sim \sim | \\ \hline \end{array} \]

or

\[ \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline & \sim \sim \sim | \sim \sim \sim \sim | \sim \sim \sim | \\ \hline \end{array} \]

It is not an easy metre and does not seem to admit of sufficient variations for a longer poem.

The other, *Rose of God*, is a lyric, an invocation. The metrical plan is — for the first two lines of the stanza, three parts with 2 main stresses in each, the first identical throughout, the other two variable at pleasure; for the last two lines, two parts of equal length, three stresses in each part.