

Milton in Time:

Prosody, Reception, and the Twentieth-Century Abstraction of Form

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Abdiel, who in Book 6 of *Paradise Lost* endures ‘Universal reproach, far worse to bear / Than violence’ (34-35)¹ before returning to heaven, makes an apt figure for the reception of Milton’s versification. This essay traces the ongoing struggle of prosody—as both science and praxis—with the inversions and other effects that define Milton’s line. It examines the reception of these inversions, or dislocations of stress, and other prosodic idiosyncrasies through several epochs, from early-eighteenth century reactions to perceived dysrhythmia to the more responsive poetics of the Victorian period, from Edwardian and Georgian concerns over the modern ear’s poor access to blank verse to the modernist understanding of T. S. Eliot, whose treatment sequentially ossifies and then revels in Milton’s prosody. The misunderstandings, bowdlerizations, and insights, the vulgar and skillful incorporations of Milton’s metrics are deeply instructional not only in revealing the complexity of Milton’s versification, or charting broad patterns in the reception of Milton’s prosody, but because they show the cumulative changes within prosody itself in successive eras of English poetry and criticism. Milton’s prosody, exceptional both in its internal form and in its symbolic force for later generations, serves to chart major changes in the cultural status and function of prosody.

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. David Scott Kastan, 3rd ed. (Hackett Pub Co, 2005).

As in Beverley Sherry's recent essay on 'The Legacy of T.S. Eliot to Milton Studies,' the final horizon of this essay is the present.² One primary aim of this essay is to re-read Eliot's proclamations on Milton to show the historical reasons why Eliot might have arrived at his ambivalent judgments of Milton's prosody, and its supposed rupture of sound and sense. In her own reading Sherry finds that 'there is no gulf between sound and sense in this supremely oral and aural epic' (p. 35), and observes that *Paradise Lost's* 'auditory effects, the materiality of sound, is of central importance, as Eliot's instincts so strongly registered and as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics also recognized' (p. 32). While this essay finds, similarly, that these preceding centuries (largely the nineteenth) register the materiality of Milton's prosody with considerable if often convoluted precision, there is reason to be more skeptical of the rhetoric in which Eliot couches his own 'instinct' for Miltonic meter. Eliot's focus on poetic sound, unsurprisingly, does not unite him with preceding centuries of prosodic thought, and yet he would affirm that distance as precisely an escape from the vagaries and pedantries of prosodic debate.

The 'mazes' Eliot found in Milton's sound are hardly an auspicious starting place for new tracings of sonic significance. It is instead Eliot's decisively modernist reconception of meter that is most telling and worth tracing; this essay argues not for any particular reading of Milton, but that with misapprehension of Milton as our baseline we can open the labyrinthine course of historical poetics and prosody to better read the complex (and above all prosody-driven) genealogy of Milton's successors. From this perspective Eliot's discourse can even be seen to work against the kind of analysis Sherry performs, insofar as it pushes attention away from the precise study of prosody as it existed historically. Simon Jarvis has recently argued that critics need to (re)learn how to think historically and technically about prosody; Jarvis looks for critics to 'renew and extend the poetics of repertoire... the quasi system of local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on or develop in particular authorships, coteries, periods, and

² Beverley Sherry, 'The Legacy of T. S. Eliot to Milton Studies,' *Versification* 5 (2010), pp. 27–38.

genres.³ This essay takes up that call not only by examining one crucial ‘gesture’—Milton’s metrical inversions—in its historical context, but by using the history of that gesture to mark the distance criticism has come from the technical questions that informed both the composition of *Paradise Lost* and its many historical readings.

Milton’s ‘Note on the Verse’ is a remarkable moment in prosodic theory not only for its radical claim for enjambment as a possible ground for prosody, but for the claims it makes on behalf of the iconic and social force of versification. Leaving aside the famous and well-treated turn to ‘sense variously drawn out,’ whose burden on enjambment would become the foremost principle of organization in William Carlos Williams and other free verse poets,⁴ I would note here Milton’s strong emphasis on versification as a principle of freedom. Heroic or blank verse recalls classical, non-rhyming, epic verse. The argument against rhyme quickly becomes a full theory of prosodic tradition as progressive ossification into sedimented, arbitrary conventions:

[Rhyme is] the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame metre; graced indeed since by the use of some famous modern poets, carried away by custom, but much to their own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse, than else they would have expressed them.

