

Polymetrical Dissonance: Tennyson, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Classical Meter

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What did A. Mary F. Robinson learn from her work as a translator of Greek, Greek meter, and from her study of classical prosody more generally? What expressive possibilities did she garner from the study of a language whose prosody bears little to no resemblance to English, and whose adoption threatens to become less boon than boondoggle? What she learns, I will argue, is the power of irregularity and dissonance, of an English prosody which diverges from English metrical tradition and yet somehow remains rhythmically forceful. But beyond the technical achievement of her metrical translations, Robinson finds in her complex new prosodic technique a means of interrogating both her aesthetic and personal relationship to the world.

Robinson's re-tuning of English meter, ordered in particular through Greek choral meters and Latin hendecasyllabics, diverges sharply from then contemporary accounts of both meter's form and its function. This essay will show how Robinson discovers the linguistic possibility of creating a form of metrical strain by importing classical schemes and bringing them into contact with traditional iambic meters; it shows, furthermore, how this strain is anticipated (sometimes nervously) by contemporary prosodists like Coventry Patmore and John Addington Symonds. The possibility of this dissonant prosodic form, adapted from classical meters, emerges in Victorian poetry most forcefully perhaps with Tennyson's experiments with quantitative verse; while Robinson follows his example, inviting the kind of metrical strain found in Tennyson's satirical and self-referential adoption of classical meters, she ultimately expands the value of this strain beyond the genre of *riposte*. In doing so she embraces not only a new form of dissonant meter but, perhaps most importantly, a new idea of how this dissonance can operate for the poet and her reader.

This essay owes a great deal to the work of Yopie Prins, who first noted the "deliberate intrusion on the ear" made by Robinson's re-tuned English prosody.¹ Prins observes that Robinson's prosodic success lay in her "tun[ing] the musical instrument of her verse by translating ancient Greek" (p. 611) and

ultimately “expand[ing] the possibilities for writing English accentual verse” (p. 607). This essay attempts to supply a broader frame for this success in the context of Victorian poetry, especially Tennyson’s, and contemporary theories of prosody that could place limits on both the “tunings” of prosody and the purpose of its suddenly expanding possibilities.

When Phaedra first speaks in Robinson’s 1881 translation of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, her voice proceeds in a triple rhythm. She joins in this moment several other figures from Robinson’s poetry that appear fixed in their triple feet. There is Constance, the lovesick woman of “A Rime of True Lovers,” from Robinson’s *Handful of Honeysuckle* (1878); she initially speaks only by repeating “leave me not, leave me not.”² Then there is the speaker of “Address to the Nightingale,” who apostrophizes “Oh, my nightingale, nightingale, trill out thy anapest!”³ For each impassioned figure—Constance, Phaedra, and Robinson’s lyric persona—the anapestic rhythm seems to formally represent their female longing.

Such a coordination of meter, passion, and identity seems one outcome of the late Victorian profusion of meters which George Saintsbury described as “polymetric” for its “variety and idiosyncrasy of meters.”⁴ The “multiplicity of means and methods with which this multitude of meters has been handled” constitutes a new field in Victorian poetics, and is the impetus behind this special issue. On the one hand, Robinson’s local use of meter to indicate passion seems limiting and even ideologically suspect; while the playful embedding of alternate meters might confirm Robinson’s sensitivity toward polymetrical play of the sort found in Tennyson’s *Maud*, it also has the unsettling effect of putting female desire into a prosodic mold. It threatens to take a figurative and arbitrary association between cadence and passion and make it seem a concrete definition of female desire, if not female poetic production as a whole. This is the Will Ladislaw theory of meter—when in *Middlemarch* (1874) Dorothea doubts that she could ever “produce a poem,” Ladislaw responds “You are a poem.”⁵ His comment obviates the question of what she might produce, of what constrains that production, and of its expressive value as a poetic production. Is Robinson, like Ladislaw, suggesting that passionate women like Phaedra or Constance simply are anapestic, set against less passionate and more regular iambic surroundings? Moreover, does this subordination of figure to prosody demand that interpretation subordinate prosodic effects to the emotions of characters and speakers?

Constance, however, ultimately comes to speak for herself, leaving the shore and embarking on a voyage to discover her Martuccio, and Phaedra articulates herself in numerous metrical modes, including the same blank verse spoken by Hippolytus, the unwilling object of her unwilling desire. Robinson’s own trilling of anapests at the moment of the apostrophe to the nightingale suggests that she formally controls the passion she seems to invite.

The anapests do not merely represent her desire, but allude to her already present ability to satisfy that desire poetically; similarly, the polymetricity of Constance or Phaedra's narratives suggests a flexible relation between figure and prosody. In each case Robinson subsumes the brief correlation between woman and anapestic figure into a larger narrative built upon several valuations of meter.

Such re-framings of specific rhythmic units or metrical feet suggest that Robinson is not "polymetrical" in the limited sense of inviting a "variety and idiosyncrasy of meters," but rather in the complex interaction between irregular meters and (generally iambic) traditional meters. Poetic meter has always had this potential for complex and creative interaction between meter and the individual rhythms that approximate meter but never define it.⁶ While Robinson was aware of this traditional ability of meter, as best seen in the Miltonic blank verse portions of her *Hippolytus*, her work in classical meters gave her an additional insight into English meter's inner-workings. Above all it taught her where these inner-workings might be disrupted.

