

What Has Five Feet and Lives Forever?

Jan Schreiber

Robert B. Shaw, *Blank Verse: A Guide to Its History and Use*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. 305 pp.

A bright woman of my acquaintance, educated in a field far from literature, recently asked me what poetry anthology I would recommend to help her become better acquainted with contemporary writing. I made a suggestion, observing that the editor I had in mind had a particular regard for poems in meter that could be understood. She replied, “I don’t much care whether they’re in meter, but I want them to be understandable. I don’t want them to be simple. I expect to have to read a poem two or three times to comprehend it – I’ll learn something that way – but I want them to make sense eventually.” And that, I thought, is in a nutshell the achievement of the modernist revolution. Ordinary intelligent readers still have little patience with poems that will not yield to understanding, but they do not demand or expect – or perhaps even recognize – meter. A “poem” has become, for many, a short, intense piece of writing, distinguished from a story by its brevity, by its often more personal and fanciful content, and by its appearance on the page, in that the lines do not run out to the margin but are broken off (somewhat arbitrarily, though sometimes for rhetorical effect) before they reach full measure.

Some would observe that readers of verse, like listeners to music, differ in the acuteness of the “ear” they possess. Just as some concertgoers can sit through an *allegro vivace* and never be moved to tap a foot or a finger, to nod the head or bounce a leg in sympathy, so (the argument goes) some readers or hearers of verse are impermeable to iambs and trochees, whether pronounced by a gifted speaker (an all too uncommon being in our time) or heard in the mind’s ear as the eye’s mouse scurries along the line. But that disdainful perspective implies determinism, and determinism leads to a false despair. In truth most people are capable of hearing an iambic line; what has been lost in our popular culture is the memory of the delight such lines are capable of evoking. That delight, in its manifold nuances and intricacies, is the trove that Robert Shaw explores and anatomizes by looking at meter in its purest form, uncomplicated by rime, in his fine treatise on blank verse.

It is an ambitious but not a perfect book. Shaw sets out his dual purpose at the outset: “To study the characteristics of the poetic form we call blank verse, and to study the achievements of poets who have used it from its first emergence up to our own day.” A tall order – and the second objective, in particular, forces him into an impossible attempt at thoroughness and fairness. The problem is that posing the problem in that way forces the writer to try to be encyclopedic, when he needs only to be illustrative. To show how blank verse has evolved from early times to the present, it is not necessary to deal with everyone who has ever published a poem in that form. (Shaw does not actually do this, but he seems to be trying.) I sympathize with his desire to show that blank verse in our own time is vigorously alive and being written by distinguished poets, but one needn’t protest too much.

To write coherently about blank verse you need a notation for technical description and analysis. Shaw opts for a simple one, consisting of a symbol for an unstressed syllable (x), a symbol for a lightly stressed syllable (\\), and a symbol for a fully stressed syllable (/). He remarks that many more nuances of stress are observable but probably do not affect scansion sufficiently to change the way we would describe the line. “The older method of scansion by feet that we are using (and

that most poets themselves use in writing accentual-syllabic verse) seems preferable for our purpose, as long as readers are aware that it is (and must be, and should be) open to question.” However, in most instances Shaw does not indicate feet explicitly. Were he to do so, it would be easier to see how even a slight stress can be greater than its neighbor in the same foot, and therefore qualify as an iamb. Instead of

x / x \ x / x x / /
The quality of mercy is not strained

(with its questionable pyrrhics and spondees) we could write:

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
The qual ity of mercy is not strained

recognizing that the light syllables at the end of *quality* make up a tripping iambic foot, as do the second syllable of *mercy* and the verb *is*; and the last two syllables of the line, though both strong, are sufficiently unequal to make a final iamb. Paying attention to foot divisions calls attention to and justifies the rule that relative stress matters only within a foot. If that rule is heeded, many problems of scansion fade.

That I take issue with some local judgments of this kind only shows that Shaw has written a provocative book worth engaging with. His salient virtue is to write not just as a theoretician but as a practitioner, which he is – and a distinguished one at that. Here he is discussing the art of composing in blank verse:

Think of a tightrope walker. The rope he is walking on is one whose properties he is intimately familiar with; he knows how tautly stretched it is and what slight degree of give in it can be tolerated. This sturdy rope (the metrical line, let us say) provides firm support to his motions in performance – to steady feats of passage, colorful jugglings, unexpected pauses, even stumbles which may appear spontaneous but are carefully rehearsed. These motions of his act can represent for us the effects of rhythms played out from the beginning to the end of the line. And what if one of those suspense-creating stumbles is not rehearsed but genuinely accidental? ... He may then fall into the net, which we will call prose.

