

AN ANALYSIS OF
GEORGE SAINTSBURY'S *A HISTORY OF ENGLISH PROSODY*

Ours is a time in which those interested in language and literature are much concerned with theory. I believe that, to understand our own theories, we can learn from studying the theories of those who have gone before us. In the field of prosody, George Saintsbury's 3-volume *A History of English Prosody*, which was written almost a century ago, is based on a remarkable theory of the English language, and of versification, which has never been methodically analysed, but which in my view still provides, in its very unsoundness, a provocative challenge to those of us who would like to describe the facts of English prosody more accurately today. Saintsbury's colossal work remains important because it has until fairly recently dominated much prosodic thinking, and because he covered a much larger range of writings (historically and otherwise) than any other prosodist has ever attempted to cope with. He cannot be accused, for example, of limiting his analysis to what literary scholars usually describe as iambic verse. In what follows I shall try to lay bare just what Saintsbury's theory is, and what is wrong with it. I also intend to show why a fairly representative late twentieth-century 'literary' approach such as my own will serve us better as a way of describing the varieties of verse-writing which Saintsbury discusses. Indeed, one central complaint I have about his method (and that of many theorists) is that he treats totally different kinds of writing as though they will, or should, all fit into his theoretical mould. He shows himself strangely unreceptive to the possibility that others, including poets, may view the English language, and prosodic uses of it, in a completely different way from his own

The first edition of Saintsbury's *History*, published in London, dates back to 1908, and, as the second edition of 1923 (from which I shall quote) contains only minor revisions, Saintsbury's work of over 1500 pages as he finally left it is best thought of as, essentially, belonging to the nineteenth century at least as much as the twentieth. Its taste and ideals are typically those of a Victorian gentleman-of-letters (the author was born in 1845), and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Saintsbury sees the history of English prosody as ending with—more importantly, as culminating in—the poetry of Swinburne, whose reputation had become very prominent during the last decades of Victoria's reign and was still going strong well into the twentieth century. In fact, Saintsbury's fascination with Swinburne reveals so much about his approach to prosody (and notably rhythm) generally, that it will be wisest for us to consider the author's treatment of this poet first.

In the last of his three volumes, Saintsbury claims that 'fifty "kind calm years" have put Mr. Swinburne indisputably at the head of the choir of the poets of our days' (p. 334). Although Saintsbury originally wrote this comment for his first edition, he preserved it, and probably still believed it, when he produced his second. Swinburne had died in 1909. What explains Saintsbury's intense and enduring devotion?

Swinburne is not only famed for his prosody in general, but also, and perhaps particularly, for the fact that his lines can be thought of as consisting of 'feet' yet are

extraordinarily varied. Later critics have rightly complained about Saintsbury's obsession with feet, and it is certainly true that he did not have patience with verse that he could not see as composed of feet, while moreover (and with more damage to the truth) he was keen to discover feet where there are none. Swinburne suited his taste exactly, because Swinburne's verse can be thought of as made up of feet while yet—and this is something Saintsbury's critics do not take sufficient account of—Swinburne did not use one and the same type of feet throughout a poem, but constantly varied them. It would be wrong to think of Saintsbury as a prosodist who insisted on mechanical regularity; on the contrary, while he rejected verse without feet, his consistent preference was for verse which he could interpret as systematised yet varied. The following passage from 'Ilicet' is a fair example of Swinburnian verse liked by Saintsbury:

There is an end of joy and sorrow,
Peace all day long, all night, all morrow,
 But never a time to laugh or weep.
The end is come of pleasant places,
The end of tender words and faces, [5]
The end of all, the poppied sleep.

(Vol. III, p. 342)

Sainbury adds, with reference to this and other passages, the comment, 'The variety and the individuality of the construction of these measures becomes almost bewildering, though every one of them responds, with utmost accuracy, to the laws and specifications which have been reached, as the result of actual examination, in these three volumes.'

We shall later consider Saintsbury's 'laws and specifications' as he actually sets them forth. He does not analyse this passage, and indeed regularly leaves the reader wondering quite what the quotations are meant to illustrate. We can only try for ourselves whether we can see 'laws and specifications' operating here, the 'laws' presumably referring to something systematically regular, and the specifications to things not necessarily regular, but somehow permissible within the system.

It is not difficult to see that lines 3 and 6 could be seen as containing either eight syllables each (if *never* is pronounced as one syllable) or as nine and eight. A system-hunter might well decide to opt for eight syllables in each line, not only because that way regular alternation of iambic beat is secured, but also because it is tempting to conclude that, since all of the other lines obviously have nine syllables if read naturally, the two indented lines differ systematically from the others (let us also note the monosyllabic rhyme *weep—sleep*).

It is not, however, part of Saintsbury's laws that line-length must be syllabically systematic in this way, and, with some difficulty, the reader of Swinburne might well come to the conclusion that one should pronounce *never* as a word of two syllables, not as *nev'r*. One

would be justified in this view because of what Swinburne does in e.g. the 'Hymn to Prosperine', of which Saintsbury quotes the following two lines:

Fate is a sea without shore, and the soul is a rock that abides:
But her ears are vexed with the roar, and her face with the foam of the tides.