Robinson's was hardly the first effort to ask whether poetry might escape the Augustan regularity of iambic schemes. Coleridge is a particularly important case because his theorization of the meter of *Christabel* lays the ground for a prosody freed from the bounds of syllabic regularity. He writes, in the preface to *Christabel*, that "variation in number of syllables is not introduced wantonly . . . but in correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery of passion."⁷ Through this idea of passion's "correspondence" Coleridge wanted to enable a new theory of prosody in which the rhythmic play of variable syllable count is grounded in the poet's passion (and presumably the reader's passion as well). A similar approach characterizes the prosodic theory of Coventry Patmore, one of the most influential prosodists of the mid-century. Patmore recognized that one meter can permit many "cadences," but also adds the demand that the "remission, inversion, or omission" of the regular placement of accents follow "an emotional motive."⁸ His belief in a subterranean principle of isochrony—verse lines are divided into equivalent temporal units—can be seen as both reinforcing an older logic of meter while providing a new ground divorced from the artificiality of feet. Jason Rudy has interpreted Patmore's intervention in prosodic theory as a "tonic to the physiological extremes of his contemporaries . . . an intellectual reserve against the bodily pull of poetic rhythm."⁹ In other words, while Patmore shares with contemporaries like the Spasmodics the need to relocate meter and its influence away from mere metronomic regularity, he insists that there must at least be an ordered irregularity.¹⁰ He also insists, like Coleridge, that this irregularity be sensible to the intellect, which is to say meaningful. The question for several Victorian poets is both how to generate this ordered irregularity through the exact placement of accents and interposition of syllables, and

how to establish the intellectual value of the irregularity.

The anapests of Phaedra and Constance appear at first to follow dramatically ordained and thus intellectually appreciable “emotional motives.” A prosodic interpretation of Robinson’s work might, therefore, involve the reader searching out recognizable syllabic perturbations as a guide to the internal conditions of different characters and speakers. But the metrical play in Robinson is not subordinated to subjective passion and its rhythmic voicing. It defies this logic most effectively by defying Patmore’s limits on transgressions of meter. Patmore limits the degree of irregularity to that which will not destroy “measure” and thus does not “cause the least offense to the cultivated ear,” so that metrical effects still strike the reader but can be absorbed as “delight” and subsequently judged as serving an emotional function. Although Robinson’s poetry is also interested in and indeed premised upon the actions of a “cultivated ear,” it neither presumes nor desires that the reader easily intuit emotional functions. Nor does it equate measure’s intellectual element with the production of the rather respectable “delight” verse has long been credited with. Instead it pursues, through its adoption and adaptation of classical meters, a marked dissonance which the reader might appreciate intellectually without being able to reduce it to a native metrical law or appreciable emotional function.

Robinson had a potential model for prosodically jarring and generically inventive verse in Tennyson’s experiments in classical meter. Tennyson indicates the potential uncanniness of an imported Greek or Latin meter when he playfully refers to his own “Hendecasyllabics” as a “metrification of Catullus.” The poem was included in a section of *Enoch Arden* subtitled “Experiments in Quantity,” but was first published in 1863 in *The Cornhill Magazine*. Tennyson, though wary of publishing in magazines, thought this venue fitting for “sui-generis experiments which I wished to try with the public.”¹¹ Although Tennyson’s description of the poem refers mainly to the meter, the poem is also sui-generis because its entire purpose is to “try” one specific public:

O you chorus of indolent reviewers,
 Irresponsible, indolent reviewers,
 Look, I come to the test, a tiny poem
 All composed in a metre of Catullus,
 All in quantity, careful of my motion,
 Like the skater on ice that hardly bears him,
 Lest I fall unawares before the people,
 Waking laughter in indolent reviewers.
 Should I flounder awhile without a tumble
 Thro’ this metrification of Catullus,

They should speak to me not without a welcome,
 All that chorus of indolent reviewers.
 Hard, hard, hard it is, only not to tumble
 So fantastical is the dainty meter.
 Wherefore slight me not wholly, nor believe me
 Too presumptuous, indolent reviewers.
 O blatant Magazines, regard me rather-
 Since I blush to belaud myself a moment-
 As some rare little rose, a piece of inmost
 Horticultural art, or half-coquette-like
 Maiden, not to be greeted unbenignly.¹²

The poem is written in its titular meter, based on Latin hendecasyllabics known best from their large presence in Catullus' poetry. The basic quantitative scansion (sans accent locations or alternate feet) of a Catullan line would be as follows:

— u | — u u — | u — | u — | u ¹³

Although Tennyson's version of the meter does approximate quantity by following rules of positionality,¹⁴ the basic and most audible part of his translation is the placement of stressed syllables (S) where the Latin has long positions, and unstressed syllables (W) in short positions:

S W S W W S W S W S W
 O you **chorus of indolent reviewers**,

What stands out in Tennyson's "metrification" is its unusual accentual framework, which can be thought of as either twin trochaic feet opening the line, or a headless line with an extra weak syllable occurring between the second and third stresses. In Catullus this pattern is the result of the second foot, a "choriamb."¹⁵ The first way of approaching the meter is interesting because Hopkins will later take it up under the name "counterpoint," but the second is more relevant to Tennyson because the Latin meter is largely defined by its second foot, the choriambic nucleus. Unlike Tennyson's poem, however, Catullus' hendecasyllabics could be highly caustic without being rhythmically inflexible and awkward. Whereas Catullus used the meter for love poems as well as ripostes, Tennyson's "sui generis" poem can only be an attack, and can only think about its meter as something as rigidly inflexible as its pedantic future readers. His strict metrical translation of Catullus' meter is thus as much a parody of its own "metrification" as it is a critique of the poems "indolent reviewers."