What readers should understand from this passage is that the process of composing in blank verse is not one of laboring through a set of rules but of training the muscles and reflexes of the mind so that, when working with the line, the writer continuously makes appropriate adjustments in the sentences being contrived, ensuring that they will be at once metrical and expressive. Readers will also recognize that each writer has individual muscles and reflexes; each hears the blank verse norm with a unique ear; and each has preferred variations and a tolerance for greater or lesser degrees of trespass. I, for example, am fond of a headless iambic foot at the beginning of a line, especially if preceded by a feminine ending in the line before. Others find this usage beyond the pale.

Of course the tightrope analogy will only take us so far. There are a limited number of moves an acrobat can make on the high wire, even if he is blessed with exceptional skill and invention; whereas the possibilities with the blank verse line are infinite. They also involve the complex, sometimes mysterious interplay between sound and sense, and it is here that the issue of intention becomes subtle and contentious. Are variations from the strict iambic norm expressive of mean-

ing at the point where they occur, or are they simply part of the ambient sound by which the meaning is carried? Put another way, did the poet intend some specific point by his unusual rhythms *right here*, or did he not?

The extreme cases are easy enough. Shaw quotes a passage from Howard Nemerov's "Gyroscope" to illustrate the imitation of sense by sound:

A silver nearly silence gleaning a still-
ness out of speed, composing unity
From spin, so that its hollow spaces seem
Solids of light, until it wobbles and
Begins to whine, and then with an odd lunge
Eccentric and reckless, it skids away
And drops dead into its own skeleton.

The first three lines are smooth. Even the extra unstressed syllable in the fifth foot of the first line seems (are we inventing here?) only an excess of energy. The fourth line is regular still, but the "and" at the end is weak, as if energy is waning, and then comes the fifth line with, in the last two feet, two weak syllables followed by two strong ones, producing an "odd lunge" indeed. The following line replaces the second, third, and fourth iambs with two anapests, where they quite trip up the meter; and the final line ends up a complete shambles. The effect is to kill one's sense of the meter, so that, although the poem maintains ten syllables per line to the end, it clearly has dissolved into prose.

Even without explicit testimony from the poet we have little trouble believing that the meter in this poem was designed to depict the humming motion, the slowing, and the final stuttering collapse of the gyroscope. But what should we make of the following lines from Robert Frost's "Birches":

Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells,
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust –
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

There are trochaic substitutions in the first two lines, but they are not uncommon. The word "shattering" contains an extra syllable that might or might not be pronounced in recitation. The same is true of "heaven" in the last line. Is this intentional sound-painting? Shaw comments:

The shattering of the ice is figured in the shattering of the iambic pattern in the first two lines, and the metrical regularity of the next two ... mirrors the tidying-up that is being contemplated. ... The slight ruffling of the meter of the last line by the presumed elision of "heaven," followed by the feminine ending, harks back in a milder way to the disorder earlier described, which may not be so easily banished. These sorts of expressive manipulations of meter are frequent in Frost....

I think many sober readers would demur. It is all too easy to ascribe any metrical discrepancies to attempts at "expressive manipulation," but without more evidence than this we're likely to fall right through that snow-crust and end up where we belong: with our feet on solid ground.

But Shaw is right to zero in on Frost's opening line in "The Wood Pile":

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day

... and to wonder about its scansion. He suggests three different possibilities, unsure about each of them. The reason for the perplexity is not hard to guess. Frost very likely first wrote a perfectly regular iambic line:

Out walking in the frozen swamp one day

and shuddered on a second look. In that form the line closes too easily and seems to invite an answering rime in the next line. In fact, remove the adjective and you're perilously close to:

While strolling through the park one day
In the merry, merry month of May ...

The solution – somewhat radical but effective – was to insert an extrametrical word at just the point where the line threatens to wrap up too neatly. The addition destroys the regular *ta-tump* – but only for a moment. It adds the right touch of color to the scene. And it gives the start of the poem an almost prosy narrative quality that subliminally lowers a reader's expectations and focuses his attentions on the events being described rather than the beauties of the language. In short, it does something Frost often did extremely well: it artfully portrays the author as an artless old fellow with a homespun story to tell.

The notion of expressive form is a theory – one that can be buttressed by some examples and undercut by others. A book of this sort cannot help proposing theories – of prosody and of stylistic development. But theories have a way of taking over. No sooner do we suggest a relation between meter and meaning than we begin finding such relations everywhere. No sooner do we see a poet as moving from tighter to looser blank verse than we see evidence of incipient looseness in everything he writes. Wallace Stevens certainly wrote an unrimed line in his late career that had little in common with the careful iambic pentameter of "Sunday Morning." But Shaw sees even in that poem "hints of the modernist challenge to tradition." He scans the first two lines thus.

x / x \ x x / x x /
Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
/ x x / x x / x / x /
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair

Only a note at the back of the book admits that *peignoir* is often pronounced with the stress on the second syllable. Shaw might have noted as well that for most people, in ordinary conversation, *oranges* has but two syllables. A revised scansion, then, admitting divisions among the feet and mindful that stress differences are only perceived within a foot, would be:

x /|x /| / x|x /| x /
Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
/ x|x /| x /|x /| x /
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair

Here there are at most two trochaic substitutions. That in the third foot of the first line is slight; both syllables in the foot are weakly stressed, and some might not hear a trochee at all. That in the second line is so common it is unremarkable. The lines are not unusual metrically; they launch us

firmly on a reliable course of iambic pentameter that holds up throughout the poem. So far is “Sunday Morning” from being a radical metrical departure that it stands as something of an archetype of blank verse in the twentieth century. Indeed, I, in common (I am sure) with numerous other poets of my generation, learned to write blank verse by studying this poem.