The ‘chances of rhyme,’ as Donald Wesling puts it, have not been good since the end of the eighteenth century.⁵ Romantic and modernist poetic theory had little room for rhyme, whether conceived as artifice and habit, or as a positive echo of

³ Simon Jarvis, ‘For a Poetics of Verse,’ *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (October 2010), pp. 931-35, p. 934.

⁴ Cf. Steven Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, pp. 19-22. Cushman notes that ‘Miltonic enjambment works within the boundaries of blank verse. Its systematic operation combines with that of an iambic pentameter norm. Without that metrical norm the systematic operation of enjambment to can become the main principle of prosodic organization’ (19). Cushman views the latter case, in Williams and others, as ‘neither temporal nor accentual’ and thus resorts to the term ‘phenomenological’ (22).

⁵ Donald Wesling, *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

natural order.⁶ Milton then juxtaposes blank verse's 'ancient liberty' with rhyme's 'modern bondage' on the authority of verse created by relatively non-monarchical societies. His republicanism is ingrained in his versification, setting up precisely those historical associations of verse style and socio-political value which later readers will implicitly or explicitly associate with their own particular, historically determined scansion of Milton's prosody. This is to say that historically variable ears and fingers, getting lost in Milton's mazes but sometimes finding meaning in that maze, markedly affect the iconic value and interpretation of Milton's verse.

Doctor Bentley and President Jefferson

Here is Dr. Bentley, Milton's most famous bowdlerizer, fixing the lines which depict the reproach faced by Abdiel: 'Scorn and reproach, more difficult to bear....'⁷ Although Dr. Bentley is far from the 'universal' reader, his abjuration of Milton was shared by a number of prosodists who if not devilish were at least made to recoil together with the devilish engine of Milton's versification. Bentley's revision is not entirely bad, however, as his ear catches something crucial about how Milton's restructured the English line here and elsewhere in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's original line scans as follows, with boldface showing syllables where word stress jars with the fixed iambic pattern:

Universal reproach, far worse to bear
W S W S W S W S

Here is Bentley's:

⁶ Samuel Daniel conceived it as such in his pamphlet *A Defense of Ryme*, a text Milton surely had in mind. Daniel writes that nature 'desires a certaintie, and comports not with that which is infinite, to have these clozes, rather than, not to know where to end, or how farre to goe, especially seeing our passions are often without measure.' Gavin Alexander, ed., *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 216. Wordsworth would later speak in similar terms of meter, yet meter would be perceived by the modern moment as having undergone much the same process of reification Milton sees afflicting rhyme.

⁷ Zachary Pearce, *A Review of the Text of Milton's Paradise Lost: In Which the Chief of Dr. Bentley's Emendations Are Consider'd*. (London, 1733), p. 195.

Scorn and reproach, more difficult to bear

W S W S W S W S W S

As Bentley's version makes clear, the line's inverted beginning stresses are not offensive; it is the penultimate stress in 'univérsal' which causes the difficulty. This is where Milton breaks the primary rule of well-formed English blank verse: that the main stress in polysyllabic words cannot occupy a weak position.⁸

In the terms given by Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the few other poets and prosodists to use such inversion systematically (discussed below), the word 'universal' creates a 'counterpoint.' It is likely that Milton, with classical precedent in the forefront of his mind, would have recognized the principle at work although he would also have known that his lines do not technically obey classical counterpoint (which is impossible in quantity-less English). Robert Bridges suggests that Milton could have arrived at quantity from Chaucer's inclusion of French words, which had less firm lexical stress, or from a 'reading of classical iambic verse, in which it is very familiar.'⁹ Derek Attridge notes Milton's introductory note to a translation of Horace: 'rendred almost word for word without Rhyme according to the Latin Measure, or as near as the Language will permit.'¹⁰ This 'near' is a crucial but not debilitating caveat: perhaps more important than the authorizing origin is Milton's sense that the effect of counterpoint between quantity and stress, a phonological possibility in classical languages (or at least Greek), might not be entirely lost.