Every joke about the meter is also aimed at its reader, as in the tumbling accents and inverted syntax of "Hard, hard, hard it is, only not to tumble."¹⁶ The mid-century's "indolent reviewers" are repeatedly and mimetically shoe-

horned into the meter's trochaic finales.¹⁷ Tennyson furthers the game with long polysyllabic words like "**horticultural**" and "**metrification**," through which he emphasizes the anti-iambic spacing of accents. The word "metrification" scarcely exists in English, which suggests that the poem has struggled and perhaps failed to be a wholly English poem. Tennyson originally wrote "versification" but swapped it out for its metrical twin in the final version, suggesting both a rather artificial, metrically oriented principal of composition as well as a rather willful disruption of diction. The word may also involve another allusion to Catullus' ironic and "learned-sounding polysyllables"¹⁸; it also provides an important lesson in English metrics. As a rule a word like "metrification," whose base stress contour (SWWSW) resembles a choriamb (— ∪ ∪ —), is difficult to place in strict iambic verse anywhere other than the beginning of the line (with a trochaic inversion). But in Tennyson's hendecasyllables, as in the Latin meter, the choriambic position conspicuously and eccentrically spans the second and third "feet." The poem's many metrical games—its puns, repetitions, bizarre diction—make meter into an intellectual game. Perhaps for this reason it was the sort of poem Tennyson was happy to "try" in the magazines.

But outside of its immediate context as an elaborate metrical joke, the poem hints at an important fact: what Tennyson has created in this poem is not merely a translated meter, but a calculated idiosyncrasy which forcefully conflicts with iambic meter. It does not interpose syllables for any emotional value, nor does it move around accents to "delight" its reader. Quite the opposite—and the reader, if he or she hopes to both scan it and understand its comedy, will need an ear not only trained in Greek, but also attuned to English meter and sensitive to the linguistic (in)compatibilities between the languages. Though the lines technically fulfill the quantitative meter, the auditory effect of the poem has little to do with quantity. The poem's finest joke, perhaps, is that readers might go through and make sure it is "All in quantity" and perhaps even tease themselves into hearing it. All the while, the poem creates its desired effect through a disruption of strict iambics which has nothing to do with the original Latin meter.¹⁹ In other words, this "metrification" does not translate a classical meter in any but the most pedantic sense, and instead uses that meter as an occasion for a grand joke about a culture in the throes of "hexameter mania."²⁰ Nonetheless, the poem admits a very real metrical effect under the foreign guise. Patmore could not have called this Spasmodic verse—it is about as cerebral as it gets—and yet it thoroughly defies the rules of iambic measure. Tennyson, attentive to the history of disruptive metrical formations as well as prosodic theory's efforts to fix the limits of this disruption, published in this poem a guide to a powerful distortion of iambic meter which the right audience might try out in new generic modes.²¹

Robinson Ellis, a contemporary translator of Catullus, was not quite this

ideal audience. Ellis, who dedicated his 1871 translation to Tennyson, viewed the “Experiments in Quantity” as above all a rare success in achieving correct quantities. In the preface to his translation he worries that his own project of observing such laws will be an “elaborate failure,” but goes on to suggest that the failure could be the fault of the “too limited number of readers who can really hear with their ears” in “this classically trained country.”²² The kind of hearing Ellis describes does not then depend only on the ears, but also on a carefully attuned sense of the prosodic phonology of a dead language. This hearing relies not only upon the study of Latin quantity, but a presumption that English poetry can be heard as if it were Latin *and* that the effects of Latin prosody will translate along with their technical reproduction. Where Matthew Arnold hoped that translations of Homer might achieve the “effect” rather than the “original sound” of Homer (Prins, “Metrical Translation,” p. 237), Ellis conflates the two. He imagines an ideal audience not simply “classically trained,” but able to hear and experience his movement between languages—a leap which the languages’ respective phonologies cannot underwrite. In other words, Ellis thinks that the right ear training can make English hendecasyllabics equivalent in the fullest sense to their Latin originals.

Tennyson’s poem more cynically suggests, however, that while a well trained Latinist’s eye might discover the “horticultural art” of Latin quantity, ears far more attuned to blank verse will for the most part hear nothing more than the poem’s strange accentual pattern. While there is “no doubt,” J. A. Symonds observed of Tennyson’s metrical experiments, “that verses can be written with correct accentuation which shall also preserve quantity in the classical sense,” it does not then follow that such preservation is available to the ear. Symonds cites as proof the fact that Latin poets were already losing an ear for quantity; so much less could English ears discover it without classical training.²³ That this classical training did still exist for much of Tennyson’s audience is necessary to the experiment, but not (as with Ellis) because Tennyson sincerely hoped his quantity would be felt.