(Vol. III, p. 341)

Nothing within these lines suggests that we should—as we might feel tempted to do with *never-try* to adjust our ordinary pronunciation to a desirable pattern. Obviously, the first line has sixteen syllables, and the second seventeen, and it is difficult to see what syllable we might be called upon to 'add' to the first line or to 'take away' from the second. Moreover, our urge to do so (assuming we are looking for a system within the lines) is reduced to zero once we realise (a) that there are six strongly stressed syllables in each line, while (b) the number of unstressed syllables between the stressed ones, although not constant, varies between one and two. Moreover—and this is crucially important—we are left in no doubt at all as to which syllables are stressed and which unstressed. Any natural reading brings out not just what we might call the *rhythm* but also the unambiguous *metre* of each line: the two are identical, and determined by a reading which identifies each stressed and unstressed syllable with absolute certainty, both physically and in the mind, as follows:

/ x x / x x / x x / x x / x x /
Fate is a sea without shore, and the soul is a rock that abides;
x x / x / x x / x x / x x / x x /
But her ears are vexed with the roar, and her face with the foam of the tides.

We are no doubt justified in thinking of feet here predominantly the lines consist of anapaests (xx/) rather than an arbitrary sequence of weak and strong syllables. The anapaestic 'measure' is most easily discovered from the second line, and it is logical to assume that in the first the pattern is to be seen as 'rising', not 'falling', although in theory, with a stressed syllable both at the beginning and at the end, it could be either. What Swinburne clearly gives us is a series of anapaests for which he has occasionally 'substituted' other feet: the iamb 'are vexed' in the second line, and in the first line either the monosyllabic (so-called 'headless') foot 'Fate' followed by the anapaest 'is a sea', or else the trochee (/x) 'Fate is' followed by the iamb 'a sea'. The iamb 'that abides' concludes the line in either case.

Whichever way we interpret the beginning of the first line, it is clear that Swinburne here feels free to substitute iambs for anapaests and sees this procedure as allowable within the anapaestic system even if it is no doubt meant to be part of the charm of the lines that the reader cannot in each case predict where substitution will occur.

In view of the fact that Swinburne clearly regarded iambs and anapaests as metrically equivalent, it is highly probable that in the 'Ilicet' passage *never* is intended to have its full syllabic value. The line is iambic with one anapaestic foot:

x / x x / x / x /
But ne/ ver a time/ to laugh/ or weep.

Of course, unless a reader knows all the 'laws and specifications' of such a system, it may well be very hard, or even impossible, to discover any system at all. It seems likely that Swinburne was using what he considered to be a system (presumably one he expected readers to recognise) and there is no doubt that Saintsbury believed that he could determine the exact operation of the system in each line. The reader may feel less confident than Saintsbury. What, for example, is the scansion, i.e. what are the *feet*, of such a line as

There is an end of joy and sorrow,

or of

Peace all day long, all night, all morrow,

where, in terms of feet, the status of 'There is' and 'Peace all day long' seems far from clear?

I do not suggest that there is anything 'wrong' with the lines, and that it should be possible to feel quite as sure about the feet as in e.g. 'The end of all, the poppied sleep.' To me, the speech rhythms allowed by these two lines are actually more satisfying than the predictability of 'The end is come of pleasant places,/The end of tender words and faces.' But in those lines there is no difference between speech rhythm and metre, while in 'There is' and 'Peace all day long' one cannot feel sure, either of the accentuation at the level of speech rhythm (more than one accentuation is possible), or of what the metre is meant to be. If this is to be considered unsatisfactory, then the fault would be Swinburne's, who would have signalled his intentions more clearly to the reader if he had *either* used, say, an iambic base as a mental pattern from which in actuality it is understood the speech rhythm may depart (as in 'Peace all day long'), *or* had consistently adhered to a 'system' in which e.g. anapaests are acceptable substitutions for iambs. At all events, it seems to be much harder to identify a system of 'laws and specifications' than Saintsbury suggests.

But then, upon close inspection of his book, it becomes clear that for all his assertions Saintsbury himself did not know what his 'laws and specifications' amounted to. Thus we find him discussing a few lines from Tennyson's 'In the Valley of Caerteret':

All along the valley, stream that flashest white.
Deepening thy voice with the deepening of the night,
All along the valley, where thy waters flow,
I walked with one I loved two and thirty years ago.

(Vol. III, p. 211)

About this Saintsbury says first that it is 'one of the pieces which require no small study to be certain of their exact manufacture' (p. 210). Now in the case of the Swinburne examples, one may complain that Saintsbury is too confident of his 'laws and specifications', but one must also in his defence say that Swinburne's actual practice largely justified the belief that the lines are made up of feet of one dominant kind for which other feet may be substituted in the actual rhythm/metre; furthermore, despite the uncertainty of the status of the first four syllables of 'Peace all day long, all night, all morrow', one may legitimately suggest that they are part of a line which has an iambic base. But surely no such reasonings recommend themselves, unless one is absolutely and dogmatically determined to look for 'feet', in Tennyson's passage. Its essential structure (and it has one) is that of lines with strong medial breaks, which are immediately revealed in any natural reading. These breaks help to throw into relief the fact that in each half-line (one either side of the break) two stressed syllables stand out more than any others. If, rather artificially, one wrote:

All along the valley-stream that flashes white,

a reader might interpret the line as having a tum-ti-tum (etc.) pattern. Tennyson's comma after 'valley' quite prevents us from constructing such a reading, and makes us aware that any 'poetic' tendency to make the stress on 'long' as pronounced as that on 'All' should be resisted. Reading the lines naturally, as though they were prose, more readers would probably produce medial breaks and strong stresses as follows:

/ / / /
 All along the valley,/ stream that flashest white,
 / / / /
 Deepening thy voice/ with the deepening of the night,
 / / / /
 All along the valley,/ where thy waters flow,
 / / / /
 I walked with one I loved/ two and thirty years ago.