⁸ Cf. Kristin Hanson and Paul Kiparsky, 'A Parametric Theory of Poetic Meter,' *Language* 72, no. 2 (June 1996): p. 296. For a discussion of Milton's inversions in particular, see also Kiparsky, 'The Rhythmic Structure of English Verse,' *Linguistic Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 211–212. For a more recent 'grid' based approach to scansion, which finds restrictions similar to Kiparsky and Hanson, see Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle, *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 45–48. By 'rule' I do not mean something universal or trans-historical, though following Kiparsky and Hanson I do mean something rooted in English phonology. I believe however that the well-formedness rule governing the placement of lexical stress can be broken without a poem ceasing to be metrical, even if this is illogical from the linguistic perspective. This is one outcome of my reading of Milton: misplaced lexical stress is a particularly extreme rule to break, as evidenced by both the historical responses studied here and contemporary linguistics.

⁹ *Milton's Prosody*, Rev. final ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921), p. 42.

¹⁰ Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 129

Eighteenth-century prosody and poetry was far less accepting of such English counterpointing, as best evidenced by Johnson's highly prescriptive rule that iambic measure is best 'when the accent rests upon every second syllable through the whole line.'¹¹ Evidence perhaps more valuable anecdotally than for its influence can be found in Thomas Jefferson's 'Thoughts on English Prosody: An Essay on the Art of Poesy' (written c. 1789).¹² Jefferson limits English verse to three types: accents on odd syllables, accents on even syllables, and accents on every third syllable. 'The English poet,' Jefferson argues with a sense of security born of discussions with European prosodists, 'must so arrange his words that their established accents shall fall regularly in one of these three orders' (419). To facilitate this task the poet can interpose members from 'the whole army of monosyllables' to be freely used, accented or not. Although four of Jefferson's six examples of this freedom come from Milton, all are perfectly regular (not merely metrical) lines. He sets the limit of this license, however, with a line of blank verse from Edward Young (Jefferson's accent marks):

Through the dark póstern óf time lóng elápsed

Jefferson's view of this line as 'impossible to read without throwing the accent on the monosyllable *of*' and his sense that 'the ear is shocked and revolts at this' suggests that for an eighteenth-century prosodist the stricter laws broken by Milton are merely an extreme case for ears that could be far more prescriptive. There is nothing unmetrical about Young's iambic pentameter, whose rhythm is echoed several times in *Paradise Lost*, unless the ear demands firm regularity. The line Jefferson struggles with is problematic in this sense, as 'time' threatens to absorb stress from 'long,' leaving the eighth position relatively under-stressed (barring Jefferson's wrenched stressing):

¹¹ Samuel Johnson, 'The Rambler No. 86 (1751),' in *Milton 1732-1801: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John T. Shawcross (London and Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1972), p. 202.

¹² Thomas Jefferson, Richard Holland Johnston, and Thomas Jefferson memorial association of the United States, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 17 (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1905).

Through the dark postern of time long elapsed
W S W S W S W S WS

The extent of the mismatches here (some debatable perhaps) and the line's proximity to a triple cadence produce a feeling of polymetricity no doubt responsible for Jefferson's struggle to reconcile rhythm (an alien term) and meter.

According to the early twentieth-century judgment of the Cambridge History of English Literature (1912), the eighteenth century produced no worthy imitation of Milton save Cowper, and its prosodists felt compelled to either edit Milton's versification (Bentley, Pemberton) or 'elide him into cacophony.' The 'trochaic and anapestic substitution, elision, slur, irregularity of stress, wrenched accent' were judged at the level of digression from a norm, important yet 'out of apparent harmony,' and this mode of prosodic evaluation limited both interpretive and poetic approaches.¹³ William Benson's 1736 *Letters Concerning Poetical Translations, and Virgil's and Milton's Arts of Verse*,¹⁴ is the exception that proves the rule; notably divergent in his lack of outright prescription, Benson alludes to those more 'apt to find fault' with Milton's 'verse contrary to the common measure' (also present in Virgil, he adds).¹⁵ Yet even Benson can only justify such contrariness on the grounds of pure variation and the entertaining of the ear, while spending considerably more time on alliteration, enjambment, and other prosodic devices which can function, for Benson, by aligning sound and sense. Even with partial acceptance of divergence prosody remains policing, a mode of reaction and retraining; beneath the prescriptive science is a presumption that English ears are and should be trained to a definite if limited purpose.

