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Hiawatha and the Earwig: Rediscovering a Metre

In 1857, the entomologist Edward Newman published a book-length poem entitled *The Insect Hunters, or Entomology in Verse*. Addressed to Laura Ada Douglas, the young daughter of his colleague John William Douglas, it is an instructive catalogue of the orders of insects according to the knowledge of the day, using precise scientific observation and correct Latin terminology but attempting to invigorate the potentially dull subject-matter with metaphor, lyricism and appeals to emotion and personal experience. A flavour of the book can be given in a passage describing earwigs:

First of walkers come the Earwigs,
Earwigs or FORFICULINA:
Feeding on the lovely petals
Of our best and choicest flowers,
Hiding in all sorts of crannies
From the sunshine in the daytime,
Crawling, feeding in the nighttime:
Their antennae many-jointed,
Gently tapering at the summit,
And the joints are swollen, beadlike,
Beads strung in a tiny necklace;
The fore wings are square and shortened,
Leaving all the body naked. (Newman 1857, 68-9)

This passage is probably the only part of the poem still in general circulation, thanks to its inclusion in an anthology of bad verse (Petras and Petras 1997, 79). Newman is undoubtedly a better entomologist than poet, but he is no William McGonagall, and his book is still quite readable, largely because he succeeds in his task of conveying his enthusiasm for the subject. One also gets a clear picture of his personality:

Laura, in our search for knowledge,
We must kill these pretty insects,
Now and then, though very seldom,
Just to learn their curious structure
More minutely, more completely.
When I take the lives of insects
Sometimes in the cause of Science,
I employ bruised leaves of laurel,
Chloroform or benzine collas,
Because these cause stupefaction,
That precludes all chance of suffering.
Let us constantly remember
That they love their lives as we do,
That they love to dance in sunshine,
Love the balmy air of summer;
Often, of a summer's evening
By their multitudes creating
Quite an atmosphere of insects,
Atmosphere of wingèd atoms. (Newman 1857, 24-5)

Newman takes the metre of his poem from one of the most fashionable works of the day, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855). He refers to his own lines as 'stolen' from Longfellow, and uses a brief extract from the poem as an epigraph. *Hiawatha* gives him more than just a metre; Newman's whole approach is borrowed from his model, from the structuring metaphor which describes insects as belonging to 'tribes', to the insistent use of repetition intended to suggest oral poetry, to the device of translation whereby an unfamiliar term appears together with its English equivalent:

And the birds sang round him, o'er him,
'Do not shoot us, Hiawatha!'
Sang the robin, the Opechee,

Sang the blue-bird, the Owaissa,
'Do not shoot us, Hiawatha!' (Longfellow 1857, 502)

Such, in brief are the Vespina,
Black and yellow wasps, Vespina.
Sandwasps follow next in order,
Sandwasps, Fossors or SPHECINA. (Newman 1857, 40)

Longfellow, then, provides the amateur poet Newman with a powerful set of poetic tools for explicating his subject-matter. And seeing the use Newman made of them gives us in turn an insight into the impact and original contribution of Longfellow's poem, which is in part a work of explication, aimed at introducing Native American culture to a reading public unfamiliar with it. Just as the scientist Newman drew on the poet, so the poet drew his own material from a reference source, the writings of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. Like other nineteenth-century folklorists, Schoolcraft has been criticised by subsequent scholars for adapting his material to suit the tastes of the times, and *Hiawatha* inevitably inherits his inaccuracies (Clements 1990). It is nevertheless a work of impressive scale and detail, taking up more than 150 pages of Longfellow's *Collected Poems*, and including a glossary and notes. And, however suspicious we may be of a white American adapting and using this material, its importance in its historical context is suggested paradoxically by a contemporary review which criticised it for 'embalming [...] the monstrous traditions of an uninteresting and, one may almost say, a justly exterminated race' (Quinn 2013, 783). In the face of such hostile attitudes, any critique based on the idea of appropriation seems irrelevant compared to the achievement of staking a claim for the value and significance of a culture in serious danger of obliteration.

Longfellow's other principal source, both for the concept of an epic based on myth and folklore and for the trochaic tetrameter metre he used for writing it, was the Finnish poem *The Kalevala*, adapted from oral tradition by Elias Lönnrot and first published in 1835. Lönnrot's achievement gave him a template for a work that would offer Americans a national mythology, one that, like those of Finland and other old nations, would be ancient, magical and rooted in the topology and natural history of the land, though, in the case of America, that mythology would have to be borrowed from the land's original inhabitants.

