

The Heroic Couplet in Nineteenth Century Romantic Poetry

by Ruth Bartlett

The heroic couplet is usually thought of as a special poetic form of the Neo-classicists of the eighteenth century, who brought it to their idea of perfection. It had, however, been highly developed by the great Restoration poet, John Dryden, who gave to it the peculiar character more specifically prescribed in rules made by his successors: the iambic pentameter line with only enough variation to avoid sing-song; each rhymed pair, or occasional triplet, a complete unit of thought, neatly divided into two parts, the first usually ending with the first line and rarely carried over; each line again marked by the caesura in the middle. An example of this form, which expresses also the Neo-classic theory of the poetic art, is to be found in Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, part I, 11, lines 70-74:

“Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, the test of Art.”

This theory of Art and Nature would seem to be similar to the Romantic principles of the nineteenth century as set forth by Wordsworth in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*: the language of poetry must be the language of men, just as the subject matter is to be drawn from life itself. However, the language is to be selective, to “entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life.”¹⁾ Moreover, the use of rhyme and metrical form, is necessary to offset and check the excess of

¹⁾ Preface to Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800, from *English Prose and Poetry of the Romantic Movement*, by Woods, p. 320.

emotional excitement.²⁾

Thus we may expect that the poets of the Romantic movement, while in revolt against the formalism of the Augustans, would feel free to make use of any verse forms consistent with their poetic thoughts and feelings. It is a fact that the iambic foot follows the natural stress tendency in English speech. Moreover, the five-foot line, whether in rhyme or blank verse, seems to have a natural flow to our ears, making us conscious of the rhythm, even in the "run-on" line. Moreover, the "run-on" iambic couplet was used by some of the seventeenth century poets, whose versification has been overshadowed on the one hand by the blank verse of Milton and on the other by the heroic couplets of Dryden. The couplet as it appears in the early nineteenth century poetry is more like that of Carew and George Herbert, yet used with a still greater freedom from the conventional pattern.

This calls for attention to an even more basic principle of English versification than the natural iambic stress of speech. This is the inheritance from Anglo-Saxon poetry of the use of stress words for rhythm, regardless of the number of syllables. It can be shown, I believe, that both Shakespeare and Milton, while apparently following the pattern of iambic pentameter blank verse, were often actually following this older natural English rhythm. It is also interesting to note that the modern use of so-called free verse, is a kind of reversion to the old stress-word poetic form.

Certain it is, that this pattern of stress words, rather than close scansion, is to be found in much of the poetry of the nineteenth century Romanticists. For the purposes of this brief study, I have chosen selections from "The Story of the Rimini" by Leigh Hunt, "Epipsychidion" by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and "Endymion" by John Keats.

Of the three, Hunt's verse is the more conventional in follow-

²⁾ Woods, pp. 325-6.

ing a metrical pattern and making the ends of his couplets correspond to divisious in thought :

“ For o’er the door was carved a sacrifice
By girls and shepherds brought, with reverent eyes,
Of sylvan drinks and foods, simple and sweet,
And goats with struggling horns and planted feet;
And round about ran, on a line with this,
In like relief, a world of pagan bliss,
.....
Never, be sure, before or since was seen
A summer house so fine in such a nest of green.”³⁾

The smoothness and grace of the lines, the unobtrusive metrical pattern, are not just accident, but the result of a few simple devices. In the first place, Hunt substitutes other stresses than the iambic, but not so consistently as to set a new pattern. Then he makes frequent use of the run-on line, and also from time to time disregards the caesura :

“ Of wallflowers, and blue hyacinths, and blooms
Hanging thick clusters from light boughs; in short
All the sweet cups to which the bees resort.”⁴⁾

To be noted also is the occasional line of stress words accented by alliteration in the manner of the Old English :

“ Down by whose roots, descending darkly still.”⁵⁾

Another characteristic, noted by Beers,⁶⁾ in the chapter on “Leigh Hunt, Keats, and the Dante Revival” is the inclusion of Alexandrines, the six-foot line. In using the heroic couplet, Beers points out, both Hunt and Keats were followers of Dryden with his more vigorous style, rather than of Pope with his Augustan

³⁾ “The Story of the Rimini,” Canto III., ll. 326-331, 340-341, Woods, pp. 867.

⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, I. 251, p. 866.

⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, I. 300, p. 867.

⁶⁾ *A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century.*

polish. Other influences to be observed in the poetry of Hunt are the writings of Dante, Chaucer, and Spenser.