Saintsbury cannot identify this pattern, which is that of alliterative verse, and not that of any system of 'feet'. He does recognise 'a very strong centre pause', but goes on to say that on either side' of it 'the cadence may be iambic *or* trochaic'. Rather than quoting him in full, it is perhaps most illuminating to give the various scansions of Tennyson's lines which he considers possible. Thus:

All/ along/ the val/ ley, // stream/ that flash/ est white,
 Deep/ ening/ thy voice/ with// the deep/ ening of/ the night,
 All/ along/ the val/ ley, // where/ thy wa/ ters flow,
 I walked/ with one/ I loved/ two// and thir/ ty years ago.

is his first solution. It looks as though Saintsbury finds seven `feet' in each line, and presumably he should have marked off `ago' as the final foot of the passage. The pattern which he thinks he detects is, miraculously, iambic. We can see how strongly dependent Saintsbury's approach is on the belief that feet may be of various kinds: thus, in this 'iambic' example, nine of the feet consist of one strong syllable each, being 'headless'. It does not appear to bother Saintsbury that in this way any arbitrary number of syllables in a line could be accommodated, or that it is not likely that a poet is maintaining a system if so many feet are exceptions (including trisyllabic 'ening of' in line 2), or that he is simply wrenching English pronunciation for the sake of his theory when in effect he makes the second syllable of `valley' as strong as the first (there cannot be much difference if each is to be the stressed syllable of a foot). The central pauses, too, seem to be adjusted to the theoretical scheme rather than those of normal speech: surely a gap after `loved' in line 4 is far more likely than one between `two' and `and thirty'.

This last point is one which Saintsbury in his fashion chooses to deal with, saying that the pauses at 'with' and `two' might be put back a syllable, which would give 'a fine anapaestic substitution in "with the deep-" and "two and thir-"; in which case the two lines in question would become:

Deep/ ening/ thy voice// with the deep/ ening of/ the night/

and

I walked/ with one/ I loved// two and thir/ ty years/ ago/

The 'substitution' which Saintsbury talks of would in fact be a reduction, from seven syllables to six in each line. It is impossible to believe that, *if Tennyson were thinking in feet*, it would not make any difference to him whether the reader opted for six feet or seven. It is equally difficult to believe that the poet did not care whether one would make `the deep' a foot or 'with the deep', or, for that matter, that he himself would think of a line as consisting of one monosyllabic foot, followed by two disyllabic ones, then by two trisyllabic ones, and then again by a monosyllabic one. If Tennyson himself did not think of the line in this way, it is a reasonable assumption that he did not expect his readers to do so.

But we should not underestimate Saintsbury's resourcefulness. After all, the cadence on either side of the central pause may be iambic or trochaic, and thus he proceeds to offer 'alternative' readings of lines 1 and 3, as follows (if I understand his alternative markings correctly):

All/ along/ the val/ ley, // stream that/ fashest/ white/

and

All/ along/ the val/ ley, // where thy/ waters/ flow/

It does not seem necessary to repeat the arguments already advanced, although with each new variant reading offered they gain even more force. The unlikelihood of 'stream' being a foot on its own (as in Saintsbury's first reading) is increased, not diminished, by the suggestion that a trochaic 'stream that' would also be possible. Indeed, the very claim that the lines are in any sense 'iambic' or 'trochaic' gets further and further eroded as Saintsbury proposes more and more alternatives, since his readings incorporate so many different 'laws and specifications' that the very existence of any single one of them becomes questionable. Thus, our last scansion is merely *one* partly trochaic line which Saintsbury would allow, since the possibility of a trochaic alternative 'might easily be extended'. We can thus effectively prove, on the basis of further analysis even of this one example, that Saintsbury's system exists in his mind rather than in poetry, except perhaps that of his beloved Swinburne. For, since we can place trochees or iambs anywhere, and may use monosyllabic feet (or sometimes trisyllabic ones), we are justified in scanning:

/ x / x / x / x / x /
All a/ long the/ valley, // stream that/ flashest/ white/

in which not a single foot is identical with those which Saintsbury first produced in

/ x / x / / / x / x /
All/ along/ the val/ ley, // stream/ that flash/ est white/

although our scansion is much more regular. Furthermore, as 'trisyllabic' feet include the dactyl (/xx), we, or at least Saintsbury, could read:

/ xx x / / / x / x /
All along/ the val/ ley, // stream/ that flash/ est white/

which would give us by now our fifth legitimate scansion. It is impossible to believe that the line is of such 'manufacture' (to use Saintsbury's own word) as to allow so many, and indeed more, scansions which—in his view—would all go to show the existence of a system of laws and specifications. There is obviously something wrong with that system, not with the English language or with Tennyson, and it is Saintsbury's system and its basis into which we now need to enquire.

II

My suggestion is that it is not Saintsbury's accidental misunderstanding of the rhythmical structure of Tennyson's lines which leads him astray, but, much more fundamentally, his outlook on language and prosody. Even in the instance we have examined, it is that outlook

which is responsible—and predictably and inevitably so—for his confusion. He was contemptuous of alliterative verse, and therefore it does not occur to him that Tennyson might use it: a respectable poet writes in feet. Thus feet have to be found, and, since Saintsbury's system of laws and specifications is erroneous, he on the one hand does find the feet which he is looking for but, on the other, exactly because the system gives him such enormous latitude, unintentionally manages to undermine the very existence of it.