The Long Nineteenth Century

With Wordsworth and the nineteenth century there comes not only a rebirth of flexible blank verse but also a sense of pliable and pragmatic metrical contracts;

¹³ Sir Adolphus William Ward and Alfred Rayney Waller, *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. 8 (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p. 262.

¹⁴ William Benson, *Letters Concerning Poetical Translations, and Virgil's and Milton's Arts and Verse* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1793).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

this, perhaps, is responsible for eager efforts to comprehend the anomalies of Milton's verse. A sense that Milton's investment in sound was no deficiency led Hazlitt, in a popular lecture given in 1818, to defend Milton from the 'common perversity of criticism' that assumed poetry 'in the highest degree musical' must therefore be 'proportionably deficient in other respects'.¹⁶ In 1825 Leigh Hunt similarly praised Milton's verse as 'harmonious.' The sense that Milton accords, to better ears, with established 'proportion' or 'harmony' is simplified and less astute than Blake's wild treatment of Milton's afterlife (or second coming). Whether Milton's versification has any role in 1811's 'Milton' is uncertain; nor is it self-evident whether Blake figures his own prosody as occurs, for instance, in Byron.¹⁷ Yet Milton's new force within literary history is unquestionable, and the proximity to questions of versification enticing. The specifics of that force are anti-Newtonian, as articulated by Wai Chee Dimock: 'The tyranny of mechanics is what brings Milton back to the nineteenth century, what forces Blake to bring him back. Anachronism is their joint defense against mechanized time, for anachronism is duration wrested from the clock, a far-flung tie that is itself a rebuke to serial numbers'.¹⁸ That Milton, Christ-like returning to the nineteenth century, 'on [Blake's] left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there'¹⁹ is a wonderfully apt figure for the new role of Miltonic inversions over the next hundred years.

Blake finds in Milton's merciful return (via Blake, of course) a radical anachronism divorcing literary history from the 'lock-stepped, unidirectional flow of the life-cycle';²⁰ at the same time, however, we see an important discovery of anachronism in a newly precise metrical sense. The most important gesture of the new century's approach to Milton's prosody might be Edwin Guest's assertion in *A History of English Rhythms* (1838, revised edition edited by W. W. Skeat in 1882)

¹⁶ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets and the English Comic Writers* (G. Bell, 1894), 79.

¹⁷ Cf. Matthew Bevis, 'Byron's Feet,' in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 78–104.

¹⁸ W. C. Dimock, "Nonbiological Clock: Literary History against Newtonian Mechanics," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 160.

¹⁹ Plate 15, l. 49. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V Erdman, Newly Revised Edition (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1988), 110.

²⁰ Dimock, p. 167.

that lines such as ‘Universal reproach’ do not mar but in fact ‘characterize the rhythm.’²¹ Painstakingly tracing the different stress contours in Milton’s verse, Guest suggests that such previously incommensurable lines must be at the center of Milton’s prosody *because* they toy so deeply and unmistakably with iambic expectations. Like Bentley, Guest felt the need to make his own hearing of Milton authoritative; but unlike Bentley, Guest sought out the authority of Milton: “To a modern ear the flow of these verses is far from pleasing, nor can I readily see what was their recommendation to one, whose ear was so delicately sensitive.”²² In other words, Milton’s ear must have known that his anomalous lines were difficult and so Guest, in spite of his discomfort, does not reject such lines as unmetrical.