The metre of *The Kalevala* is a form of unrhymed trochaic tetrameter traditional in Finland, but scholars tell us that it is more complex and subtle than its English equivalent used by Longfellow and others, including patterns of alliteration and vowel quantity as well as stress (Bosley, xlvii-1). Nevertheless, Longfellow inherited from it a basic structure of four trochaic, or falling, feet, as well as his use of repetition and parallelism. He had, in fact, been preceded in this by his other main influence, Schoolcraft, whose *Alhalla, or the Lord of Talledaga* combines the catalectic form of trochaic tetrameter, discussed later in in this essay, with Native American mythic themes (Schoolcraft 1843).

Longfellow's own use of the form was to have an immediate and long-lasting impact. In the year of its publication, an article in *The New York Times* claimed:

The madness of the hour takes the metrical shape of trochees, everybody writes trochaics, talks trochaics, and think [*sic*] in trochees [...]

“Charming morning, Mrs. Wilkins!”

“Very, but it's rather chilly.”

“'Tis indeed, but not so cold as

I have felt it in November.” (*New York Times* 24 November, 1855)

Other parodies soon appeared, among them one by the arch-parodist Lewis Carroll, who used the form to describe his favourite hobby, photography:

From his shoulder Hiawatha

Took the camera of rosewood,

Made of sliding, folding rosewood

neatly put it all together.

In its case it lay compactly,

Folded into nearly nothing. (Carroll 2011, 45)

The attraction of the Hiawatha metre lay in its combination of distinctiveness and relative simplicity. As the *New York Times* article implied, almost anyone could write it. Carroll himself wrote:

In an age of imitation, I can claim no special merit for this slight attempt at doing what is known to be so easy. Any fairly practised writer, with the slightest ear for rhythm, could compose for hours together, in the easy running metre of *The Song of Hiawatha*. (Carroll 2011, 45)

His comment is laid out as prose, but the joke, of course, is that it is itself written in ‘the easy running metre’ it describes.

Both Longfellow’s nationalism and the distinctive style and technique of *Hiawatha* have since fallen from favour, though the essays collected in Irmischer and Arber 2014 suggest that his reputation may be recovering in academic circles. Newman’s imitation, as we have seen, was, somewhat unfairly included in an anthology of bad verse, and a recent translator of *The Kalevala*, Keith Bosley has deplored the use of trochaic tetrameter by previous translators, claiming that the form is impossible to write well in English:

As any reader of *Hiawatha* knows, the metre is not only monotonous, it restricts language to the point of triviality – in English at least. This matters little in a romance of Indians without cowboys, but it matters a great deal in an epic of world stature. (Bosley 2008, 1)

The easy dismissal of *Hiawatha* here, though insensitively phrased, is in other ways understandable. The combination of the thumping metre with repetition and didacticism (showing rather than telling) can indeed feel heavy-handed:

I have given you lands to hunt in,
I have given you streams to fish in,
I have given you bear and bison,
I have given you roe and reindeer,
I have given you brant and beaver,
Filled the marshes full of wildfowl,
Filled the rivers full of fishes.
Why then are you not contented?
Why then will you hunt each other? (Longfellow 1857, 546)

It is a surprise, then, to find that much of Longfellow's poem retains the incantatory quality and lyricism that fascinated its early readers. Here, for example, is a description of Hiawatha traversing the marshes in his canoe:

All the air was white with moonlight,
All the water black with shadow,
And around him the Suggema,
The mosquitos, sang their war-song,
And the fire-flies, Wah-wah-taysee,
Waved their torches to mislead him;
And the bull-frog, the Dahinda,
Thrust his head into the moonlight,
Fixed his yellow eyes upon him,
Sobbed and sank beneath the surface. (Longfellow 1857, 602)

Despite Bosley's scepticism, then, it is possible to write powerful as well as clumsy poetry in trochaic tetrameter: there is a great deal of both in *Hiawatha*. And one modern poem draws on its form and influence to great effect:

On the day of the explosion,
shadows pointed towards the pit-head.
In the sun the slag-heap slept. (Larkin 2012, 95)