To Saintsbury the temptation to find feet was so strong that, in his *History of English Prose Rhythm* (London, 1912), which is capably dealt with by D.W. Harding in *Words into Rhythm* (Cambridge, 1975, p.118 ff), he even discusses prose as though it is made up of 'feet' commonly thought of as existing only in verse. Curiously, he does not, however, produce systematic readings, but instead such things as the following, which I quote from Harding (p. 121).

x / x / / x / x x x / x
 When all/ is done,/ human/ life/ is,/ at the greatest/
 x x / x / x / x / x x x
 and the best,/ but like/ a froward/ child/ that must be
 / x x / x x / x x / x / x / x
 played with/ and humoured/ a little/ to keep it/ quiet/
 x x / x / x / x / x / x
 till it falls/ asleep;/ and then/ the care/ is over.

Even as a way of marking off the phrases of prose this seems pretty arbitrary, with the peculiar gaps between 'human', 'life', and 'is' (Saintsbury thought that feet were divided by small actual pauses). But, at most, the 'scansion' indicates one possible way of dividing prose-phrases; the terms of verse-feet are simply inappropriate, because the passage as presented by Saintsbury does not resemble verse according to the definition of it which is implied by his system, set forth in Vol. I of *A History of English Prosody*, pp. 82-84.

At first, it does seem as though Saintsbury is confusing verse and prose, for, until we reach 'life', we have two 'iamb's followed by one 'trochee', and trochaic substitution is acceptable to Saintsbury. But, in his verse-system, the status of the monosyllabic feet 'life' and 'is' would be dubious, and 'at the greatest' would hardly be acceptable.

It is odd, though, that Saintsbury from *his* point of view does not 'scan' the passage as though it were verse, for otherwise the labels of verse-feet have no purpose in the analysis of the passage. Moreover, it is not very difficult, if we use Saintsbury's notions of verse, to make verse out of the passage according to his system. For example, we can read:

x / x / / x / x x x / x /
 When all/ is done/ human/ life is,/ at the grea/ test and/
 x / x / x / x / x / x
 the best,/ but like/ a fro/ ward child/ that must/ be
 / x x / x x / x x / x /
 played/ with and hu/ moured a li/ ttle to keep/ it qui/

and so on. A slight rhetorical stress on 'and' between 'the greatest' and 'the best' seems quite acceptable in a fairly natural delivery. Saintsbury might have objected to the divisions here chosen, but they seem no more objectionable or impossible than those in e.g. 'Deep/ ening/ thy voice/ with// the deep/ ening of/ the night.' The use of trochees ('human') and anapaests ('at the grea') is allowable within Saintsbury's system, as we have already seen.

So as to avoid the charge that I am making a mockery of that system, I shall now present, fairly and with only slight adaptation, Saintsbury's main 'laws and specifications', within the context of Vol. I in particular, but also of the other volumes.

Saintsbury has little time for alliterative verse, which he hardly discusses and does not acknowledge to be an essential component of the great tradition of 'English' verse as defined by him. About the continuity of that tradition Saintsbury was not in doubt, nor about its prosodic characteristics. In Vol. I, Anglo-Saxon (alliterative) poetry is dismissed in terms like this: 'Regular metrical time, tune, "number", it never possesses for any considerable period; and its momentary hints of such things are uncertain and fragmentary' (p. 73). Saintsbury clearly believed that 'Anglo-Saxon poetry', despite its alleged ineptitude, was desirous of achieving what Swinburne later came to exemplify. By contrast with the immature beginnings, 'the differences of English verse in 1300 and 1900 are mere differences of practice and accomplishment'; the Darwinian implication is that the verse of 1300 is inferior to that of 1900, but its main prosodic laws are the same, and are applicable to all English verse between 1300 and 1900. Those laws can be set forth as follows, largely in Saintsbury's own words:

- (1) Every English verse-line not within the tradition of alliterative verse (i.e. most verse lines after c. 1300) tends to be composed of feet of one, two, or three syllables.
- (2) The foot of one syllable is always strong (stressed), except when it is nothing at all, being a pause-foot, the 'equivalent of silence'.
- (3) The foot of two syllables usually consists of one strong and one weak syllable, and though it is not essential that either should come first, the weak syllable precedes rather more commonly.
- (4) The foot of three syllables never has more than one strong syllable in it, and that syllable is almost always the first or the third. (In poetry c. 1900 such a foot need have no strong syllable at all.)
- (5) The foot of one syllable is practically not found except (a) in the first place of a line; (b) in the last place of it; (c) at a strong caesura or break ('it being almost invariably necessary that the voice should rest on it long enough to supply the missing companion to make up the equivalent of a "time and a half' at least'; similarly the monosyllabic foot

may be found in very exceptional cases where the same trick of the voice is used apart from strict caesura').

(6) The foot of two (or of three) syllables may essentially be found anywhere, and feet of two and three syllables may be very freely substituted for each other; however, there is 'a certain metrical and rhythmical norm of the line which must not be confused by too frequent substitutions', juxtapositions of more than three short syllables should be avoided, and the licence of monosyllabic beginnings, terminations, or pauses must be sparingly used.

(Cf. Vol. I, pp. 82-4.)

There is, of course, some connection between Saintsbury's approach to prose and that to verse. There is the same inveterate tendency to label things in both cases. It does not seem to occur to Saintsbury that in prose, if there are so many different 'feet', labels that should be—and commonly are—reserved for a system in verse can have no function: he appears to feel that the mere use of labels somehow imposes a pattern on prose, or, otherwise, that what happens to be his personal 'scansion' is something all sensible people will share and which has some real significance in our appreciation of a passage. We may assume that there is a similar mental process (probably unconsciously) at work in his attitude to verse. The distinction between Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse and e.g. Tennyson's 'All along the valley' is, as we have seen, wholly arbitrary. The only reason why Saintsbury does distinguish between them is that he is prejudiced in favour of Tennyson, and this prejudice is so strong that he supposes that Tennyson is writing according to Saintsbury's system of laws and specifications. But the absurdity of that system is in turn shown up by the fact that (a) it *can*, however inappropriately, accommodate Tennyson's lines ('inappropriately' because it is not meant to accommodate alliterative verse and does it lamely), and (b) in the process, shows that it is hardly a system at all, but can be used to describe all sorts of subjective 'scansions'.

