

HOW TO WRITE ENGLISH VERSE.

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PART III.

ANAPÆSTIC AND DACTYLIC VERSE.

"THE ÆSSÿ | rī(a)n cāme dōwn | līke thē wōlf |
 ōn thē fōld, |
 And hīs cō | hōrts wēre glēam | īng īn pūr- |
 plē ānd gōld, |
 And thē shēen | ōf thēir spēars | wās līke
 stārs | ōn thē sēa |
 Whēn thē blāc | wāve rōlls nīght | lī ōn
 dēep | Gāllīcē." ||

This is a good and characteristic example of anapæstic verse. The line and the stanza alike represent the anapæst in its most popular if not in its most favourable English form. An anapæst, as the scansion above has already signified, consists of two short syllables followed by a long one —. Anapæstic verse has long lost its popularity. For a brilliant period, under the spirited auspices of Messrs. Scott, Byron, Moore, Campbell and company, it might almost be said to dominate the lyric and short narrative poem. Who does not know and admire "Young Lochinvar" and "Tamburgh," and "The Meeting of the Waters" and "The Irish Harper"? Down to the period when Wordsworth's influence had thoroughly leavened the literary instinct of England, the anapæst had things pretty much its own way. It was swift and gay and nimble: it gave of its own momentum a swing which the writer might vainly have sought to inspire: its beat was so firm and mechanical that once set in motion even imbecility, ignorance and a bad ear could hardly fail to maintain it. But its excellences were also its weaknesses. It was monotonous, wearisome, inflexible. The ordinary writer had it under no better control than had Goose Gibbie the heavy charger of Lady Margaret Bellenden. It had a hard mouth, and it carried the rider with grievous bumpings into all sorts of awkward places. I doubt if Tennyson ever wrote an anapæstic line. Wordsworth did venture once or twice to tread the anapæstic measure: and a sad dance he was led. It carries meditation as a wild ass carries a basket of eggs. Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, Morris, Patmore, Rossetti—I cannot recall its use among the later men. Robert Browning did furnish one memorable example of anapæstic verse—as it should not be written:—

"Nēck bŷ nēck, | strīde bŷ strīde, | nēvēr
 chāng | fug ōur plācē." ||

on such wise goeth the simple dromedary—whose misfortune it is—when he is in particularly high spirits—to jolt his rider asunder.

At the present moment then, be it remembered, the once fashionable anapæst is under a cloud. I doubt if he will ever emerge. But you must know all about him, and be able to manage him all the same; for though no longer served as a joint, he still contributes his elements to the stock of English verse.

The difficulty of writing anapæsts resides in the paucity of syllables truly short. Think of the destitution which could make a writer accept *stride* as anything but a very long syllable. Three consonants (one of them an *s*) to start with, then a resolute vowel, and after that a consonant with a mute sound, adding at least to the length of the syllable as read.

Schlecht: if Browning had written in German, with a light heart he would have made a short syllable of that. Verily he would, bless his godlike brain and his elephantine ear. (By the way, elephants are more musical than I was allowing: they all perform a little on the trumpet.)

Another stumbling-block to the modern anapæstic bard is the prevalence of little

words. It takes practice and some natural gift not to kick dissonance out of those loose stones. The more monosyllabic the more vigorous the verse will be; but the *verse* will be won at the price of the music. Browning's lines are a splendid specimen of powerful narrative: the very scramble of the verse adds to the breathless effect of the whole effect. One might have thought even the ungainly short syllables a part of the intention, had he reserved them for such an effect as this. But he scrambles and shambles under Juliet's window—in his new pumps—quite as badly as when he runs over cobble stones to mount his stout galloper Roland.

"Jūānī | tā, bēhōld | īn vōlū | mīnoūs wīte, |
 Lēōnō | rā thē beāu | īffūl, rō | sīlŷ brīght!" ||

There! That is a fair sample of anapæstic run. The slightest clogging of consonants: the clearest and softest vowel sounds: the sharpest clink of the long (or accented) syllables—these make up the ordinary excellences of the verse.

The anapæstic stanza is frequently written with rhymes in the alternate lines:—

"Wē māy rōm | thrōugh thī wōrld | līke ā
 chīld | āt ā feast, |
 Whō bāt sīps | ōf ā swēet, | ānd thēn
 flīes | tō thē rēst; ||
 And whēn plēā | sūre bēgīns | tō grōw dūll |
 īn thē Eāst, ||
 Wē māy ōr | dēr ōur wīngs, | ānd bē
 ōff | tō thē Wēst." ||

That is not a favourable example of Tommy Moore's skill as a lyricist. The lines hop, instead of flowing, by reason of the excess of monosyllabic words. Then the rhymes have quite a *curiosa infelicitas*—an elaborate infelicity. They all fizz and sputter with sibilants—a terrible defect in lines meant to be sung. Furthermore, the vowel *e*, especially when long as in *cast*, shuts up the mouth, and the voice is squeezed out as juice from a reluctant lemon. And, yet once more, the almost identity of the sound in the two pairs of rhymes confuses and worries the ear.