Turning now to the "Endymion" of Keats, we find the same variations as those of Hunt, with frequent use of the stress-word line, and much greater flexibility in rhythm for the expression of different emotions. In demonstrating the use of stresses by both Keats and Shelley, I shall follow the device of Gunnere in his *A Handbook of Poetics*: 0 for absence of stress, 1 for medium stress, 2 for main stress, assuming normal pronunciation and emphasis based on emotional content. Thus the opening lines of "Endymion":

0 2 0 2 0 1 0 2 1 2 0
 "A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
 1 2 0 1 0 2 0 1 1 2 0
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 1 1 0 2 0 1 0 2 1 2
 Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
 0 2 0 2 0 1 1 0 0 2
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
 2 0 1 2 0 2 0 2 0 2 0
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing."⁷⁾

Here we find rhythmic beauty combined with naturalness of language, which takes us at once into the atmosphere and feeling of the poem, without any consciousness of its metrical form. Actually the variations from regular iambic pentameter are slight, an added syllable each in lines 1, 2, and 5. Greater irregularity occurs when the feeling is one of excitement, as in the lines from Book II:

1 2 0 0 2 0 2 1 2 0 2
 "Endymion! dearest! Ah, unhappy me!
 1 2 1 2 0 0 2 0 1
 His soul will" scape us—O felicity!
 2 1 1 2 1 1 1 2 0 2
 How he does love me! His poor temples beat
 1 0 1 0 2 0 2 1 2 2 2
 To the very tune of love—how sweet, sweet, sweet.
 1 2 1 2 0 1 1 2 0 2
 Revive, dear youth, or I shall faint and die."⁸⁾

⁷⁾ "Endymion," Book I, ll. 1-6, Woods, p. 767.

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, Book II, ll. 762-5 Woods, p. 189.

A contrasting emotion, that of calm despair, "all passion spent," is conveyed in the description of Endymion's awakening:

1 2 0 1 0 2 1 2 0 2
 "Endymion awoke, that grief of hers
 1 2 0 1 1 2 1 2 0 2
 Sweet paining on his ear: he sickly guessed
 1 2 1 2 1 2 0 2 0 2
 How lone ne was once more, and sadly pressed
 1 2 1 2 0 2 0 2 1 2
 His empty arms together, hung his head,
 0 2 1 2 0 1 1 2 0 2
 And most forlorn upon that widow'd bed
 2 2 0 0 2 2 0 1 1 2
 Sat silently. Love's madness ne had known:
 2 0 0 2 0 2 1 2 0 2
 Often with more than tortur'd lion's groan
 2 0 1 2 1 1 0 2 1 2
 Moanings had burst from him; but now that rage
 1 2 0 2 2 2 0 1 1 2
 Had passed away: no longer did he wage
 0 2 2 2 0 2 0 2 0 2
 A rough-voic'd war against the dooming stars:
 2 1 1 2 2 2 0 1 2 2
 No, he had felt too much for such harsh jars."⁹⁾

If the scansion on these lines is correct, it would seem that when Endymion gives up the struggle (lines 857-859), the poet too follows the line of least resistance and falls into regular iambic pentameter; then the jolt in the last line suggests that the hero is shaking himself awake to face cold reality.

In many of the narrative and descriptive parts of the poem, where Keats is not seeking to convey a particular emotion or create an atmosphere, the lines flow smoothly in an easy rhythmic pattern in run-on lines, with few caesuras and only occasional shifts of stress:

"For there did spring
 From natural west, and east, and south, and north,
 A light as of four sunsets, blazing forth
 A gold-green zenitn' bove the Sea-God's head.
 Of lucid depth the floor, and far outspread

⁹⁾ "Endymion," Book II, ll. 855-865, Woods, pp. 790-791.

As breezeless lake, on which the slim canoe
 Of feather'd Indian darts about, as through
 The delicatest air; air verily
 But for the portraiture of clouds and sky."¹⁰⁾

Thus in Keats's skilful employment of a verse from that had formerly become stereotyped, we observe not only great freedom in the lines, but also a corresponding variety of emotional effects, showing the imaginative possibilities of the heroic couplet. Yet we find that Shelley's use of this metre in "Epipsychidion" is even more unconventional than that of Keats.

Shelley constantly challenges attention by opening a stanza with a spondee or a trochee. If he needs eleven or twelve syllables for a line, he puts them in. He falls into dactyl or anapest upon occasion. Yet despite these irregularities, his verses are remarkable for their rhythm; they have an inner harmony of proportion and balance, based essentially on the Old English principle of stress words rather than on a metrical scheme derived from the classics. As illustration, consider the opening stanza of "Epipsychidion":

2 2 1 2 0 0 1 2 0 1
 "Sweet Spirit! sister of that orphan one,
 2 2 1 1 0 2 2 2 0 1
 Whose empire is the name thou weepst on
 1 1 2 2 0 1 1 2 0 2
 In my heart's temple I suspend to thee
 2 2 1 2 0 2 0 2 0 1
 These votive wreaths of withered memory."¹¹⁾

Try to label the measures according to the stresses indicated, and you will find a mixture of anapest, dactyl, iamb, and spondee, no two lines following the same pattern. But considering the four lines as a unit, a kind of inner rhythm emerges from the repetition of the sounds *m* and *w*: *empire, name, temple, memory; weepst, wreaths, withered.*

¹⁰⁾ Ibid., Book III, ll. 875-883, p. 804.