Predominantly, the 'system' is a mythical fabrication which allows Saintsbury the illusion that all the verse which he likes is organised on a defined set of principles. But on the one hand a much tighter system would be needed if it were to do justice to any verse which we could recognise as so constructed. On the other hand Saintsbury's actual system can be used to describe almost any kind of writing indiscriminately, prose included, and thus serves no purpose other than that it provides some sort of quasi-scientific sanction for personal interpretation.

Yet, to say that English verse 1300-1900 cannot be regarded as constructed on Saintsbury's system, is not to say that the system is an invention which bears no relation to the reality of any such verse at all. As we have seen, it would seem to provide a reasonable description of what Swinburne appears to be doing. There is little doubt that Swinburne believed in such 'substitution' of feet as is a central feature of Saintsbury's system. Insofar as Swinburne manages often a close and inescapable match between what I would call 'speech

rhythm' and `metre', one can actually identify the feet, but there are obvious dangers to such identification caused by the fact that, English being what it is, a reader may feel complete uncertainty as to which syllables to stress, and will—if scansion is sought—feel the more bewildered by the knowledge that quite different kinds of feet can occur at almost any point.

There are good arguments for believing that in any case most poets in English did *not* model their verse on any such set of principles as Swinburne appears to have had in mind. I think it is fair to say that his verse is especially well-known for its use of anapaests, and this suggests that his prosody is not at all typical. His experiments with unusual feet, and unusual combinations of them, far from being in any sense the culmination of a long-lasting *English* tradition, almost certainly is to be seen as strongly influenced by his reading of classical poets (he even wrote poems in Latin and Greek).

The earliest verse in English, which Saintsbury would on the whole so much like to ignore, was not made up of feet of either the Swinburnian or any other kind. Yet one reason why Saintsbury, despite his professed disapproval of it, nevertheless in practice occasionally sees some merit in aspects of it is that his own system allows variations of feet which are not necessarily different from stress patterns in alliterative verse. He thus comes to accept alliterative verse which anyone thinking in terms of *regular* feet patterns, especially iambs, would reject, and which in fact only accidentally fits into his own system. As Saintsbury is never specific about actual examples of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) verse, we can only gain an impression of his approach by considering some of the things he says about the so-called `alliterative revival' of the fourteenth century when, in Saintsbury's view and to his amazement, alliterative verse surfaced again as `only a loop or backwater in the stream of English poetry—an unsuccessful attempt at reactionary rebellion' (Vol. I, p. 191). Even so, despite this kind of generalisation, Saintsbury tries hard to fit the aberrant authors into his system. The attempt is misguided in principle and inevitably injurious to the poetry, but no doubt prompted, in a pseudo-logical way, by the circumstance that there *are* some (wholly fortuitous) resemblances between certain patterns permitted by the Saintsbury system and those of alliterative verse. Thus we get told that Langland (of all people) is 'trochaic sometimes, but he constantly blends the "double time" with, and often passes from it into. "triple time," the time, as we call it, of the anapaest' (p.181). Amazingly, Langland even gets praised for his '*regularity*' (Saintsbury's italics, p. 180). In support of such claims, Saintsbury quotes the beginning from the first version of *Piers Plowman*, starting as follows:

In A somer sesun • whon softe was the sonne,
I schop me in-to a schroud • A scheep as I were;
In Habite of an Hermite • vn-holy of werkes,
Wende I wydene in this world • wondres to here.

We need not assume that Saintsbury arrives at his conclusions on the basis of any assumption that Langland's pronunciation of English differed from ours, for, almost at the outset of his

opus, Saintsbury has already asserted that such notions are 'very mainly guess-work—resting on ingenious hypotheses not a century old' (Vol. I, p. 10). So we can confidently 'scan' e.g.

x / x x /
whon softe/ was the sonne

and

x / x x /
A scheap/ as I were

as though these phrases consist of an 'iamb' and an 'anapaest' in each case. Of course, not all of the phrases respond readily to the Saintsbury approach—or rather, our application of his system, for he does not scan the lines for us. Also, those which do seem 'regular' or otherwise acceptable by his standards pass the test only by chance. But the error in Saintsbury's thinking is compounded by this very fact. Someone who believes that most English verse before 1900 is either alliterative or iambic could never feel tempted to confuse the two modes the way Saintsbury does. But in Saintsbury's model, acceptance of alliterative verse as somehow 'regular' or 'systematic' according to his criteria is just as possible but just as whimsical as rejection of it as too 'irregular' or 'unsystematic'.

But, in the main, we should reject Saintsbury's approach to alliterative verse as quite foreign to its nature, which he is constantly inclined to distort. It is not just harmless name-calling, but a serious mangling—physical or mental—of the truth to claim that in *William of Palerne* 'each of the lines falls, as a rule, roughly into the rhythm of a four-footed anapaestic metre' (pp. 102-3). No unprejudiced reader will make this claim come true without either physically violating the language or mentally abstracting the wrong metrical pattern, as can be understood even from the first two lines of the passage quoted by Saintsbury:

Hit bi-fel in that forest • there fast by-side,
Ther woned a wel old cherl • that was a couherde.