One of the chief pleasures of verse is the contrast of the alternate rhymes.

Notice the gain in clearness and in charm which belongs to these lines by the same hand. They represent the most popular of all anapæstic stanzas:—Four anapæsts in the odd lines; three anapæsts in the even lines.

"It īs | nōt whīle beāu | tŷ ānd yōuth | āre
 thīne ōwn, |
 And thŷ chēeks | ūnpŕōfīd | bŷ ā tēar, ||
 Thāt thē fēr | vōur ānd fāith | ōf ā sōul |
 māy bē knōwn |
 Tō whīch tīme | wīll bāt mākē | thēe
 mōre dēar." ||

Here there is still too much suggestion of an agile wooden leg, but the rhymes are vastly better. Short anapæstic lines are hardly fit for anything but comic verse. Their bumpiness is cruel:—

"Yōū māy rōmp |
 īf yōū līke ||
 Ōa ā cōmp- |
 ētēt bīke." ||

But here is a passable stanza:—

Alternate rhymes: 2 anapæsts in each line.

"Dō I slēep, | dō I drēam, |
 Dō I wōn | dēr ānd dōub; ||
 Afē thīngs | whāt thēy sēm, |
 Ōr āre vīs | īōns ābōut? ||"

* I take the liberty of omitting the last two lines of the stanza.

I hope that what I am now to say has been anticipated by all my readers. In the third line there is an irregularity. The anapæst has one short syllable docked—is in fact not an anapæst —, but an iambus —.

Exactly. That independence is not a laxity, but the assertion of a principle. The first foot of an anapæstic line is variable. All that it wants, in fact, is a long syllable, or, let us say, an accent.

I do not mean to say that there is absolute licence in the matter, but under the government of a good and practised ear this opening foot may stand:—

(1) — |
 (2) — |
 (3) — |

Beginners should never make experiments: metrical, like other liberties, are dearly won.

If mŷ rēa | dērs wīll fōl | lōw ās wēll | ās
 thēy cān |

Thīs fār | frōm ēlāb | ōrāte mēt | rīcāl
 plān, ||

Sōon | thēy shāl mūt | tēr, ōr lōud | lŷ
 ēclām, |

Dāctŷl ōr | ānāpæst! | whāt's īn ā | nāme? ||

Pause and consider. In that last line we have raised a point of some importance.

A dactyl is, individually and separately, an anapæst turned upside down. Instead of two shorts and a long —, it is a long and two shorts —.

"Stīll fōr āll | slīps ēf hērs, |
 Ōne ōf Evē's | famīlŷ. ||
 Wīpe thōse pōr | līps ōf hērs |
 Ōozīng sō | clāmnlŷ." ||

That is a sample of pure dactylic verse, and pure samples are few. The English accent is not dactylic, and the difficulty of maintaining it is proved by the quotation. Except *famīlŷ* and *clāmnlŷ* there is not a good dactyl in the four lines. All the rest are either lumbering or forced. And yet Hood was a master of every metrical resource, and that poem, "The Bridge of Sighs," has always been considered one of his finest metrical achievements.

As a rule, not a dactyl but a long syllable ends the line in so-called dactylic verse:—

"Wārīōrs ānd | chīefs! shōuld thē | shāft ōr
 thē | swōrd ||
 Pīerce mē īn | lēādīng thē | hōst ōf thē |
 Lord." ||

That is the characteristic dactylic verse. If a rhyme be introduced in the middle of the line—a difficult introduction to bring about—the long syllable still comes where it did:—

"Tāke hēr ūp | tēndērŷ, |
 Līft hēr wīth | cārē, ||
 Fāshīōn'd sō | slēndērŷ,
 Yōung ānd sō | fāir." ||

Here is an example of dactyls, written with rhymes only in the even lines. It will be noticed that there is a singular effect of continuity, and also an atmosphere of wildness and desolation. Of course the sense has most to say to this. Still the metrical movement is an essential element in their effect, and upon that movement the substitution in the even lines of a trochee (—) for a long syllable (—) has a potent influence:—

"Whēre bŷ thē | mārshēs |
 Bōomēth thē | bīttern, ||
 Nīckār thē | sōulless ōne, |
 Sīt wīth hīs | ghīttern—||
 Sīt īncōm | sōlāble, |
 Frīendlēss ānd | fōelēss, |
 Wāīlīng hīs | dēstīnŷ—|
 Nīckār thē | sōulless." ||