De Superbia Carminum

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DE SUPERBIA CARMINUM.

DANT. *Vulg. Eloq.* II, c. 5, l. 51. *Ed. Oxon.*

Et licet hoc quod dictum est celeberrimum carmen [i.e. endecasyllabum] ut dignum est videatur omnium aliorum, si eptasyllabi aliqualem societatem assumat dummodo principatum obtineat, clarius magisque sursum superbire videtur; sed hoc ulterius elucidandum remaneat. Et dicimus eptasyllabum sequi illud quod maximum est in celebritate.

‘And although this verse, the hendecasyllable, of which we are speaking, be held, and with justice, the most noble of all forms of verse, yet if it be allied in one way or another with the heptasyllable, keeping however its pre-eminence, it will be found still more glorious and loftier in its pride; but this must be left for further elucidation later on. And the heptasyllable we pronounce second to the most noble form, which is the hendecasyllable.’

THIS I take to be the passage in Dante’s analytical writings where the language of analysis and criticism is most touched with passion, and most enthusiastic. Is there anything like it in the critical work of any poet? His praise of the hendecasyllable line is devoted to a mere form, an abstract rhythm and melody. And when he comes to speak of the harmony of hendecasyllable and heptasyllable his critical and analytical language, like the poetical tune of which he is speaking, rises and swells in pride and glory, *clarius magisque sursum superbire videtur*. *Superbia carminum* is his theme; *carmen* being used to denote the single line of whatever type. Without excuse or apology, he uses the name of a deadly sin for the intellectual virtue proper to verse of different forms. The hendecasyllable is the proudest form; the harmony of eleven and seven is prouder still, and his prose becomes resonant as he describes it. All in honour of an abstract idea, an empty frame of syllables.

It is a prophetic sentence, for this Italian harmony of eleven and seven is the great discovery of the Italian poets; long after Dante it was the chief poetical influence in the foreign languages that have owed most to Italy, always excepting the French: *quod ulterius elucidandum remaneat*. In Spanish and Portuguese, in Garcilaso and Camoëns, the correspondence of eleven and seven is observed as Dante has described and as the Italian *Canzone* had given examples of it.

Spenser copied it in his solemn odes, and Milton followed him, following of course the Italians themselves along with Spenser.

Here I take leave to mention a place in Milton where the editors have failed to correct a misprint, a wrong division of a line.

But who is this, what thing of sea or land,
That so bedeck'd, ornate and gay
Comes this way sailing
Like a stately ship
Of Tarsus, bound for th' isles
Of Javan or Gadier?

It is impossible to read aloud

Comes this way sailing like a stately ship

except as a full heroic line. The division into two short lines is irrational. No one, in reading, can make anything of the printed pause, and we may be sure that whoever read the proofs to Milton read it in the only natural way, so that the printer's variation escaped notice.

What the Italian tune has meant for English poetry cannot be calculated or detailed, but it is well enough known to every one. *Lycidas*; the *Ode to a Nightingale*; the *Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis*, these are among the first to be thought of when this form of verse is called to mind.

Dante does not say, though he certainly knows, that it is an Italian form. One of the curious things in his essay on the Art of Poetry, *de Vulgari Eloquentia*, is that while he treats the French and Provençal poets as equals of the Italians, and as authors of the noblest forms of line, he must have noticed several great differences between their practice and the Italian usage. The French and Provençal line is regularly divided after the fourth syllable: the fifth syllable is always a fresh word. Dante keeps this rule in his Provençal rhymes in the person of Arnaut Daniel, *Purg.* xxvi (though not in *Canz.* xxi, in *lingua trina*). This French cesura, as we may call it, is probably the reason why the Italian harmony of eleven and seven was left for the Italians to discover. Combinations of eleven and seven are found indeed in Provençal, but not very commonly; in many cases Dante's condition *dummodo principatum obtineat* is not observed; i.e. the long line is not the chief element in the stanza. The poet who is most like the Italians, as far as I have observed, in his use of eleven and seven, is Pons de Capduoill, and Pons de Capduoill in his long lines does not keep strictly to the French cesura. 'Si nom perdona la colp' el faillir': there are

eight lines of this type in his poetry (ed. Napolski, p. 33), and some of these come in the poem which is most like Italian verse (*op. cit.* XXVII), though the likeness after all is slight and casual :