Tennyson’s poem is at least in part, as A. A. Markley suggests, “further proof of his mastery of classical meters”; although it has other value as a prosodic experiment, its self-reflexivity nonetheless suggests stiff limitations on what can be done with translated meters.²⁴ Tennyson “ultimately came to an acceptance of the limitations involved in attempting such a feat. More importantly, he wanted those limitations acknowledged by his readers” (p. 98). The most important limitation suggested by “Hendecasyllabics” is that the translation of classical meters results in such a dense interweaving of prosody and the poetic genre of satire that it is hard to imagine a poet using hendecasyllabic verse for any other reason.²⁵ The fact that Tennyson wrote only one other hendecasyllabic riposte and never published it further suggests the experiment’s non-repeatability.²⁶

Fortunately, however, the technical prowess of his experiment suggested possibilities for the manipulation of iambic verse within other genres, and in particular non-satiric narrative and lyric poetry. Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, developed a “counterpoint” meter which approaches the systematic perturbation of iambic meter of English hendecasyllabics.²⁷ Symonds also focuses on this “trochee in the second place” in his study of blank verse, noting that it is a “favourite expedient of Shelley’s” (p. 11). Yet this particular kind of metrical change also proves to Symonds 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” (p. 12). Hopkins’, Symonds’, as well as Patmore’s interest in and concern for the liminal state of meter suggested by certain forms of inversion suggests a tense interplay between metrical anticipation and dissonant forms; at the moment when the iambic pentameter line is about to break it returns all the more forcefully as a desire for some form of audible or in some cases conceptual harmony.

This desire, stemming from the impossibility of performing the pattern anticipated by scansion, lies at the heart of much of Robinson’s prosody. It is no coincidence that the height of her meditation on poetic musicality comes in a poem written in hendecasyllabic meter, entitled “During Music.” This surprising choice of meter can be explained through a broader study of the metrical innovations in Robinson’s translation of Euripides, as well as by contrast with the more limited experimentation in her more traditional and in certain respects more musical poetry.

In one of her letters to Symonds, Robinson claimed that the key to her experiments in Greek choral meters lay in the deliberate pacing of the “arrangement of Choriamb & Iamb” (Prins, p. 607). One strophe and antistrophe provide the sole examples in the play of a decidedly choriambic meter; a few lines show the pattern (the second and fifth lines are in a distinct meter):

First from my friend heard I the news how on a fevered bed,
 Wasted with pain, hath Phaedra lain
 Sick in the house, under a veil shrouding her golden head.
 This is to-day third of the days since she persists to close,
 Foodless, in drouth, her ambrosial mouth
 Death is her choice, on to that goal urged by her secret woes.
(*Hippolytus*, pp. 9-10)

Robinson worried that these lines might “read like prose” (Prins, p. 607). This concern seems strange given the very audible repeated stresses produced by her “choriamb” (separated here by vertical lines):

S W W S | S W W S | S W W S | W S
Death is her **choice**, **on** to that **goal** **urged** by her **secret** **woes**

The danger of this line reading “like prose” makes some sense in the context of Patmore and Symonds’ theories of prosody. As mentioned earlier, Symonds saw that English meter (particularly blank verse) places no strict “minimum” on what could be considered metrical. In other words, verse might cease to be audibly or perceivably metrical without breaking any strict rules—a concern which Patmore clearly shared in limiting the dislocation of stresses. Robinson is doubly removed from the certainty of meter, since her lines would appear from a more conservative perspective (like Patmore’s, or numerous Augustine figures) to lack both the strict English rules (the pattern is Greek) as well as the means by which to guarantee her meter can be perceived as a variation on that scheme.

The double estrangement from English meter hardly produces prose, but is rather what makes the passage effective as verse. The other choruses in the *Hippolytus* depend on only the single estrangement from English meter produced by the intrusion either of alternate (triple) feet into an iambic scheme, or alternate lines of triple meter into iambic stanzas. Symonds finds this estrangement in Robinson’s subsequent volume *The New Arcadia*, noting how the anapestic lines “have driven the iambic rhythm so far away, that it becomes intrusive on our ear,”²⁸ and worrying about how “frequently and violently” she departed from this rhythm (2:939). That he and other critics judge her later versification harshly is not entirely surprising, as it presents much the same conflict as did extreme counterpointing for Patmore.

Yet because the choriambic sections of the translation’s first *parodos* do not technically diverge from an iambic scheme, and instead take their cue from the Greek, they become anti-iambic for a very different reason than Patmore or Symonds consider. The meter of the Greek *parodos* does not entirely determine Robinson’s prosody. It is largely Aeolic,²⁹ in that the unity of strophe is predicated on repeated Aeolic cola.³⁰ These cola are built around choriambic feet, the foot that so concerned Robinson. Although the choriamb is an “isolable element” in these cola,³¹ it is not repeated in Euripides as it is in Robinson’s verse or in longer Greek lines like lesser and greater asclepiads (the latter is close enough to Robinson’s meter that it would seem to be her model). The repeated choriambic feet are thus her invention, or her transfusion of one lyric passage with another lyric meter, and so their effect only partially stems from an evocation of Euripidean choral meter. More important than the allusion is Robinson’s manipulation of one isolated element of Euripides chorus to form something entirely different, a line which does not diverge from a fixed iambic meter but rather approximates one of the most common English metrical forms, ballad meter. The line scanned above, for example, can be re-lined to show it is one half of a ballad stanza:

Death is her choice, on to that goal
urged by her secret woes.

It is unusual in ballad meter to have such strongly enjambed lines as this, which suggests that this meter hovers close to but is not wholly in the ballad form. Thus at the same time as she brings the choral song close to the common ballad, she adds an element of gravity and fitting dissonance through the unexpected placement of stresses.