Philip Larkin's choice of trochaic tetrameter for 'The Explosion' is a characteristically perverse decision, taken in the face of the prevailing low opinion of the form we have noted. Like Longfellow, he demonstrates that the the metre is capable of vivid effects:

Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,
Shouldering off the freshened silence. (Larkin 2012, 95)

He thought highly enough of 'The Explosion' to use it as the concluding poem in his final

collection *High Windows*, and it retains an important place in the canon of his work, though one of his staunchest supporters, John Osborne, demurs, decrying the ‘inherent risibility’ of the metre (Osborne 2008, 75). The use of trochaics is appropriate to Larkin’s industrial working-class subject; the people he writes of are chapel-going miners and their families, who might be expected to be more familiar with this 19th-century best-seller than with recent free verse or with the tradition of pentameter-based poetry. (Motion 1993, 394, notes, however that Larkin himself claimed not to have been consciously using Longfellow’s rhythms while composing the poem.) The form speaks directly to people excluded from bourgeois literary culture, deriving as it does from a poem still remembered and respected by them, though forgotten or reviled elsewhere. Another important source, the folksong ‘The Trimdon Grange Explosion’ by Tommy Armstrong, ‘the Pitman’s Poet’, inspired Larkin’s theme, and also uses a trochaic metre, in this case a ballad form that includes rhyme:

Men and boys set out that morning for to earn their daily bread,
 Never thought before that evening they'd be numbered with the dead.
 Let's think of Mrs Burnett, once had sons but now has none –
 By the Trimdon Grange explosion, Joseph, George and James are gone.

(Armstrong 1978, 183)

It is time to look more closely at trochaic tetrameter, hereafter referred to as TT. Traditional English metrics are so dominated by iambic pentameter (IP), that any other form is best described in relation to it. IP typically consists of five iambic, or rising, feet:

x / | x / | x || / | x / | x /

In fair Verona where we lay our scene. (Shakespeare 1905, 764)

The odd number of feet makes for an unbalanced effect. In the line above, the caesura after ‘Verona’ splits a foot in two, so that, although there is the same number of syllables in each half-line, there are two stresses in the first half and three in the second. Read it as two half lines, and the first is iambic with an extra unstressed syllable at the end (‘In fair Verona’) and the second trochaic with the final unstressed syllable missing (‘Where we lay our scene’). Caesuras can also occur after the second foot, or the third, or even elsewhere in

the line. This means that IP, despite its regular structure, gives a constantly shifting effect, in contrast to the symmetry of forms such as TT which have an even number of feet with the caesura tending to fall in the middle. Like other metres, IP and TT permit occasional irregularities, which vary the rhythm and prevent monotony. The most common of these are the reversal of a foot and the addition of one or more unstressed syllables. Reversing an iamb produces a trochee:

/ x | x / | / x | x / | x /

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (Shakespeare 1905, 1108)

In this case, I would argue (though prosodic interpretations are always provisional, dependent as they are on regional and historic factors and the linguistic idiosyncracies of individual readers) that the first and third feet are reversed. Reversals of this kind are particularly common at the beginning of lines. The addition of unstressed syllables is most common at the end:

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / (x)

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. (Shakespeare 1905, 834)

It can, however, take place anywhere, and more than one unstressed syllable can be added, leading in some cases to lines with twelve or more syllables:

x / | x / | x / | x x / | x x /

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, (Yeats 1950, 245)

Because IP contains five feet, it can sustain more irregularities than shorter lines without losing its essential character. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day' may have two irregular feet but they are still outnumbered by the three regular ones. A typical passage of IP by a flexible metricist such as Shakespeare contains a wealth of different rhythms within and counterpointed against the basic iambic pattern. In a shorter line like TT, however, there is less scope for variation; two reversed feet, for example, would leave the line uncomfortably poised between trochaics and iambics. TT therefore tends to stick more

closely to its basic pattern, leading to the accusation of monotony we have seen.

The final difference between the two lines is that between the rising and falling rhythms. It is sometimes stated that iambics are based on the natural pattern of English speech. Anyone making the effort to listen to the rhythms of a conversation will sooner or later hear an IP turning up naturally:

x / |x / |x / |x / |x /
I'll have a cup of coffee and a bun.