Guest provides a telling reading of another idiosyncratic line, in this case one which crosses the boundary between iambic and anapestic rhythm and threatens to produce the sort of wrenched accent Jefferson condemned in Young’s verse: ‘In his own image he / Created thee: in the image of God’ (Book VII: 526-27). To explain this line Guest speculates that the reader must either become mired in ‘a miserable verse with only four accented syllables’ or must add a stress to the preposition ‘in,’ nominally open to stress because of its position after a caesura.²³ The result involves a double “trochaic” counterpointing:

Created thee: in the image of God
 WSW S **W S W S** W S

Although Guest does not explicitly make an interpretive leap from “miserable” verse to, say, the miserable state of those created in God’s image, his prosody foreshadows later nineteenth century as well as modern critical efforts like Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin* to account for how and why the reader might become ‘mired’ in Milton’s meter. An 1867 edited volume of *Paradise Lost* thus explains the line

²¹ Edwin Guest and Walter William Skeat, *A History of English Rhythms* (George Bell, 1882), p. 238.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

‘Universal reproach, far worse to bear’ as an instance of deliberately ‘inharmonious measure’ which achieves *concordia discors* at the level of meaning.²⁴

It would take poets like Tennyson and Hopkins to formulate a poetics around this higher harmony, and they did so through the combined influence of Milton and classical prosody. That Milton was an inspiration for Tennyson’s metrical experimentation is clear from the poem in ‘Alcaics,’ dedicated to Milton and printed in *Enoch Arden* under the sub-heading ‘Experiments in Quantity’ in (1864). The opening lines display a distinctly foreign rhythmic contour (my italics):

O mighty-mouth'd inventor of harmonies,
O skill'd to sing of Time or Eternity,²⁵

While the lines begin iambically, each interposes an additional syllable in the penultimate foot. While ‘tor of’ might be said to elide into one syllable (or, more accurately, position), it would be less typical for ‘or E’ or later ‘set of’ to elide or resolve; nor would it be typical to have an elision or resolution in every seventh-eighth position and no other positions. Tennyson is not only playing with a Greek meter here, however, but with Milton’s English meter as well.

One might imagine that Jefferson, translated to the mid-nineteenth century, might reckon with the sudden appearance of a double weak (or ‘dactylic’) sequence by wrenching the line into iambs as ‘O mighty-mouþ’d invéntor óf harmónies’:

O mighty-mouth'd inventor of harmonies
W S W S W S W S W S _ [how Jefferson might scan]
W S W S W S W W S W W [an ‘Alcaic’ stress pattern]

The utility of Jefferson’s scansion is that it shows the ‘harmony’ (albeit a dissonant one) between tradition and quantitative scheme: between two meters, or better yet iambic meter and Alcaic rhythm masquerading as a (quantitative) meter. Tennyson’s lines are not then pieced together of iambs and dactyls but are rather a

²⁴ John Milton, *The Paradise Lost*, ed. James Robert Boyd (A.S. Barnes & co., 1867), p. 249.

²⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 651.

blank verse deformed according to the ‘harmonies’ and ‘time’-sense of Milton. Unlike Tennyson’s famous ‘barbarous hexameters,’ which are neither a Homeric nor English form, the ‘Alcaics’ secure a possible place within English prosody precisely because of the poet to whom they are dedicated. Milton makes the alternate scheme poignant, if not necessarily ‘audible.’

Hopkins’ counterpoint similarly derives from Miltonic versification a deep understanding of English metrical effects. The ‘reversal of feet,’ Hopkins notes, ‘is done freely at the beginning of a line and, in the course of a line, after a pause; only scarcely ever in the second foot or place and never in the last, unless when the poet designs some extraordinary effect; for these places are characteristic and sensitive and cannot well be touched.’²⁶ Hopkins is not the first to look for some ‘extraordinary effect’ where English meter is ruptured, but he is in special communion with Milton in his sense that certain places and patterns within a metered line are ‘sensitive’ to the physical or mental ear.

Hopkins’ counterpointed verse shows both patterns and themes proximate to those of Milton. ‘God’s Grandeur,’ like the scene of ‘universal reproach,’ juxtaposes two seeming universals: God’s perfection, with which the ‘world is charged,’ and the world of men that yet fail to ‘reck his rod’ and ‘reproach’ the right path.²⁷ Throughout this poem Hopkins uses the Miltonic technique of the sharply counterpointed foot to rebuke, just as in Milton, the sad and ironic universality of the rejection of the divine: ‘Generations have trod, have trod, have trod.’ To signify the effect of the rejection, the ‘trodding’ feet limp in the hollowed middle of the line. The pun returns and is strengthened in the lines ‘the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.’ ‘Feel’ and ‘shod’ are the principle stresses of this utterance, but ‘feel’ sits in a weak position and therefore forces the rhythm out of the iambic pattern: ‘Foot feel’ is ill-shod. By way of contrast, a more secure pattern is heard in God’s grandeur: ‘It will flame out, like shíning from shook foil.’ The ‘double iambs’ (x x / /) of the first and final four syllables are a more