What makes these lines “Greek” is not merely the choriambic element intruding on iambic meters but the surprising infusion of the native, scannable English pattern where there was only an abstract Greek pattern. Like Tennyson’s experiment in “Hendecasyllabics,” Robinson uses an unusual classical foot to build a cadence that remains alien to English precisely because it comes so close to a native meter (in Tennyson’s case, blank verse). But unlike Tennyson, who simply equated distinct phonological features (length and stress) and enjoyed the result, and unlike Ellis, who imagined these features could become or were already equivalent for the right ears, Robinson constructed the meter by rediscovering the Greek pattern in a long history of English meter and its historical distortions.

Although this discovery results in only a few “choriambic” choral lines, the interplay between the Greek pattern and the expected metrical cadences of English remains a constant presence throughout the tragedy. Perhaps the most interesting effect occurs within the play’s blank verse. The lines Phaedra speaks after learning that her Nurse has betrayed her passion to Hippolytus, for example, emphasize her shock and sense of impotence at the “fate of women” through a careful movement of accents: “I know none else but this—**straightway** to die; / For all this pain **Death** only knows the cure” (*Hippolytus*, p. 34). The inverted stress contours and caesura placement here repeatedly recall the choriambic sections of the chorus, yet remain perfectly metrical examples of blank verse. Interestingly, Robinson’s permutations of blank verse are not limited to Phaedra but also capture Hippolytus’ parallel moments of desperation. When Hippolytus is exiled, accused by Theseus of raping Phaedra, he too finds it impossible to flee his fate. “Where shall I, wretched, turn? **Me** miserable / What host receive, being charged with such a crime” (my italics). The rhythm here, as in Phaedra’s lament, foregrounds inversions of stress after caesuras in order to capture the weight of exile.³²

This prosodic convergence between Phaedra and Hippolytus elevates Phaedra to the status of tragic hero and works against the play’s final shift of concern to the relation between Hippolytus and Theseus. Robinson’s translation suggests a modern reading of the play, in which the play first represents a female world constructed from Phaedra’s “painful and scrupulous search for self-knowledge” and the Nurse’s “recognition of . . . practical compromise,” and then must forget this world in order to move on to a far “shallower” male world.³³ While later readings of the play see Hippolytus’ misogyny as blameworthy and even partly responsible for his fate, F. A. Paley’s 1876 an-

notated edition of the original play considers this “pure-minded” boy’s cruelty towards Phaedra “not devoid of a kind of pedantry.”³⁴ Robinson’s prosody helps avoid bias towards the play’s titular figure by insisting upon the parallelism of two tragic figures equally subject (albeit for different reasons) to the ravages of sexual passion.

The chorus too performs this parallelism, marking the power of fate and exile through anti-iambic cadences. When, toward the end of the play, it laments the power of Cyprus (Aphrodite) over the fate of both Hippolytus and Phaedra, their iambic tetrameter verse stumbles back into a triple cadence (or an inverted third foot): “but these are all thy slaves, / And subject, O Cyprus, to thee” (*Hippolytus*, p. 67). This interlacing of meter does not so much express the chorus’ passion as symbolize Phaedra and Hippolytus’ fate, which they too express in jagged, anti-iambic lines. The placement of “Cyprus” is particularly important here, since Cyprus is at once the cause of the play’s distress and of the displaced iambic cadence.³⁵

The new poems in the second half of *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881) continue to display the hyper-sensitive attention to syllable and stress placement which Robinson developed in her translation. But in her lyric and narrative poetry this sensitivity extends to the metaphorical or thematic value of meter. She consistently emphasizes both the presence of metrical play and its broader significance through frequent metrical puns, as did Tennyson’s “tumble” or Hopkins’ “have trod, have trod, have trod.” Whereas Tennyson in the self-certainty of his mature poetry treats the pun as little more than a joke and an opportunity for further allusion, Robinson’s first two volumes consistently develop as a theme the uncertainty of meter, often tying that uncertainty to the uncertainty of the soul, divinity, and their relation. Yet in the recognition of that uncertainty the poems foreground meter’s unique status as the poet’s instrument, whether harmonious or inharmonious.

In “De Profundis,” the pair of sonnets that ends *The Crowned Hippolytus*, the speaker finds herself troubled by the fury and anonymity of the world’s “unreasoning tempest” and asks God for salvation. In the first poem of the pair, the speaker binds her sense of alienation to meter, expressing her inability to hear anything but “the sound / Of rising waters that destroy the ground / Where fail my feet and stumble.” Although the “feet” here are perfectly solid iambs, they rest upon the uneasy ground of an obvious syntactic inversion (“fail my feet”). The second poem of the pair responds to the first by setting meter against nature’s blind, irrational violence, insisting now on the steadfastness of her lines: “yet shalt not thou / Strike off Hope’s luminous glory from my brow, / Nor shake from purposed paths these feet of mine” (*Hippolytus*, p. 198). In these lines the “tempestuous world” has less power to discompose her lines than does, paradoxically, “Hope.” Through this unusual, counterpointing promotion of stresses (**Strike** off **Hope’s** luminous”) Robinson marks Hope

out as an extreme, piercing force not unlike the storm. But the disordering force of “Hope” can be absorbed into the poem’s prosodic structure. The line containing “Hope” might sound anti-iambic to the point of dropping beneath Symond’s “minimum of metrical form,” but beneath the strident accents there remains a firm iambic structure. This can be seen by constructing a pattern of five weak/strong alternations, and simply bracketing positions where a reader might substitute weak stress for strong or strong stress for weak:

(W) (S) (W) S W SW S W S
Strike off Hope’s luminous glory from my brow

Although “Hope” is no more certain than the unreasoning tempest, it can be contained within the poem’s metrical order. The poem ends with an emphatic address to the world: “Beyond thy lie lives God, and perfect love / Unfound and distant justifies my heart.” With the final textual metaphor of “justifying” Robinson reinforces the idea that metrical form connects to the higher law which permits continued Hope. Metrical form is not impersonal like the storm (or perhaps even God); as “these feet of mine,” meter transforms the impersonal world into an intensely personal path and so saves the speaker from the individual despair suggested by the poem’s title.