Per so nos deu d'amar leis enardir
 Nuillz hom que trop plaidei
 Ni trop cossir, nis cuite mantenir
 Per tener avol lei
 Mas tant c'am joven e joi e garnir
 Guerra cort e domnei
 Et ab armas autotz premiers ferir
 En guerr' et en tornei
 Lejals servire
 Si humilmen
 E non s'azire
 Ne s'espaven
 Si trai martire
 Ni greu turmen
 Que bos sufrire
 Conquer sufren
 Las qu'eu non pos mais soffrir la dolor
 Tant ai sofert e tant ai gran temor
 Que peichs m'esta c'a nuill autr' amador
 S'umilitatz e merces nom socor.

In Spanish prosody (Rengifo, *Arte poetica española*, Salamanca, 1592) the hendecasyllable and heptasyllable are described as 'verso italiano y su quebrado,' the Italian verse and its fraction (or 'refret,' or 'refrain'). The heptasyllable is taken as repetition of part of the longer verse, just as in the native *redondillas* of eight syllable verse there may be 'versos quebrados' of four; which is likewise the French verse of *Avril* and all its train :

Here I'd come when weariest,
 Here I'd rest
 Where the wide-winged hawk doth hover.

Taking the heptasyllable in this way we can see, or rather hear, why it was not usual along with hendecasyllables (=décasyllabes) of the French type and why the Italian type all but cried aloud for it. Where the verse is regularly divided into 4 + 6 there is not so much to be gained in using the *quebrado*. It is known in old French narrative verse, as at the close of each tirade in the epic of *Aliscans*, where it is a sort of lyric cadence :

Ma grans dolors n'ert jamais oubliée
 Tant com jou ere en terre.

The effect of this is not far from that of Guiraut's refrain :

Et ades sera l'alba.

In French poetry, however, the heptasyllable goes most frequently with

the Alexandrine. The *quebrado* of the French *décasyllabe* appears to be most commonly four, not six :

Gastibelza, l'homme à la carabine,
Chantait ainsi.

But where the long line, our heroic verse, is varied as in Italian and English, the refrain of six, or seven, comes in with peculiar effect, as dwelling on a part of the whole rhythmical phrase, letting it declare itself, whereby at the same time the long verse, in Dante's words, *clarius magisque sursum superbire videtur*. The long verse in French with its regular cesura does not give the same opportunity for a refrain to bring out the rhythm. The Italian hendecasyllable sprang from the French-Provençal line, but it is a different thing from its original, and its changes are so various that it often seems nearly to pass into another measure. E.g.

Batte col remo qualunque s'adagia. *Inf.* III, 111.
D'una fessura che lagrime goccia. *Inf.* XIV, 113.
Come la fronda che flette la cima. *Par.* XXVI, 85.

Separately, these verses might be passed off as belonging to the type

Sempre nell'animo
Mi sta quel giorno
Che con un nuvolo
D'amici intorno, etc.

'which type is closely related to the regular hendecasyllable, as e.g. in another poem of Giusti, *Il Brindisi di Girella* :

Viva le maschere
D'ogni paese,
Viva il gergo d'allora e chi l'intese.

The refrain, Dante's heptasyllable, comes in effectively to keep the measure in mind where the poets allow themselves such freedom as Dante takes in the long verse. Where the long verse definitely marks the rhythm with an invariable cesura the refrain is not so clearly required. The languages have their own metrical instincts, and Dante shows this in his tract on Poetry. He will not, for example, allow the *neasyllabum*, as he calls it, which corresponds to our octosyllabic verse. But he knew well that this was one of the most favourite of all the measures of Provence. He quotes

Si per mon Sobretotz no fos.

And of course he knew the use of the measure in the Ambrosian hymns ; there are his own quotations :

Vexilla regis prodeunt

and

Te lucis ante terminum.

But he will not be bribed even by these into approval of a form which after the early days has been consistently rejected by Italian poetry. French and Provençal may do as they please with the fatal fluency of octosyllabic verse; and in these languages, and in English, that verse can be as weighty as any heroic line. But there is no use for it in Italian. Dante's remark about it is not caprice; it is an Italian instinct of language.

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