A Silent History of Poetic Meter:
On Robert B. Shaw's *Blank Verse: A Guide to Its History and Use* and *Solving for X*

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While one might often hear intimations of the "miraculous" hanging about the writings of romantic and post-romantic poets, one seldom hears that term invoked with specific regard to the use of iambic pentameter or of versification more generally. J.A. Symonds, the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete, marked an exception to this rule when he referred to blank verse as a "kind of divinised prose." He thus expressed the purpose iambic pentameter served in Milton, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's epic and discursive poems, where meter gives a heightened form to the verses along which the sense is "variously drawn out," elevating the philosophical to the prophetic, the oratorical to the incantatory.

Shaw's history and guide to blank verse takes Symonds' observation as a point of departure. He begins by demonstrating how the form functions differently from its rhyming cousins, and also how it differs from prose. The latter might appear the more difficult task, given that even Samuel Johnson was unsure one could *hear* verse *qua* verse without the grace notes of rhyme, but Shaw is able to do it. Discussion of versification has become so reductive in the last few decades that he goes to great pains in explaining that iambic pentameter *can* coincide perfectly with the most colloquial and casual English speech, because English's heavy, alternating accentual qualities *tend* toward iambs. And yet tendency is not actuality, and the composition of blank verse is guided by a spirit of artifice leading to an elevation of tone that, if not resisted by, as it were, a second act of artifice, reaches a heightened state or, as Symonds would say (borrowing a term from Orthodox mysticism), a divinization. Shaw notes,

> The meter is a startlingly neutral medium, as indifferent to the words it propels as the Oxus river is to the flotsam it carries downstream. Its readiness to ferry both "high" and "low" vocabulary is one principal reason for its continuing and expanding use by poets.

Shaw's second chapter offers a swift tour of blank verse's use from its origins in the sixteenth century in Norton and Sackville's play *Gorboduc* to the start of the twentieth century. It demonstrates that this "neutrality" and consequent versatility itself may strike one as a minor species of miracle.

But a third miracle pertaining to iambic pentameter bears mentioning here, all the more so because Shaw's history responds to, without actually mentioning, it. Poets from Sackville on have persisted in writing in iambic pentameter despite a longstanding failure to understand fully how it operates on a theoretical level. Meter is an abstract pattern that partially informs the rhythm of verse (in the same manner that the abstraction "green" denotes an attribute informing the appearance of a frog). Despite a failure to articulate the nature of this abstraction, poets wrote it competently over the course of centuries. As Paul Fussell illustrated in his *Theory of Prosody in Eighteenth-Century England* (1954), the heyday of a certain kind of abstract thinking, and the heyday of the practice of iambic-pentameter (in the heroic couplet rather than blank verse), did not produce a theory of prosody that could adequately account for what poets were nonetheless doing.

In other words, poets have but rarely comprehended in the abstract the versification they deployed in instance after concrete instance. In the century of Enlightenment, prosodic theorists fell short of accounting for their subject because they understood the line only in terms of syllable count and "alternating stress" rather than in terms of metrical feet (iambs, trochees, etc.). They did however understand, as had the printers of Shakespeare and Milton's day, that iambic pentameter depended for its interest and consistency upon the use of elision rather than upon the use of substituted feet. The phrase "many a" was elided and pronounced "man-ya" and the substitution of anapests or other

forms of feet was almost unheard of.

In the nineteenth century, the use of elision continued unobtrusively, so that Swinburne's "Anactoria" could contain the following line without violating iambic pentameter: "I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat." One must elide "body as" to pronounce it "bod-yas" (the form of elision called "synaloepha"). Later in the same poem, the polysyllabic luxuriating of "Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill" easily elides (through "syncopation") so that "Intolerable" contracts from four to three syllables and "infinite" from three to two. One finds such elisions forthcoming everywhere; for instance, in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Romantic poetic theorists proved even less able to explain the operation of meter than their ancestors. Despite this, metrical practice remained nearly identical to previous centuries, save for a lessening of the print denotation of elisions with apostrophes. In the Victorian period, Coventry Patmore's *Essay on English Metrical Law* sparked a resurgent interest in prosody that radically expanded the kinds of verse being written without affecting the old practice of routine elision and extremely rare substitution. Insofar as versification was a matter of quantifying types of feet, the Victorians were unprecendented in their conceptual understanding of accentual-syllabic meter. But this assiduity for numbers blinded them to a crucial dimension of verse composition.