Saintsbury is right, I think, in seeing a connection between the rhythms of alliterative verse and 'ballad metre'. A good example of the connection is the *Tale of Gamelyn*:

Litheth and lesteneth • and herkeneth a right,
And ye schulle heere a-talking • of a doughty knight,
Sire Johan of Boundys • was his righte name,
he cowde of norture ynough • and mochil of game.

(Lines 1-4, Vol. 1, p. 255)

The inherent rhythmical patterning of the lines, the pauses, and the rhymes, all would seem to suggest that the 'lines' are merely one way of writing out something which is really, as Saintsbury grants, in 'ballad-quatrain'. I would indicate the structure as follows:

/ x x / xx
 Litheth and lesteneth,
 x / xx x /
 And herkeneth aright,
 x x x / x / x
 And ye schulle heere a-talking
 x x / x /
 Of a doughty knight.

x / x / x
 Sire Johan of Boundys
 x x / /
 Was his righte name
 x / x / x x /
 He cowde of norture ynough
 x / x x /
 And mochil of game.

The fact that these lines vary somewhat in length need not disturb us: Saintsbury and prosodists of his kind are quite willing to concede such variation in ballad metre, not least because their notion of substitution of e.g. 'anapaests' for 'trochees' automatically does away with rigorous syllable-counting. I am not suggesting that the accentuation and syllabification which I propose is definitely identical to what the poet meant it to be, but I do think it is likely, in this instance, that few readers would wish to argue any syllables into or out of existence, and I am convinced that the syllables which I see as stressed do stand out from their environment.

At all events, it appears difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in a natural reading (whatever our precise theories of late medieval pronunciation), the lines emerge as being of variable length, with no fixed number of unstressed syllables, but with, as a norm, two stressed syllables in each line. The fact that in line 7 it is probably easier to see three syllables as standing out than two hardly affects our perception of the general pattern.

The dots in the passage as quoted by Saintsbury are obviously pause-marks which help us to understand that the long lines there are actually divided into 'half-lines', the 'lines' of the quatrains as we produce them. Astonishingly, Saintsbury—though he recognises the quatrains as such—asserts that 'it will be almost always (I think I might say always) still possible, as it will be always elsewhere, to neglect the dot, and scan the whole line (double line), even on strictly metrical principles, as decasyllable, Alexandrine, or fourteener' (p. 256, his italics).

Like many others, I believe that there is a connection between alliterative verse and 'free verse', the chief characteristic of both being that they do not consist of 'feet' (either at the level of 'speech rhythm' or that of 'metre'), but of the phrasal patterns of prose; these phrases

are arranged in such a way that the reader's attention is called to rhythmical organisations, both within the phrase-patterns and within the line as a whole, which one is not normally aware of in prose (or indeed might not always be aware of if the verse were written out with prose-lineation). The chief difference between alliterative verse and free verse lies in the fact that the former is normally more clearly ordered according to its own 'laws' of alliteration and stress-patterning.

Writing the Preface to his Second Edition (1923), Saintsbury says that 'The most prominent feature of poetic practice today is, of course, the preference shown to "free" verse', which essentially (and appropriately) he appears to see as consisting of 'ametric rhythm' (p. vi). It would be unfair and little to the purpose to try out his 'system' on free verse after 1900, since it is verse prior to this date which the system is designed to illuminate for us. We do, of course, have the right to ask how well an approach like Saintsbury's can cope with what we may interpret as 'free verse' before that date, such as the following lines from Blake's *French Revolution* (1971):

/ x / x x / / x / x x / x x / x
 Then the ancientest peer, Duke of Burgundy, rose from the Monarch's
 / / / x /
 right hand, red as wines
 x x / x x / x x / x / / x / x x
 From his mountains, an odour of war like ripe vineyard rose from his
 / x
 garments,
 x x / x x / x x / x / x x / x x
 And the chamber became as a clouded sky, o'er the council he
 / / x / /
 outstretched his red limbs,
 / x / x / x x // x / x x x /
 Cloth'd in flames of crimson, as a ripe vineyard stretches over sheaves
 x /
 of corn
 x / / / x x x / x x / x / / x
 The fierce Duke hung over the council; around him crowd, weeping
 x x / x /
 in his burning robe,
 x / / x / x / x / / x / x / x x
 A bright cloud of infant souls, his words fall like purple autumn on
 x /
 the sheaves.

(Vol. III, p. 24)

I have copied out the passage as it stands in Saintsbury, except that I have added marks which—if one is to decide which syllables in ordinary speech stand out as weak or strong—are meant to indicate my own choice in the matter. Of course individual readings can differ to some extent, and this crude representation does no justice to *relative* degrees of stress, leave alone to where pauses may or do occur, etc. But, rough-and-ready though my procedure is, I

believe that it would indicate a pattern of feet if there was one, since in foot-scansion it is exactly our awareness of the difference between 'weak' and 'strong' in natural reading which draws our attention to the scansion in the first place.

Saintsbury claims of this passage that its 'metrical norm is a seven-foot anapaest, sometimes cut short, sometimes extended, and undergoing substitution of the most unlimited kind, with the result that the rhythm constantly approaches (and sometimes very closely) the long swinging forms of which Mr. Swinburne was himself so fond in his later days ...'

I find it impossible to believe that Blake himself saw the passage in such terms. I suppose that, if one really believes in 'substitution of the most unlimited kind' it *is* possible largely to square the lines with the Saintsbury system, and my own accent marks would not suggest otherwise, although they suggest that in some places the task would not be easy. But the point is that, allowing for such unlimited substitution as Saintsbury would have us embark upon, it would be very surprising if we did *not* find that Blake was trying to write like Swinburne himself, should it be our wish to enter into this belief. The very variation of Blake's patterning, however, suggests the much likelier interpretation that he simply was not thinking of feet and substitutions, and—although Saintsbury does not find them so despite quoting them—Blake's own words are an apposite description of what he is doing: 'I therefore [i.e. to avoid monotony] have produced a variety in every line, both in cadence and number of syllables. Every word and letter is studied and put into its place' (Vol. III, p.20). As Blake explains in the last sentence, his free verse is not to be seen as uncontrolled. The care of his craftsmanship does not lie in the use of any such 'feet' as Saintsbury invents, but in the effect of balance that he manages to give in the choice and arrangement of his phrases, the stress-patterning being intensified by alliteration (amongst other sound effects) and repetition (e.g. alliteration in 'rose from the Monarch's right hand, red as wines', and repetition in 'rose from the Monarch's right hand' ... 'rose from his garments', etc). The 'piling-up' of the phrases throughout the lines—which contain only few really major breaks—is another major factor in the very special result obtained, which looks forward, not to Swinburne (who did think in feet) but to, for example, Walt Whitman and D.H. Lawrence. There is no doubting Blake's skill, but it is useless to see the lines in terms of feet. Indeed, Blake's very tendency is away from these by putting emphasis on phrase-divisions which may not correspond to 'feet' at all.

One might at first think that the Saintsbury approach, if deficient in the case of alliterative verse, 'ballad metre', and 'free verse', would at least be innocuous (or possibly even helpful) if applied to the very large body of verse in English which has generally been regarded as 'regular', i.e. consisting of lines of equal syllable-length or well-defined stanzaic structure, and accentually sufficiently inclined to fall into patterns which we think of as 'feet', even if those do not constantly demonstrate their presence in the lines as we may normally speak or read them.

Unfortunately, Saintsbury's system does not aid our understanding of the nature of such verse, and actually prevents our seeing things for what they are in instances which are at all difficult.

One of the problems about verse which appears regular is that we may upon reflection have some doubt as to whether it really is. To stay with the example of Blake, let me quote—in Saintsbury's version—two stanzas from the 'Introduction' of *Songs of Experience* (about which Saintsbury says that he thinks that he 'would rather have written these lines than anything in English poetry outside of Shakespeare')

O Earth! O Earth! return!
Arise from out the dewy grass.
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more,
Why wiltt thou turn away?
The starry floor,
The watery shore,
Is given thee till the break of day.
(Vol. III, p 15)

Either at the level of speech rhythm or that of metre, the first line surely consists of an unequivocal weak-strong-weak-strong pattern. By 'unequivocal' I mean that it is impossible to read the line otherwise, if pronounced naturally, and that therefore there can be no doubt about the distribution of stresses. The same would appear to be true of the next line. But 'Night is worn', with its three syllables, comes as somewhat of a surprise; and if it is to be read as starting with a 'headless' foot, one's initial confidence about the presence of an iambic pattern may decrease yet further with 'And the morn', which is not easy to square with any iambic pattern. Does Blake, after all, merely by accident use what appear to be iambs in the first two lines? It may be tempting to read line 5 as

/ x x x / x x /
Rises from the slumberous mass.

But I think that the second stanza confirms one's initial impression that Blake does use an iambic matrix for his poem. For, while in 'Turn away no more' he so to speak leaves out the initial syllable which we do find in 'O Earth ...', we also discover that 'The starry floor' has the extra initial syllable lacking from 'night is worn'. As I see it, in *metrical* terms each line has been thought of as consisting of iambs and thus an even number of syllables, while *in practice* several of the lines are headless.

If this analysis is correct, then it will affect not only our mental perception of the lines, but also the way they are read. For we would have to interpret the 'headless' line which starts with 'Rises' as containing seven syllables, not eight, unless we assumed that Blake introduced yet further deviation from the iambic scheme. No such assumption is necessary if we take it that the line consists of seven syllables, with disyllabic 'slumb'rous'. It is a persistent habit of Saintsbury's to resist any such pronunciation, yet it is acceptable in English, and even in Saintsbury's terms the line is much harder to scan if 'slumb'rous' were to be ruled out of court. If it is accepted, it immediately becomes clear that *metrically* (though not necessarily also in *speech*) 'from' has stress.

The metrical scheme as I see it also suggests the pronunciations 'wat'ry' and 'giv'n'. It therefore comes as a shock to see Saintsbury write: 'Blake wrote "wat'ry" and "giv'n" according to the prescriptions of Bysshe [author of *Art of Poetry*, 1702], whose work, we know, he possessed; but the love of poetry laughs at such locksmiths, and we may spell it as he would have spelt it today, though the shorter feet make good metre enough.' Thus Saintsbury is not only a victim of his own prosodic thinking to the extent of finding much more complicated patterns of feet than an unbiased analysis reveals, but he also—and more seriously—would like to suppress the very spellings which indicate Blake's pronunciation, and thus by implication his prosody. I believe that an appraisal of what the prosody may be will help us to understand pronunciation (at least in the verse under study), but it is even more likely that any evidence of what the pronunciation may have been will help us to understand prosody; any approach like Saintsbury's which prefers to ignore the evidence of spelling in favour of preconceived notions of prosody is sure to be damaging to an understanding of both the language and the prosody in question, and in any study which tries to gain insight into both, the demands of the language should always come first (since prosody is based on it, and not *vice versa*).

Blake actually wrote 'watry', not 'wat'ry', and no doubt wanted the reader to perceive a connection with 'starry' immediately above it. Saintsbury chooses to print the last two stanzas of the poem, not the first two, but Blake's forms are used with considerable consistency to indicate both his pronunciation (in the poem, anyway) and the prosody: with 'giv'n' we may compare disyllabic 'fallen' in 'And fallen fallen light renew' (cf. the O.U.P. facsimile ed., *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, London, repr. 1972). Blake similarly alternates 'walk'd' and disyllabic 'lapsed' in 'That walk'd among the ancient trees' and 'Calling the lapsed Soul'.

It should have been of great concern to Saintsbury that Blake's spellings, as late as just over a century before *A History of English Prosody*, unmistakably suggest the persistence of habits of pronunciation which, throughout the history of English verse, have to be reckoned with as an important factor in whatever we may wish to conclude about English prosody. Saintsbury's refusal to acknowledge the potential importance of such spellings (though his refusal is not systematic and consistent) first of all inevitably leads him to misjudge pronunciation (about which his mind had largely been made up in the abstract anyway); he

then inevitably goes astray in his interpretation of prosody; and the mistaken assumptions about prosody which he brings to bear on the reading of verse subsequently prevent him (once again) from seeing the importance of spelling as reflecting pronunciation. The whole process is made worse by the fact that Saintsbury's prosodic 'system', once accepted, allows virtually any pronunciation as part of the 'laws and specifications': the anachronistic 'given' which Saintsbury invents is, within the system, neither more nor less acceptable than Blake's 'giv'n'. Any pronunciation, however unhistorical, can be accommodated by Saintsbury's system; in turn, the system is so flexible that it will hardly suggest that any pronunciation in any period is, within the body of verse examined, more likely than any other.

But no less important is the fact that Saintsbury's system fails to give the reader any indication of the importance of distinguishing between 'speech rhythm' and 'metre'; and of course the nature of speech rhythm as such is not faced at all. The relentless march of feet treads everything else underfoot. Here is one of Saintsbury's comments about Milton: 'Milton, it was observed at the beginning, is perhaps the first English non-dramatic poet who uses the spondee much, and he certainly makes the most of it in such instances as the magnificent "Or that *starr 'd Ethiop Queen that strove*" (Vol. II, p. 214).

To talk of the use of a 'spondee' (//) here is merely confusing. The actual metre of the line, if considered within its context in *Il Penseroso*, is iambic. Its successor, line 20, displays the pattern unmistakably: 'To set her beauty's praise above' (see e.g. *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler, London, 1968, p.141). Saintsbury's own system hardly allows for a 'spondee': 'The foot of two syllables usually consists of one long and one short syllable...' (Vol. I, p. 83). The crucial word appears to be 'usually', but if other combinations than 'long'- 'short' and 'short'-'long' are also feet, we would be at liberty to see here, in Milton's line, not only a 'spondee', but also, preceding it, a so-called 'pyrrhic', which consists of two weak syllables (Saintsbury prefers 'short' to 'weak', but allows us to use either; cf. Vol. I, p. 11).

Thus, in such a line, there would be two 'substitution' feet. Of course, these two, added to the trisyllabic and monosyllabic feet of which we have already heard so much, yet further erode a 'system' which hardly deserves that name. But, more importantly, the tendency to interpret everything as consisting of feet blunts our perception of the real *metrical* feet which underlie the line and the *rhythmical* patterning—best not thought of *in* terms of 'feet'—which establishes itself in the actual articulation of the line. If a 'pyrrhic' is a substitution, the fact remains that it is a substitution of a 'foot' of which we remain metrically aware, the iamb, and it does not aid our understanding of either metre or speech rhythm to use one and the same kind of terminology for two quite different phenomena. It may well be, of course, that Milton considered only certain patterns acceptable at the level of articulation; from our point of view, however, it will not be helpful to see such patterns as consisting of 'feet' if at the same time we talk of metrical feet.

Furthermore, the concept of the foot obscures yet other distinctions if we consider questions of articulation. It cannot cope at all adequately with relative degrees of stress which

might be perceived by a person listening to someone reading the line aloud (or, in one person's reading, inwardly). For example, as I read the line ('Or that starr'd Ethiop Queen that strove') myself I think that 'Or' is weaker than 'that', but 'that' weaker than 'Starr'd'. The fact will not be brought out by calling 'that' either the second part of a 'pyrrhic' or of an 'iamb'.

We may distinguish, I believe, between `variable' readings and `fixed' ones. Thus the stress on 'that' may be variable: instead of the reading just mentioned, I might—controversially but legitimately—put a heavy stress on 'that', in the belief that Milton wants us to distinguish between one Ethiop Queen and others. Such a rhetorical stress, if it is optional at all, is not usefully described as part of a foot. On the other hand, the first syllable of 'Ethiop' is more heavily stressed—in *any* normal reading—than the second; such a `fixed' stress is different in principle from any stress that we might put on `that', but, although fixed stresses are more likely to bring out the metre of a line than those which are more dependent on individual renderings, a stress at the level of articulation is one thing, and a metrical stress another.

We do not need metrical terms to make us aware of a 'fixed' stress in the language; for our purposes, the importance of such a fixed stress is, rather, that as a fact of language it may make us aware of metrical patterning yet retains its function within its linguistic context where, again, any difference with surrounding syllables should obviously not be described in metrical terms.

The 'feet' which lie at the heart of Saintsbury's system, therefore, provide an inadequate concept in the analysis of almost *any* kind of English verse. The chief merit of his monumental book is that its very erroneousness forces us to think more clearly than he did.

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Note: only works actually quoted from are listed here; others are referred to within the body of the paper itself.

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