Both the *Hippolytus* and “De Profundis” suggest the productivity of metrical dissonance, its ability to carry the poet and her figures beyond the seemingly insurmountable alienation and isolation which threaten to define them.³⁶ Meter’s power to enact such a transformation is both the desired effect and the all-but-explicit theme of Robinson’s poem “During Music.” The poem is written in Catullian hendecasyllabics and bears a strong resemblance to Tennyson’s experiment.³⁷ Yet adopting this meter is an unusual strategy given the limitations on genre which Tennyson’s “metrification” seems to enforce. While this could seem to signal her ignorance or lack of responsiveness to the Catullian precedent, it is also possible to read “During Music” as a daring effort to un-crib Tennyson’s “metrification” in order to release the meter’s idiosyncratic force within her poetics of dissonance.

The poem is not particularly musical: it lacks rhymes, for one, and insistently (and necessarily) begins each line with a strong stress, often an apostrophe, phatic utterance, or command. By way of contrast, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s unpublished “During Music” is written in the ABBA rhyming tetrameter of the *In Memoriam* stanza, a more sonorous and therefore more obvious form for such a poem.³⁸ Yet although there is a disjunction between the “strong harmony” of the music Robinson hears and the foreign, jaunty and abrasive rhythm of the poem, this disjunction can be understood as the poem’s real object. Ultimately it is a not a poem that seeks to mimic or describe music, but rather to explore the experience of hearing a music so beautiful that it can “pierce my hearing with agonized vibrations”:

Hark! how urgently rise the viol-voices;
 Sounds grown wild with the secret of existence
 Leap like flames at my throat and catch my breathing,
 Blind mine eyes with a shine of light unvisioned,
 Pierce my hearing with agonized vibrations. (*Hippolytus*, pp. 162-163)

This stanza opens up a crux that the rest of the poem must consider: if the poet's breath is caught, her eyes are blinded, and her hearing is pierced, can she still write poetry? Should she remain silent, perhaps, and not try to verbally respond to a "harmony" that uniquely "utter[s] things unuttered"?

The fifth and sixth stanzas try to respond to this difficulty by presenting two similes for the poet under the influence of music. The first compares music to an eagle that bears the sheepish poet "beyond the soul's horizon." But the speaker immediately realizes that her comparison to a bleating sheep drawn towards a visible horizon makes little sense when she is blind and mute:

Nay, no eagle; a restless mountain torrent
 Irresistible, pitiless, tumultuous,
 Onward whirling the soul, we know not whither;
 So, rain-swollen, the rivers whirl in autumn
 Fallen leaflets and things of no endurance.

Here the poet is represented as feeling, bodily, rather than hearing the music. And it is only at this moment that Robinson releases at full volume the torrent of meter. She does what Tennyson did when he wanted the hendecasyllabic meter to become insistent, inserting several long Latinate words. The rhythm of the "Irresistible, pitiless, tumultuous" torrent is identical to that of Tennyson's "Irresponsible, indolent reviewers." Every line of the poem follows this meter, of course, though few have such emphatic rhythmic contours as this. This line is the peak of the "tumultuous" effect of Robinson's tumbling meter; she has inverted the figure of the leaf whirled onward by the river; she has made her work, and its leaves, a river unto themselves.

The poem's final stanza develops this tentative casting of the poet, who is subject to Beauty, as paradoxically the creator of beauty. Her reconciliation with the disordering effect of beauty is similar to the rapprochement with God in "De Profundis," and as in both "De Profundis" and the translation of the *Hippolytus*, the final unity of disparate figures (whether speaker and God, or Phaedra, Hippolytus, and the Chorus) depends upon the poem's meter.

The metrical torrent displaces, in fact, the dominance of music as the poet's means to beauty. The final stanza suggests, through a surprising apostrophe, that music is not the poet's aspiration but merely another aspirant to Beauty:

Thou, perpetual element of Beauty,
 Thou, whose memory music is, oh hear me;
 Flesh, sense, soul of me yearns to Thee and feels Thee;
 Now content me with truth and secret meanings
 Vast, harmonic, for which we grope in music.

Up to this point the poem's implicit and sometimes explicit addressee has been music ("Cease, ah! cease, for behold and pity, Music"), but in this final stanza it appears strangely as a medium through which humanity "gropes" for an abstract beauty "vast, harmonic." By adding a turn to the apostrophe, and by de-capitalizing the figure of Music, "During Music" indicates a new kind of sympathy between poet and music. It is not the sort of sympathy pursued in Robinson's "Address to a Nightingale." Instead, "During Music" permits only the sympathy of two aspirants, two apostrophizers to Beauty. The poet achieves this sympathy not by sounding musical, or by approximating music's physical effects, but by approximating music's "torrent" of inaccessible, uncertain beauty through a uniquely torrential meter. It is a meter, moreover, that requires training to hear and scan, whose characteristic rhythm is not "natural" in the same way that four beat ballads and iambic lines might be said to be natural. The unnatural hendecasyllabic meter makes sense because it is both artificial and dissonant, refusing direct association with Beauty itself. Yet once this direct association is abandoned, the force of meter's blind, deaf, seemingly impotent "groping" paradoxically becomes a moment of poetic promise. Robinson converts her former difficulty responding to music—her breathlessness, her blindness, her pierced hearing—into an unusual kinship with music no longer grounded in mimesis. Thus the speaker's final apostrophe undoes the hierarchy implied by the title, making it describe the reader's experience as much as the speaker's. That experience cannot result from a musical verse form like the *In Memoriam* stanza, but only by a seemingly unmusical brand of music that is, by virtue of its distance from harmony, all the more able to mark the "strain" of the speaker's (and perhaps reader's) heart.³⁹

The intimate binding of music's form and affect, suggested by the poem's pun on musical "strain," belongs ultimately to meter. The meter strains against the harmony of fit numbers, becoming inharmonious by external comparison to iambic cadences while remaining perfectly timed within itself. Her placement of polysyllabic words in the third position, her trochaic finales, and the strong emphasis of the line-initial addresses and commands all prove a control of the stave like that of Tennyson. But whereas Tennyson's experiment in hendecasyllabic meter justifies itself through satire, Robinson proves in this poem the possibility of adopting an alien rhythm without obvious allusiveness or self-referential learnedness. The classical meter is not merely a referent, but an embodiment of the poet's "agonized vibrations." It becomes that

embodiment only by virtue of those intrinsic, linguistic differences between her meter and traditional iambs which Robinson learned from her classical studies and her work as a translator.

In Robinson's subsequent volume, *The New Arcadia* (1884), the scope of those "agonized vibrations" expands from a private metrical straining to the "jarring, discordant prosodic and lyric techniques" that Robinson adopted to "jolt her readers out of their complacency and to stimulate sympathy for the sufferings of rural poverty" (Harrington, p. 68). But the development of those techniques, and perhaps more importantly their liberation from the generic limitations imposed by Tennyson and their re-situation within the context of lyric, begins with Robinson's youthful experiments. In her first volume she creates a complex figure for this transformation, a poor street singer who "never paused till her stumbling feet / Refused at length to go" (*Honeysuckle*, p. 44). Those "stumbling" feet ground Robinson's poetics, her discovery of a hybrid classical and English meter; but that meter is anything but stumbling in execution. It allowed her poetry to transcend the street singer's "paltry" song, the isolated voices of Phaedra, and her pathos-driven speakers, for the singer's metrical identity—the "soul in her voice" (*Honeysuckle*, p. 46).

Notes

- 1 Yopie Prins, "'Lady's Greek' (with the Accents): A Metrical Translation of Euripides by A. Mary F. Robinson," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 2 (2006): 610. Prins's research shows how Robinson, one of the first women to study Greek formally at college, found in the Greek language and its prosody a mode of self authorization centered on a "metrical performance, inventing new measures for new women poets" (p. 593).
- 2 A. Mary F. Robinson, *A Handful of Honeysuckle* (London, 1878), p. 4. Hereafter cited as *Honeysuckle*.
- 3 A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Crowned Hippolytus* (London, 1881), p. 187. Hereafter cited as *Hippolytus*.
- 4 George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 317.
- 5 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 155. For an extended discussion of this passage as well as Robinson's contemporary reception, see M. Lynda Ely, "'Not a Song to Sell': Re-Presenting A. Mary F. Robinson," *VP* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 94-108.
- 6 The diversity and interaction of different rhythms constellated around an abstract metrical ideal provides for the creativity of the majority of English metrical poetry. Thus it was possible for Keats to write a line like "Singest of summer in full-throated ease," which has an anapestic rhythm but still conforms to the iambic meter of "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819).
- 7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1997), p. 187.

- 8 Coventry Patmore's *Essay on English Metrical Law: A Critical Edition with Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1961), p. 22; hereafter cited as *English Metrical Law*.
- 9 Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2009), p. 15.
- 10 Rudy terms this a "limited freedom," and suggests that it is the ordering principle of both Patmore's isochrony and Hopkins' sprung rhythm (p. 135).
- 11 *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Volume II: 1851-1870*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon Jr. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), p. 346.
- 12 *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 2:652.
- 13 Gaius Valerius Catullus, *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Peter Green (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2007), pp. 32-33.
- 14 See John Ferguson, "Catullus and Tennyson," *English Studies in Africa* 12, no. 1 (1969): 41-58.
- 15 A recent study by Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle argues that Tennyson's poem transforms, through a fairly complex rule, iambic pentameter into hendecasyllabic verse. See *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 28-33.
- 16 The reference to "tumbling" may allude not only to the fall of the trochees but also the prosodic genre of tumbling meters. King James I of England assigned the meter to "flyting" or invective verse, noting that it follows a different fashion than traditional verse forms, having highly variable feet. In Tennyson, however, the "tumbling" obeys strict rules.
- 17 John Talbot notes that "Hendecasyllabics" has the "trait of repeating phrases and words in metrically corresponding positions," and argues convincingly that this trait comprises an allusion to the Catullan genre of the literary riposte ("Robert Frost's Hendecasyllabics and Roman Rebuttals," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 10, no. 1 [2004]: 82).
- 18 John Talbot, "Tennyson's 'Metrification' and Catullan Coinage," *Notes and Queries* 49, no. 247 (2002): 474.
- 19 Hegel and later Patmore agree that little short of a Greek's own "life's habituation" could prepare the ear to hear quantity (*English Metrical Law*, p. 13).
- 20 Prins has shown how Tennyson directly mocked the era's "barbarous hexameters." She notes how Tennyson repeats this metrical phrase, technically dactylic yet ultimately hard to hear; his repetition of "indolent reviewers" works similarly, but without any conflict between quantity and stress. Both cases show, however, how Tennyson emphasizes rote metrical phrases for "comic effect" ("Metrical Translation: Nineteenth-Century Homers and the Hexameter Mania," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005], p. 247).
- 21 Tennyson might have had in mind "counterpointed" lines that are particularly prominent in Milton; Tennyson suggests this connection in dedicating to Milton his "alcaics," which share the hendecasyllabic's choriambic nucleus. Counterpoint is crucial, for example, to *Paradise Lost's* depiction of the scorn faced by Abdiel after he abjures the other fallen angels: "Universal reproach, far worse to bear / Than violence" (VI.34). For further discussion of Milton's "idiosyncratic" rhythm, see Edwin Guest

- and Walter William Skeat, *A History of English Rhythms* (George Bell, 1882), p. 238 and James Woods Davidson, cited in T. S. Omond, *English Metrists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 221.
- 22 *The Poems and Fragments of Catullus*, trans. Robinson Ellis (London, 1871), p. xx.
 - 23 John Addington Symonds, *Blank Verse* (London, 1895), p. 4.
 - 24 *Stateliest Measures: Tennyson and the Literature of Greece and Rome* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 99.
 - 25 Robert Frost's 1922 poem "For, Once, Then, Something," a rare example of hendecasyllabic verse in the twentieth century, is less obviously self-referential than Tennyson but remains a riposte and a one-off. Frost admitted it to be (whatever else it was) something to "tease the metrists." He, like Tennyson, translates the quantitative scheme into an accentual pattern.
 - 26 This non-repeatability ultimately condemned such experimentation in the eyes of modernist poets like T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost, who felt that it consigned poetry to the status of a trick. In "Reflections on Vers Libre" (1917) Eliot attacks Swinburne's prosody for its singularity (T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* [London: Faber, 1975], p. 33), while Frost lambasts Swinburne and Tennyson's "assonation" (Robert Frost, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964], pp. 79-81).
 - 27 Hopkins was particularly attentive to the prosodic repercussions of trochaic substitutions, often using this reversal of feet mimetically and in puns. The "reversal of feet," he 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" (*Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953], p. 8).
 - 28 *The Letters of John Addington Symonds.*, ed. Herbert M Schueller and Robert Peters, vol. 2 (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 910.
 - 29 Euripides, *Hippolytos*, ed. William Spencer Barrett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 183.
 - 30 Cola (plural of colon) are sequences of long and short syllables that may be used alone or sequenced to form lines and stanzas.
 - 31 A. M. Dale, *The Lyric Metres of Greek Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1948), p. 17.
 - 32 The phrase "Me miserable" echoes the words of Milton's Satan, the exile of *Paradise Lost*: "Me miserable! Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?" This resonance further suggests that the source of Robinson's metrical play lies not only in a Greek pattern but in the historical prosody of English literature.
 - 33 Phillip Vellacott, "Introduction," in *Three Plays: Alcestis / Hippolytus / Iphigenia in Tauris* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 25.
 - 34 Euripides, *The Hippolytus of Euripides, with brief notes by F. A. Paley* (Cambridge, England, 1876), p. 7.
 - 35 The fact that Euripides uses "Cyprus" instead of "Aphrodite" for its metrical facility in his iambic (rather than dactylic) verse, but Robinson uses "Cyprus" in order to superimpose a triple meter on English iambs adds yet more complexity to her Greek experimentation.

- 36 Robinson's use of prosody to re-situate the isolated subject is part of what Ana Parejo Vadillo has termed her poetics of "immateriality." Vadillo argues that Robinson's poetry initiates a crossing between the poetic self and symbolic manifestations, between the poet's physical body and voice and a "disembodied soul" located in impressionistically skewed landscapes and images. Prosody might be thought of similarly as a soundscape. See "Immaterial Poetics: A. Mary F. Robinson and the Fin-De-Siècle Poem," in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 231-260.
- 37 Prior to being published in *The Crowned Hippolytus* the poem appeared in 1879 in Cambridge's *The University Magazine*, including "(Hendecasyllabics)" beneath the title. It is unclear why the subtitle was eliminated, but it seems safe to assume that she or her publisher were either unconcerned there would be a misrecognition of the meter, preferred not to allude so directly to the meter's classical origins, or perhaps even wished to avoid the allusion to Tennyson. It is worth mentioning that Swinburne also published a non-satiric hendecasyllabic poem in *Poems and Ballads*, 1866.
- 38 The poem was written in 1851 but was not published until 1886. Although Robinson was well acquainted with Rossetti's work, writing a eulogy for him in *Harpers* in 1882, it is hard to say whether she would have heard his "During Music" by 1879.
- 39 Emily Harrington has suggested that Robinson's later poetry in *The New Arcadia*, whose prosody concerned Symonds, is built around "resistance to its own form—in other words, its refusal to be a metrically conventional work" ("The Strain of Sympathy: A. Mary F. Robinson, *The New Arcadia*, and Vernon Lee," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61, no. 1 [June 2006]: 88).