

**THE FOUNDATIONS
AND
NATURE OF VERSE**

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The Foundations and Nature of Verse by Cary F. Jacob

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FOREWORD

OUT of the seeming chaos of conflicting opinion that has enveloped the study of English prosody, order at last begins to evolve itself. The deplorable lack of agreement among prosodists as to the very fundamentals of their science has led the sceptically inclined to a not unjustifiable questioning with regard to the propriety of dignifying as science the mass of writing concerned with phenomena about the nature of which so great an amount of uncertainty has prevailed and still prevails. That, through a long period of years and with ever increasing earnestness and skill, a large number of scholars have kept untiringly at work upon the solution of prosodic problems, is of itself occasion for encouragement and for congratulation, not for discouragement. The most remarkable aspect of the situation, when one considers the rather crude methods of investigation that have until comparatively recently been the only ones possible, is that from so marked a disparity of opinion as has prevailed an astonishingly large amount of truth has been brought to light. Almost every one who has approached the subject in a spirit of conscientiousness, and not of mere slavish imitation, has been able to contribute something of value to the gradually increasing quota of knowledge, even though in many instances his contribution has seemed to be at variance with the precepts of all established schools.

The chief difficulty has lain in the unusual breadth of the field. Too frequently each writer has fixed his atten-

tion exclusively upon those particular acres which could be seen from his own little rise. Where the range of vision has been sufficiently broad to include the areas covered by other inquirers, they have formed themselves into a school and have taken up the cudgel against all who did not see as they saw. This type of partizanship has led to great activity; but it has not always made for open-mindedness. Often it has been the means of obscuring more truth than it has revealed. The time has now come when quite a number of prosodists are prepared to see that the light does not rest exclusively within the keeping of any individual or of any one group. Facts can be brought together, sometimes from the most unpromising sources, and their correlation so established as to effect a synthesis that does not involve a compromise. This can be accomplished more readily by a qualitative than by a quantitative method of procedure, — not so much by a tabulation of data as by a judicious weighing of the facts already at hand.

"The use of prosody," says Professor J. B. Mayor,¹ "is to supply a technical language by which to describe each specimen of verse brought before us, to distinguish the different kinds of verse, and to establish a type of each, with reference to which existing varieties may be compared, and finally to state the laws of composition which have been observed by those whom the world recognizes as poets. Then from this we may draw practical rules of art for the use of the poet or the reader." Fortunately, the poets before beginning to write have never waited for the prosodists to formulate the rules of poetic art. Guided by the verse of their predecessors and by their own good taste, they have written. It has remained for the prosodist to reformulate his rules time and time again in order that they might meet the demands of an ever broadening

¹ *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1873-4, p. 624.

conception of art. Where the rules have not been sufficiently elastic, the rules, and not the verse, have had to go by the board. The function of the prosodist is to describe and to interpret, — not to make rules, but to say what rules the poets seem to have followed. As critic he can praise or condemn, — not, however, on the ground of precedent, but upon the more comprehensive basis of whether or not a given production follows the natural and artistic trend of its genus.

"In a subject like prosody," Professor Mayor continues, "there is danger of confused treatment, arising from its connection with history on the one hand and æsthetics on the other. There are thus three views which may be taken of it: [first,] . . . the purely scientific, or logical; secondly, the historical, which brings in the succession of time, and traces the growth of one form out of another; thirdly, the æsthetic, or subjective, which adds criticism to statement of fact, and points out beauties and defects in the various metres, or in the manner in which they have been handled. It is of great importance that the first view should be kept clear of the other two, that an antiquarian yoke, for instance, should not be laid upon the readers and the writers of the present, and their verses be denied to be metrical at all, or else twisted and mangled to suit the usage of five centuries ago; just as the modern sentence might be condemned as ungrammatical because it could not be explained on antiquarian views of syntax."

In my attempt to avoid most effectively the pitfalls into which so many prosodists have stumbled, I must say at once, that, although I consider both the historical and the æsthetic methods of the highest importance and of indispensable value in establishing a comprehensive view of the subject, and that, although I shall use them wherever they can make plainer the path I have chosen, never-