

**A PRIMER OF ENGLISH
VERSE: CHIEFLY
IN ITS AESTHETIC AND
ORGANIC CHARACTER**

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A Primer of English Verse: Chiefly in Its Aesthetic and Organic Character by Hiram Corson

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PRIMER OF ENGLISH VERSE

CHIEFLY IN ITS ÆSTHETIC AND
ORGANIC CHARACTER

BY

HIRAM CORSON, LL.D.

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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A PRIMER OF ENGLISH VERSE.

I.

POETIC UNITIES AND THEIR ORIGIN.

THE principal coefficients of poetic expression are Rhythm, Metre, Stanza, Rhyme, Assonance, Alliteration, Melody, and Harmony, which seem to be all due, when they are vital and organic, to *the unifying action of feeling or emotion*. When strong feeling is in any way objectified, a unifying process sets in. The insulated intellect, in *its* action, tends rather in an opposite direction — that is, in an analytic direction. It matters not upon *what* feeling or emotion is projected, or with what it is incorporated; it will be found that in all cases it is unifying or, to use a word coined by Coleridge, *esemplastic*, in its action. If we look at a landscape coldly or indifferently, we may be cognizant of its various elements or phases; but there is little or no effort to grasp it as a *whole*, and to subject all its elements to some principle of harmony or fusion. At another time, when our feelings are active, and the intellect is in a more or less negative state, there will be a spontaneous and, it may be, a quite unconscious effort to *unify* that same landscape,

to subject all its elements to some principle of harmony—to fuse the primal units, so to speak, into one complex unit. It may be that the landscape is composed of very incongruous elements; but even then, the feelings, if abnormally active, by reason of some associations either of pleasure or pain, or from some other cause, may project upon it a light or a shade that will bind together its otherwise inharmonious features.

Now as soon as feeling is embodied in speech, and to the degree to which it is embodied, we find that speech is worked up, more or less distinctly or emphatically, into unities of various kinds. The primal unit, the unit of measure, we call *foot*, which is made up of two or more vocal impulses, according to the nature of the feeling which evolves it. This primal unit is combined into a higher unity, which is called *verse*, and this, in its turn, is combined into a still higher unity, which is called *stanza*, and so on. Rhythm is a succession and involution of unities, that is, unities within unities. The term is as applicable to a succession of verses as to a succession of feet, and to a succession of stanzas as to a succession of verses.

II.

ENFORCING, FUSING, AND COMBINING PRINCIPLES OF POETIC UNITIES.

a. ACCENT.

NOW we find that each class of unities has its enforcing, or fusing, or combining principle—the agency by which it is more or less strongly marked and individualized; that of the primal unit, foot, we call *accent*. What accent really is, it does not now concern us to consider. There is not a general agreement among prosodists as to *what* it really is. But whatever it is, whether the vowel or syllable on which it occurs is distinguished from the rest of the word by an increased sharpness of tone, or by an increased force or loudness, or whether it unites both, it is a sufficiently valid phenomenon, for any one with ears to appreciate its function in modern verse. When the following lines are pronounced, everybody knows which syllables are distinguished by the accent:

At the close of the day, when the hamlet is still,
And mortals the sweets of forgetfulness prove,
When naught but the torrent is heard on the hill,
And naught but the nightingale's song in the grove, etc.

Every kind of foot consists of one, and only one, accented syllable and one or two unaccented. The principal feet in English verse are: