The musical basis of verse, a scientific study of the principles of poetic composition

Dabney J P
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A SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF THE PRINCIPLES OF POETIC COMPOSITION

By J. P. DABNEY

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“See deep enough and you see musically.”

Carlyle.
PREFACE

I was led to the inception of this work by my recognition of the need—a need felt grievously in my own studies, but even more in the attempt to direct those of others—of a working hypothesis of the Science of Verse which should be at once rational, coherent, and simple—such a working hypothesis as every music student has at his right hand.

The study of all the a priori text-books—founded as they are upon a complicated system which will not fit our modern verse—proved a weariness and vexation to the spirit; for, from Puttenham ("Arte of English Poesie," 1589) to our own day, although there is much delightful reading upon the essence of verse, there is little light upon the paths of metre, but endless ignes fatui. To follow the various disquisitions of the various metrists is like wandering through a vast Daedalian labyrinth, wherein, if at any time some true clew seems to offer itself, it will be presently snipped away and another diametrical one substituted; and, in the end, all lead no-whither. This, because in every case the supposed true way has been an artificial and arbitrary one, not the natural one founded upon primary law; the primary laws of verse, like those of music, being laid upon the bed-rock of acoustics.

The first clear note of truth we hear struck is from Coleridge, when, in his preface to "Christabel" (1816), he announced that he had discovered a "new principle of versification; to wit, that of accents." This declaration raised a storm of abusive criticism from the "Edin-
burgh Review,” and from other quarters, and there the matter would seem to have ended; but he had, however elementarily, made as great a discovery as Sir Isaac Newton, when, from a falling apple, he deduced the law of gravitation.

In 1881 Sidney Lanier published his brilliant “Science of English Verse,” this being the first deliberate attempt to analyse verse upon its true lines; viz., by musical notation. Lanier’s book did not have the revolutionising effect which the promulgation of so great and radical a principle should have had; partly, perhaps, because the book is somewhat abstruse for the general reader, but also partly, it seems to me, because it is not always wholly logical with itself. Many of the verse-notations, using as they do the foot-divisions and not the true bar-divisions measured from accent to accent, would seem to be an attempt to reconcile quantity with accent; whereas, belonging as they do to different periods, with their differing metrical standards, they have no correlation. Also, I do not comprehend the classing together of such diverse verse as “Hamlet’s Soliloquy,” Poe’s “Raven,” and Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” as all in 3-beat measure; because, as I have pointed out (page 49), the 3-beat rhythm cannot exist without such a predominance of three notes (syllables) to a bar as shall give the whole verse its organic stamp.

Lanier’s supreme glory is that he was a pioneer. Like Columbus, he plunged boldly into the unknown and discovered a new world; and the world is ours, to possess as we will.

In the present work, besides the exposition of primary verse-rhythm, as illustrated by the bar-measurements of music, I have endeavoured to elucidate a quality of verse which I have never seen noticed in any work on metre;