²⁶ *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1953), p. 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

common shifting of accents, with little suggestion of dysrhythmia. Yet the poem does not equate divinity with metrical regularity. The world is ‘charged’ with divinity, not patterned after it in the manner of natural theology.²⁸ Divinity emerges as the sonic equivalent of ‘shook foil.’ In his effort to sound the divine through irregularity Hopkins attempts to draw a new, more markedly symbolic function from Milton’s prosody. The first and last lines of the sonnet best exemplify this effort. The first line of the sonnet begins traditionally but seems to have only four stresses—‘The wórld is chárged with the grándeur of Gód.’ Although this seems like the ‘miserable verse’ of four stresses that Guest described in Milton, phonology bears out the meter. ‘Grandeur,’ a ‘word of late adoption’ which only arrived from French in the late 17th century,²⁹ can (as Bridges noted of Milton’s usage) be treated as a compound word and assigned hovering stress; instead of unmetrality, then, we have the expansiveness of the triple meter, the gravity of the spondee, and yet we also have the iambic pentameter line Hopkins himself defines in the preface to the 1876-1889 poems as ‘running’ or ‘common English rhythm’ and which accords, before its permutations, with the weak-strong patterning defined above. An even greater metrical tour de force shapes the final line of the sonnet, which alludes to Milton’s wildly gendered image of the Holy Ghost: [thou] ‘Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad’st it pregnant’ (Book I: 20-21). Hopkins’ prosody incorporates but may go beyond

²⁸ The most succinct poetic rejection of natural theology, from Browning’s roughly contemporary ‘Caliban Upon Setebos,’ occurs in magnificently ‘rank’ prosody. When Caliban’s ‘rank tongue blossom[s] into speech,’ iambs trail far behind: ‘Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos! / ‘Thinketh, He dwelleth i’ the cold of the moon.’ Each line here shakes the meter through dissonance with word stress. The first line promotes (or hints at promoting) the secondary stress on ‘bos’ in the sixth and tenth positions while simultaneously demoting the same syllable in the third position. The line is metrical only in the most basic sense that the primary stress in ‘Set’ is in even positions (and the first position, which is acceptable). The second quoted line contrasts absolutely by playing with the absence of stress in function words: ‘i’ the’ and ‘o’ the.’ The typographic elisions suggest that these two pairs of small words should each contract (‘resolve’) into single positions. Yet ‘i’ the’ must occupy two positions, and ‘o’ the’ can occupy only one. In other words, these lines are metrical only if we cease to demand uniformity at the level of the word. This is in a way more radical than Hopkins, though we see a similar effect in his treatment of the word ‘grandeur.’

²⁹ ‘Grandeur, N,’ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED Online: Oxford University Press, October 18, 2010), <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

Milton's characteristic effects, transforming the Holy Ghost's enjambed hermaphroditism³⁰ into sensory and metrical wonder:

the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (13-14)

The final line surprisingly inverts the third foot ('breast and') without the warning of a caesura, as does Milton on several occasions. Like Milton's surprising enjambments, the double alliteration of 'w' and 'b' tries to make 'breast' feel like the naturally stressed end of the second foot (or, more accurately, fourth position) rather than a radically stressed fifth position:

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
W S _ W S W S W S W? S?