But any suggestion iambics are more natural than trochaics is dubious. Both rhythms are simply the alternation of weak and strong stresses – it is such alternation that characterises English speech, not rising or falling rhythms as such (Greene et al. 2012, 1463). The only difference between the two is the starting point. Trochaic structures are also common in everyday speech:

/ x | / x | / x | / x
Let me see if I can help you.

Besides, not all lines start at the beginning of a sentence. Enjambment may break the sentence at any point, causing the next line to start either with a stressed syllable or with an unstressed one. So not only does it seem unlikely that iambic rhythms are more common than trochaic ones in English, it does not even seem a meaningful statement.

The problematic quality of the trochee is its weak ending. At the conclusion of a line, where it carries the sexist traditional terminology of a *feminine ending*, this makes for an inconclusive effect which the reader may well find unsatisfying. The feminine ending makes us want to read on to the next line, in search of the closure we have not found in this one, until we finally reach a line that ends on a strong syllable. Poets have taken advantage of this throughout history by constructing stanzas where feminine and masculine endings alternate, each succeeding line resolving the tension established by the first. It is a popular pattern in songs and ballads, for example:

Tell me not here, it needs not saying

What tune the enchantress plays
In aftermath of soft September
Or under blanching mays,
For she and I were long acquainted,
And I know all her ways. (Housman 1997, 106-7)

As with any well-used and effective device, this alternation of masculine and feminine endings can come across as tired and stereotyped. But TT, with its apparently endless succession of feminine endings, runs the greater risk of disappointing the reader with a tension that is never resolved. However, it has a trick up its sleeve in the form of a useful variation that does not exist in IP, the catalectic line, in which the unstressed final syllable is omitted – an *ad hoc* masculine ending. We have already seen an example of this in Larkin's line 'In the sun the slag-heap slept'. This has only seven syllables rather than the expected eight, and provides a strong conclusion to the first stanza of 'The Explosion' by finishing on a stressed syllable. In fact catalectic TT is a metre in its own right as well as a permitted variation of standard TT, and was a favourite of Shakespeare, who used it in 'The Phoenix and the Turtle':

Let the bird of loudest lay
On the sole Arabian tree
Herald sad and trumpet be. (Shakespeare 1905, 1135)

To sum up this comparison, IP avoids symmetry through its odd number of feet and monotony through the greater metrical variety allowed by the longer line, while TT is symmetrical and has less scope for variety. Suggestions that trochaic rhythms are less natural in English than iambic ones are dubious. However, the feminine endings of TT lines can lead to a lack of resolution which poets may attempt to counter by means of the occasional use of catalectic lines. Overall, it is hardly surprising that IP, with its greater rhythmic variety, dominated English verse until the rise of free verse in the twentieth century, while TT, after its brief surge of fashionability in the mid-nineteenth-century, sank back again amid a flurry of parodies, into disuse and disdain. Larkin's poem, which, *pace* Osborne, seems to me very fine, is possibly the only significant example of pure TT (as

opposed to, say Betjeman's use of trochaic rhythms in ballads) in the years following its heyday.

In the rest of this essay, I am going to discuss how this topic has impinged upon my own poetic practice. I first discovered Newman's poem through the extract in *Very Bad Poetry*, and was drawn to it, not by the metre, but by its use of poetry as a medium of instruction. I was at that time interested in exploring alternatives to the personal lyric; narrative poetry is one such alternative which I have practised extensively. As I contemplated future projects, a poetry based on the explication of natural history or other branches of science seemed a potential way forward. At this point, a fortunate commission arrived: I was asked to write a poem to accompany an art exhibition on the theme of the human ear. I was not particularly excited by the prospect, but my newly formed views on the uses of poetry seemed to require accepting the challenge. Searching for an original approach, I remembered the old wives' tale that earwigs like to lodge themselves deep in the ear, a belief so well-established that it gives the creatures their common English name. I would write an invocation to an earwig by an unfortunate sufferer who was trying to get it out of his or her ear. The poem, based though it was on a fantastic premise, would be as accurate as possible on the scientific facts concerning both ears and earwigs, and would draw on both a scientific vocabulary and the fascinating list of dialect names for earwigs given in the reference book *Bugs Britannica* (Marren and Mabey 2010). As for form, I had Newman's example in front of me, so it seemed natural to use TT, which I arranged in imitation of 'The Explosion' in a pattern of tercets with a concluding single line. The poem that resulted was 'A Charm for Earwigs':

Witchy-beetle, forkin-robin,
no one heard you as you clambered
up the nursery slopes of pillow,

felt your way in heaving darkness
where a dreamer breathed siroccos,
scaled the north face of an earlobe,

stumbled on the antihelix

where the cartilage was ruckled
into an upended mizmaze,

teetered round its corrugations,
to the vortex where the tragus
overhung a bloodwarm grotto.