¹¹⁾ "Epipsychidion," ll. 1-4, Woods, p. 720. 12) Ibid., ll. 21-24, p. 720.

Whereas in the verse just quoted, Shelley has adhered closely to the ten syllably line, we find irregularity in length resolving into perfect cadence in the third stanza :

2 1 2 2 0 2 2 0 0 1 2 0
 "Seraph of heaven! too gentle to be human,
 2 0 1 2 1 2 0 1 1 0 2 0
 Veiling beneath that radiant form of woman
 2 1 1 2 1 2 1 0 0 2
 All that is insupportable in thee
 0 2 0 2 0 2 1 2 0 2
 Of light, and love, and immortality."¹²⁾

In contrast to the uneven lines showing disturbed unhappiness in the first two lines following, the calmness of the succeeding mood is conveyed by a smooth melodic flow :

2 0 0 2 0 2 0 0 2 2
 "Wounded and weak and panting: the cold day
 2 0 1 2 0 0 1 2 0 2
 Trembled, for pity of my strife and pain,
 0 1 0 2 2 2 1 2 0 2
 When like a noonday dawn, there shone again
 1 2 0 1 2 2 0 1 2 2 2
 Deliverance. One stood on my path who seemed
 1 2 0 2 0 0 2 1 1 1 2
 As like the glorious shape which I had dreamed
 1 1 0 2 1 2 0 1 0 2
 As in the moon, whose changes ever run
 2 0 1 2 1 0 2 1 2
 Into themselves, to th(e e)ternal sun:
 0 2 2 2 0 2 0 2 2 2
 The cold chaste Moon, || the Queen of Heaven's bright isles,
 1 2 1 2 0 1 1 1 1 2
 Who makes all beautiful || on which she smiles;
 1 2 1 2 0 2 1 2 0 2
 That wandering shrine || of soft yet icy flame
 1 2 0 1 1 2 1 2 0 2
 Which ever is transformed, || yet still the same,
 0 2 1 2 1 2
 And warms but not illumines."¹³⁾

This is indeed departure from the Neo-classical pattern of the

¹²⁾ Ibid., 11. 21-24, p. 720.

¹³⁾ "Epipsychidion," 11. 274-285, Woods, pp. 723-4.

heroic couplet; except for the concluding cadence, there is definite contrast rather than coincidence of thought and rhyme. Yet the poet suggests the smoothness of the iambic, with a hint of caesura, more discernible towards the end of the passage. Still other passages may be cited to illustrate contrasting stresses and rhythms for changes of mood:

“Ah, woe is me!
 What have I dared? where am I lifted? how
 Shall I descend and perish not? I know [contrast]
 That love makes all things equal: I have heard
 By mine own heart this joyous truth averred;
 The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
 In love and worship blends itself with God. [contrast: emotion]
 Spouse! Sister! Angel! Pilot of the Fate
 Whose course has been so starless! Oh, too late
 Beloved! Oh, too soon adored, by me!”¹⁴⁾

“ Or linger, where the pebble-paven shore [transition: cadence]
 Under the quick, faint kisses of the sea
 Trembles and sparkles as with ecstasy,—
 Possessing and possessed by all that is
 Within that calm circumference of bliss,
 And by each other, till to love and live
 Be one.”¹⁵⁾

In a brief study such as this, it is possible to illustrate only a few of the many rhythmic patterns derived by the Romantic poets from the heroic couplet of their Neo-classical predecessors. Having made themselves complete masters of the form, they are able to use it with infinite variation, in keeping with different emotions and imaginative concepts. In this freer melodic flow, they revert, perhaps unconsciously, to the original English verse form of the stress-words. As early as 1589, George Puttenham, in his *The Arte of English Poesie*, had pointed out the inaptness of classic syllabic feet to indicate stress in English verse, nothing

¹⁴⁾ Ibid., II. 123-133, p. 721.

¹⁵⁾ Ibid. 11.546-552, p. 727.

the freedom of Tudor poets in varying from the iambic measure. This same divergence from set metrical pattern is equally true of the nineteenth century poets, Hunt, Keats, and Shelley, who thus show themselves to be, though innovators, in line with the main tradition of English poetry from *Beowulf* to T.S. Eliot, and including Shakespeare and Milton.

References consulted in preparation of this study :

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