The effect is to make the second 'with' appear to be an unstressed monosyllable in an even/strong position, of the sort Jefferson found common and acceptable. With 'ah!' we reach what we might count as a wrenched stress in an odd position, before an alliterative stress on 'bright' in an even position matching the other stressed 'br' words. The problem with this is of course that it leaves 'wings' out in the cold of a hypometrical finale. The above scansion is ruinous whether we hear 'ah! bright wings' with sustained, hovering stress or with a dip at 'bright.' Yet a second scansion that is not tempted to leap over the first 'with' shows that this 'ah!' is in fact stress falling where it ought to:

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
W S W S W S W S W S

It would seem fitting that this performance of final regularity, relying first on seeming irregularity before proving itself subtle counterpoint, also reveals how the Holy Ghost exists within and through the trodding world. Alliterative patterns contrast with both grammar and metrical pattern, and yet 'world' and 'wings'

³⁰ My thanks to John Rogers for bringing my attention to the dual gendering in Milton, and connecting it to Hopkins' twin characterization of God as both 'warm' and 'bright.'

ultimately frame and harmonize these conflicts. The harmony is extended into a complex alliterative chiasmus in the onsets of the stressed words (w / br / w / br / br / w) which parallels the counterpointing structure of the meter. Such effects are far beyond what Milton could reasonably insert into an epic meter;³¹ they belong to a lyric prosody, and yet nonetheless learn from a version of epic prosody that did not hesitate to perturb the flow of rhythm (especially where it might have mimetic potential).

The Twentieth Century

Where Tennyson and Hopkins reveal new uses for Milton's prosody, responding to his sense of the blank verse line with innovative versification translated to lyric modes, twentieth-century prosody tends to reify Milton's versification. Even for prosodists that laud its flexibility, it is seen as more like architecture than as a tool for a poetics of strategic, meaningful dissonance. Even more important, however, is a growing suggestion that Milton's prosody and even blank verse in general has either ceased to be an audible, appreciable verse form, or is an unprecedented and scarcely repeatable technique most valuable for its audacity. Charles Leonard Moore, in an article for the *Dial* in 1902, describes Milton's 'greatest lines' as 'crusted and overloaded with ornament and pomp.'³² Whereas Shakespeare wrote in 'living rhythms' (notably, this echoes Shakespeare's ambivalent argument against statuary in Sonnet 55) Milton could only at his late moment 'make blank verse architectural...build it up into magnificent edifices of symmetrical art.' But if blank verse 'solidifies' with Milton, it paradoxically becomes the rarified province of those 'finest ears' which can manage the enjambments and pick up the metrical pattern across the verse paragraphs. This same worry emerges in J.A. Symond's 1895 study *Blank Verse*, less as an indictment of Milton (whose sublimities are

³¹ I intentionally leave aside Milton's lyrics and their prosody. Certainly they contain many of the same effects, yet based on classical precedent there would have been more acceptance of idiosyncrasy in 'lyric' meters given that classical lyric or 'choral' meters are much more variable than the stately hexameter. It is Milton's willingness to disrupt stately blank verse that makes him important to Hopkins; I doubt the precedent of non-regular metrics in lyric poets like Wyatt or Donne would have been particularly authorizing.

³² Charles Leonard Moore, 'The Lost Art of Blank Verse,' *The Dial* 33 (1902), p. 317.

likened to Italian Renaissance architecture) than of the ears that try to hear him. For Symonds, the inversion of the second foot—those which characterized Milton's prosody according to Guest—affirms that it is 'by no means easy to define the minimum of metrical form below which a Blank Verse ceases to be a metrical line.'³³

Milton's prosody, then, appears in the twentieth century with the solidity (or pomp) of architecture and yet dips below the threshold of security provided by definite or rigid participation in iambic formulae. If it no longer suffers in the poor light of Augustan prescription, neither does it inform and receive new life from contemporary poetics. Yet if it ceases to actively inform poetics in terms of formal choices, it somehow attains an exceptional importance to poetics through its more abstract significance. In the revised edition of *Milton's Prosody* (1921) Robert Bridges tells a lovely anecdote that serves to reveal the rather baroque response elicited by Milton at the fin-de-siècle and beyond. Following the publication of the first edition of *Milton's Prosody*, a study which helped correct the ongoing tendency of students toward Jeffersonian mispronunciations of Milton, Bridges found himself faced with an unusual uproar that made 'prosody' a news item worth advertising in posters: '[*Milton's Prosody*] converted some of the younger poets, who 'nimble began dancing'; they introduced Miltonic inversions so freely into their blank verse that champions of the prevailing orthodoxy raised an indignant protest in the newspapers.'³⁴ Bridges depicts a culture in which prosody was fashionable, but one which lacks phonological training and, perhaps more importantly, a good sense of how and when to adapt older models.