There was curl-room in the concha
but the scent of earwax drew you
through a straight and oozy burrow,

thrumming with a distant heartbeat.
First the walls were soft, then bony,
then antennae scratched a membrane.

Arrywiggle, horny-gollach,
you awoke me from my stupor,
rasping with a chitin stylus

on my mind's long-playing vinyl,
ratcheting my taut tympanum
with your cacophonous tarsi,

set my ossicles percussing
with the clangour of rough music,
dustbins, copper saucepans, kettles.

Now I smear a linen poultice
with the pulp of roasted apple,
press it, wincing, on my pinna.

Malic steam pervades my chambers
to entice you with a perfume

sweeter than November compost.

Clipshears, codgybell, twitch-ballock,
lift your bristles from my eardrum,
let the sea of cochlea settle,

turn back from the labyrinth. (Francis 2017)

Writing this was so enjoyable that I have now embarked on a book-length narrative sequence in the same form. And I have come to believe that TT has real potential as a poetic metre of the future. As ‘The Explosion’ and the better passages of *Hiawatha* show, the short lines and inflexible rhythms are not in themselves a bar to good writing, while the use of catalectic lines as a variation (as in the last line of my poem) can deal with the unresolved effect of too many feminine endings. Many of the problems of *Hiawatha* are not caused by the metre but by Longfellow’s heavy-handed use of repetition in his attempt to imitate oral narratives.

The comparative inflexibility of TT may even be a strength. In twenty years of teaching poetic form to students, I have learned that very few modern readers can really hear the rhythms of IP, which has ceased to be widely practised and familiar to the general public. In their attempt to grasp the form, student poets generally rely on a combination of syllable-counting (since they have been wrongly taught that IP is a line of ten syllables) and an ear for rhythm attuned to a common structure of English folk poetry, two strong stresses each side of a central caesura. This is, roughly speaking, the pattern of Old and Middle English alliterative verse:

/ / || / /

The fellow in green was in fine fettle. (Armitage 2007, 13)

It is also found in nursery rhymes

/ / || / /

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.

/ / || / /

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

/ / || / /

All the King's horses and all the King's men

/ / || / /

Couldn't put Humpty together again.

It is a commonplace of prosody that this four-stress structure lurks beneath the smoother, more complex rhythms of IP, helping to give some of the dynamism to the line. But four-stress poetry in its basic form often comes across as unsophisticated, making it more appropriate for children's poetry than the adult equivalent:

/ / || / /

The August Bank holiday's here again,

/ / || / /

With buckets and spades and pouring rain;

/ / || / /

Bumper to bumper, we haven't got far

/ / || / /

Before Maisie is sick in the back of the car;

/ / || / /

The baby starts howling, Jim's pinched the last jelly

/ / || / /

And Karen remembers that “film on the telly”

/ / || / /

Which she’s wanted to look at “for weeks and weeks”;

/ / || / /

Dad loses his temper. Nobody speaks. (Harvey 1997, 72)

TT uses a similar structure, is less complex than IP, but more structured than four-stress accentual verse.

I believe that if poetry is to connect with a wider public, it has to renew its engagement with rhythm. While some of the achievements of free verse, particularly those created in the Modernist period, are magnificent, much of their power depends on a continuing dialogue with a poetic tradition based on accentual-syllabic metre, especially IP. As that tradition recedes, the original impetus and daring of free verse are gradually being lost, leaving a poetry that lays itself open to accusations of formlessness and artlessness. Poets who return to iambic pentameter must overcome two difficulties: the tiredness of a form that has been practised intensively for hundreds of years, which led poets to reject it in the first place, and the fact that many potential readers can no longer hear its rhythms. In these circumstances, they may well decide to look for new solutions. One possibility, I suggest is trochaic tetrameter, a metre which has been unfairly reviled because it is comparatively easy to write and has a strong, simple rhythm. These are the very factors that brought about its brief popularity in the nineteenth century, and could make it popular again.

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