The longstanding continuity of verse practice, particularly respecting elision, would be overlooked when George Saintsbury wrote his *History of English Prosody* (1906-1910). The actual stability—even stasis—of method would find itself transformed there as a buoyant story of continuous progress culminating in the Victorian present of a new, liberal dispensation of verse freedom. Saintsbury observed in the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other nineteenth-century poets what he took for an opening of the iambic-pentameter line to frequent foot substitutions—above all the routine insertion of the anapest, which he found particularly elegant and curiously ubiquitous. Although there is no scholarly consensus on the matter, this seems almost certainly the error of a "positivist" scholar—with a taste for irregular details and for narratives of

inevitable national progress—mistaking the absence of *printed* elision for an *actual* absence. The silent, effectively untheorized, tradition of iambic pentameter maintained through elision and subtending immense varieties of verse rhythm, Saintsbury reinterpreted and thereby distorted (in this he was not without predecessors dating back to the eighteenth century).

Following Saintsbury's lead, future theorists of poetic rhythm would insist that the evasion of monotony in formal verse could only be achieved through foot substitutions or other disruptions of the meter. The climax of this revisionist misreading of prosody and the misunderstanding of the versatility of iambic-pentameter it entailed would come, as Shaw powerfully suggests, in the critical prose of T.S. Eliot:

> He [Eliot] proposes that "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only true freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation." The implications of Eliot's trope are striking. First, the notion of a ghost portrays traditional meter as something dead. It cannot be directly engaged by the modern poet; it can only haunt his writing like an apparition or nightmare. Second, meter (or, at least, the "simple" meter Eliot has in mind) is something that is on the outer fringe of rational consciousness, something mindlessly automatic. Its presence diminishes as the mind of the poet or the reader becomes fully awake, rationally active.

This is evidently a poor account of how meter functions even in the (comparatively-loose-metered) Jacobean dramatists Eliot admired and faintly imitated in "Gerontion." It cannot explain the rhythmic menagerie of *Paradise Lost*, where the apparent foot substitutions in fact should be elided when read, nor does it account for many of the apparent substitutions in the poems of Eliot's contemporary, Yeats. Writing after Saintsbury (and the ferment that helped Saintsbury reach his errant conclusion), Yeats sometimes *does* substitute anapests for iambs, but one can readily detect the difference between that practice and the more typical eliding of feet. His blank verse

"The Two Kings" and "The Second Coming" illustrate this difference by doing both.

The supposed revolution of modernist free verse was necessarily preceded by an earlier rupture—the loss of the ability to hear elision where it was intended. When Wordsworth's blank verse did not visibly seem to conform to the metronome (da-DUM, da-DUM), modern readers assumed he must be substituting (da-da-DUM) rather than eliding. Once meter appears so inconstant that it can no longer be discerned informing the rhythm of a poem, it really does become a ghost of its former self. Modern formal poets by and large thrill to the haunting; free verse poets understandably can no longer hear or see why one would bother—an incomprehension Shaw laments vicariously in discussing the great poet of epigrams, and conscientious formalist, J.V. Cunningham.

Lamentable or not, Saintsbury and Eliot's similar theory of metrical substitutions as saving verse from monotony won the ear of an age. As Shaw's two chapters on blank verse in the last century thoroughly demonstrate, many of its practitioners have peppered their lines with substitutions and variations in a manner previous eras would have found clumsy. And they have done so largely because of a failure to grasp the versatility of elision, where ostensibly "surplus" unstressed syllables are swallowed, slurred, or otherwise minimized so as to keep the rhythm of a verse closely bound to (but seldom identical to) its meter. Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, instructively, were some of late modernism's strongest advocates for formal verse. However, their criticism shows a poor understanding of elision. Consequently, they all follow Eliot in conceiving meter as a pattern to be approached and withdrawn from as if in mortal combat or romantic flirtation. Winters, the most attentive of them, presumed that the substitutions he *thought* he found in earlier poetry must possess some kind of interpretable thematic meaning; in his own poems, intriguingly, he seldom substituted and never elided, giving his lines their ferrous, turgid austerity. Many more recent formal poets have effectively followed Eliot, while many naïve free verse poets voice platitudes of "substitution" and "variety" without under-

standing—or practicing—what they preach.