Readers who are analytically inclined can observe the inner workings of pentameter lines over an extended history with Shaw as a knowledgeable guide, and in this way some of them may refine their own abilities to handle the meter. And all of us are likely to encounter poems or passages we had overlooked, which in turn may lead to other discoveries as we peruse the books where they appear. In this way we may arrive at what is still in our time a radical perception: how much of the beauty of verse inheres in its technical mechanisms. Consider these lines by Derek Walcott, quoted but not explicitly commented on in Shaw’s book:

Across the dirty beach surpliced with lace,
they pass a brown lagoon behind the priest,
pale and unshaven in his frayed soutane,
into the concrete church at Canaries;
as Albert Schweitzer moves to the harmonium
of morning, and to the pluming chimneys,
the groundswell lifts *Lebensraum, Lebensraum*.

(“The Fortunate Traveler,” II,7-13)

The last three lines of this passage are a virtuoso performance. The first of these has six feet, while the next line has four. Together they comprise twenty-one syllables and are heard as two conjoined pentameters with a feminine ending. In the last line the first *Lebensraum* forces a trochaic substitution into the line. The final syllable of that word has less stress than the beginning of the second *Lebensraum* and thus comprises an iambic foot, while the final two syllables make up another iamb. Thus the same word, in its two repetitions, has different values, *-raum* being unstressed (relatively) on its first occurrence, and stressed on its second. The effect is that of a swelling chant, or groundswell. Walcott is one of the finest verse writers of our time; his best work has a sensuous and moving intelligence that repays close attention. Shaw is to be commended for bringing some of his less well known work to notice.

Walcott, however, is famous, as poets go. There are many other practitioners of blank verse who are also worth reading but who are little noticed. A significant benefit stemming from Shaw’s attempt to be encyclopedic is his identification of many such writers. In the last section of his book he gathers the well known and the less well known together in a paragraph worth quoting:

If we begin by listing enduring poems like Robinson’s “Isaac and Archibald,” Frost’s “Home Burial,” Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” Stevens’s “Sunday Morning,” Wilbur’s “The Mind-Reader,” Hecht’s “The Venetian Vespers,” Merrill’s “Lost in Translation,” Bowers’s “Autumn Shade,” and Cunningham’s “Montana Fifty Years Ago,” we have only scratched the surface. There are a host of remarkable pieces that reward thoughtful reading as well as these: Muir’s “The Transfiguration,” Pratt’s *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, Hayden’s “Witch Doctor,” Shapiro’s “A Cut Flower,” Keyes’ “Against Divination,” Pinkerton’s “Crossing the Pedregal,” Moss’s “Einstein’s Bathrobe,” Mueller’s “The Power of Music to Disturb,” and a generous handful from each of Nemerov’s, [Miller] Williams’s, and Cassity’s bodies of work in the form. And this is leaving unmentioned not only many of the fine early and mid-twentieth-century poems previously discussed

but also the energetic contributions of poets born from 1940 on, whose careers are in full stride.

Readers curious to explore the wealth of blank verse in the century just past would do well to mine the veins exposed here.

Having endured many years in the wilderness, writers of metered verse are once again finding an audience among readers, editors, and academics. Signs of the changing times include books like this one and the book on forms by Finch and Varnes, which I reviewed for this journal not long ago. We have not yet reached the point where mainstream editors (of the *New Yorker*, for example) *expect* a poem to be metrical, but we may yet get there. The current editor of *Poetry*, a magazine seen by many as a bellwether in its field, has a pronounced bias toward meter.

That being the case, it behooves the rising generation of writers both to acquaint themselves with the achievements of their predecessors in this powerful expressive mode and to learn the techniques that will allow them to continue the tradition. The best way to learn those techniques, of course, is to study the great achievements in the form, reading the lines aloud and paying attention to the relation between line and syntax, to the turn from one line to the next (like the turn of a swimmer at the end of a lap), to syntactic and rhetorical pauses, to trochaic and other substitutions and their favored positions, and – most subtly and critically – to the varieties of stress within the overall iambic pattern, ranging from emphatic to barely discernible. This book will not convey that information, except incidentally and suggestively, but it will give readers the tools for understanding and *hearing* what they read, and it will direct them to superb examples of the art – poems that will quicken the pulse and whose own pulse is palpable at every point.