It is striking to find critics of such different stripes as Symonds, Bridges, and T.S. Eliot turning to Milton to express a common anxiety about the production and circulation of blank verse, if not accentual-syllabic verse more generally. In his first essay on Milton (1936) Eliot argues that Milton's 'hypertrophy of the auditory imagination' prevents the natural diction and strength of imagery that characterize

³³ *Blank Verse* (J.C. Nimmo, 1895), p. 12.

³⁴ Robert Bridges, *Milton's Prosody*, rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921.

Shakespeare and good verse more generally.³⁵ This makes Milton a very poor model for contemporary poets seeking (as did Eliot) to productively build from the tradition of blank verse. Like Symonds, Eliot worries that readers may need a technical understanding to recognize the blank verse; even Eliot's training, however, leads him only through (again architectural) 'mazes of sound.' Here 'Milton' stands in for the misdirection of poetic sound more generally. Taken alone, Eliot's first essay does little more than affirm modernist attitudes towards most if not all metrical verse,³⁶ and an active project of canon revision that seeks to prevent an aesthetics few would find valid: ornate language, cheap metrical tricks, and overwrought, technical syntax.

Eliot's second essay on Milton (1947), however, takes a surprising turn by reconsidering the modern utility of Miltonic prosody. That utility lies not in specific techniques of versification—as Tennyson or Hopkins found them—but in Milton's self-legislation: 'His work illustrates no principles of good writing; the only principles of writing that it illustrates are such as are valid only for Milton himself to observe.'³⁷ Milton's versification is 'unique' in a way that not only Edwardian but also free verse (alluded to by Eliot as 'pointless irregularity,' 'unscannable verse') could fail to be. Scansion unexpectedly returns here in a positive light, though strangely detached from the usual function of preparing readers for broad ranges of verse (much less poets for the writing of it). At the mid-twentieth century Milton's precise, 'unique' versification was less important to Eliot for its form than for what it symbolized *as* form. It stands for a 'freedom within form,' a verse 'continuously animated by the departure from, and return to, the regular measure.'³⁸ While there is a hint here (as in the 1917 'Reflections on Vers Libre') that measured irregularity differentiates versification from the mere

³⁵ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 263.

³⁶ The most famous rejections belong to Pound: first, his command not to write 'in sequence of a metronome,' and the later battle cry of *The Cantos*, 'to break the pentameter, that was the first heave.' The antagonists were legion, including Ford Madox Ford, Richard Aldington, Harriet Monroe, William Carlos Williams. I treat the subject extensively in my book project, *Modernism's Metronome*. See also Timothy Steele, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990).

³⁷ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 268.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

making of verse, Eliot's primary interest is on uniqueness and the exercise of 'freedom' rather than precise manipulations of syllable and stress.

His manipulation of blank verse in the *Four Quartets* notwithstanding, Eliot's largely satiric and iconic echoes of iambic verse in his early poetry confirm this view. The essays on Milton, the response of critics like Moore, and the hundreds of foot-inverting poets inspired by Bridges suggest that blank verse and perhaps prosody in general had shifted permanently from living form to reified model. This is not to say that Milton was *not* architectural, or was somehow 'organic' in his versification. It is rather to say that the cultural position of versification as a living discourse, as something to which critical and casual ears alike respond, was severely attenuated by the early- to mid-twentieth century. Through Milton's reception we can see this truism in action, can see a shift from earlier questions of how sound can be free within strictures to the far more abstract modern question of how 'form' might be liberating (or, less excitingly, symbolize liberation). If Milton continues to be a model for poetry at the midcentury, it is because he becomes a model for making new formal models. By virtue of his eccentricity he was central to the development of blank verse and prosody more generally as both praxis and science; and through this eccentricity he achieves a unique and symptomatic afterlife in a poetic culture more interested in 'formal' innovation than historically specific interventions in prosodic form. His changing reception marks the evacuation of the very 'poetics of repertoire'—to return to Jarvis—that could facilitate new explorations of his and other poets' 'auditory imagination.'