As it happens, Timothy Steele's *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing* (1999) was the first popular guide to prosody that took on board the centrality of elision to iambic-pentameter. By grace of elision, modulation of rhythm, and variations (the use of enjambment, caesurae, headless and broken-backed lines, feminine endings, etc.), Steele contends, metrical substitutions are all but unnecessary to produce verse of almost infinite variety. Shaw is aware of this argument (Steele was a close advisor on *Blank Verse*), and seconds it early in his study. However, he does so in language that, given the post-Saintsbury understanding of formal verse, may be open to misunderstanding: "Rather than adhering in lockstep fashion to the paradigm, well-written lines of iambic pentameter will correspond to it in more relative ways . . . with ever-shifting modulation." One must understand—as Eliot did not—that modulation does not mean substitutions, but rather the management of sentence rhythm as it is drawn out upon the abstract stress pattern of meter.

Shaw's eminently readable volume is a fine guide to how blank verse has been written, and especially for how it may be taken up by aspirant poets. Its efforts to serve as comprehensive survey and instructive commentary at once could hardly be more successful, with the last chapter providing an essential account of the versatility of the form that every apprentice writer should study. The general reader will learn much from these pages, as well: especially those in need of being "resensitized" to the substitution-happy versification of late modernist poets, such as John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz. Shaw is critical of this substitution "trend," but not unaffected by it in his historical analysis. Although his critical approach is clearly informed by Steele's theories of elision, in his scansions of pre-twentieth century poems, Shaw often dangles ambivalently between Steele and Saintsbury. By finding substitutions where there may be none, he is able to dramatize more radically the shifts and variations in blank verse's use over the centuries. This consists, unfortunately, of making anapests out of ant hills; Shaw hints as much by frequently qualifying provocative scansions with ones that take elision on board.

In his readings of more recent poets, of course, Shaw must speak of frequent substitutions rather than elisions, because the silent history of verse practice was itself elided in the wake of Saintsbury's ahistorical theorizations. His rewarding and skeptical narrative of the declension of Wallace Stevens's pentameter line over the years serves as a touchstone for the radical experimentation with and divergence from that line in verse after modernism. Even acknowledged "formal" poets such as Howard Nemerov and Andrew Hudgins *do* deploy substitutions and do *not* evidence elision in their blank verse, largely because the absence of a comprehensive account of prosody allowed a long practical tradition to be forgotten and, consequently, the poems produced within it to be misread.

One would expect the author of so expert a study of blank verse to himself be a formidable practitioner, and so he is. Shaw's *Solving for X* in both execution and subject matter displays the sensibility of one who has thought long and productively about his craft. Most poems, it is now conventional to observe, are in some sense about their own writing. The contemporary profusion of *ars poetica* is merely symptomatic of poets failing to write poems about more than that. In achieving that "more," Shaw's talent shines forth powerfully. While the witty "Anthology Piece," "The End of the Sonnet," and "Typo," are thoroughly amusing, Shaw's best poems are those that thread meditations on making through the myriad narratives of common human experience. In "A Bowl of Stone Fruit," a child's encounter with artifice—"Never forget a child's face, nonplused / on touching first an apple, then a pear"— results in initial disillusion followed by initiation into what "adult taste holds in fond regard." The ambivalence of such a turning point is justly weighted: "Never forget his face, first made to know." "Airs and Graces," about a young girl playing dress-up with her great aunt's old clothes is marked by a similarly acute ambivalence:

> Years would pass
> before the festooned girl would realize what
> her hostess must have seen: her bygone self

and her dead sisters, flaunting these fine items
when they were new, and later not so new.

A gorgeous sesta rima lyric, "The Arbor," echoes Yvor Winters's poem "The Garden" but with a greater generosity of spirit:

Gladly to steep oneself, not just to think
but to watch thought grow ripe from greenest hints:
that is what vintage poets learned to do.
The marvel is, it might work here for you.

One hears the sharp curmudgeon side of Winters, too, in "The Devil's Garden" and "The Latest Sign," which capture respectively the stark and threatening horizons of human experience and the stultifying and trivial bowels of contemporary "politically correct" euphemism (the road sign "used to say, plainly enough, DEAD END. / Now, suddenly gentrified, it says / NO OUTLET"). As the extended historical poem "Drowned Towns" and the quiet "Snowplow in the Night" make clear, Shaw is keen to observe where modern life debases and betrays itself when it—literally or figurative—destroys its present and abandons its past.

X makes virtues of its limitations. Shaw's voice is learned, colloquial, and humorous—better keyed to the satiric than the lyric. The poems take for subject the landscape of the Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts and the pastoral and academic life that has long flourished there. They reveal Shaw as a wit and master stylist even as they do not quite demonstrate the range proper to a major poet in this or any era.