Syllables in Verse and Speech

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SYLLABLES IN VERSE AND SPEECH.

The contribution made to this argument by Mr Williams is full of interest, and I entirely agree with him that prosody must consent to be interpreted by phonetics, the appeal of verse being primarily to the ear. But, though 'no specialist in such matters,' I do not find that the view of syllable-structure, quoted by him from Sievers, is universally accepted; it does not, for example, commend itself to Jespersen (*Modern English Grammar*, 4. 12). Leaving phonetic scholars to fight out their own battles, I offer a few remarks on the question from the prosodist's point of view.

It is suggested that when two vowels are not 'separated by another sound of less sonority than either' they may coalesce into a diphthong. This, if true, would go but a short way to explain Milton's metre, in which words like *reason*, *pillar*, *azure*, *river*, *eaten* take the place of monosyllables, words like *manifest*, *capital*, *populous*, *resonant*, *insolence* take the place of dissyllables. A 'sound of less sonority' does, I presume, separate the vowels in these and very many similar words as ordinarily pronounced, so that the diphthongal explanation is manifestly inapplicable here.

Even when vowels are contiguous, need they form actual diphthongs? Is there no syllabic difference between rapid utterance of consecutive vowels and veritable blending—between 'rapture so oft' and 'rapture soft'? If there be a difference, why should we ignore it? To define a syllable is undoubtedly difficult, but do we lessen the difficulty by shutting our eyes to obvious distinctions? Can we call 'slayer' a monosyllable in quite the same sense as 'slay'? That either can be used in certain forms of verse certainly does not foreclose the issue.

We do, without doubt, modify the utterance of words like 'to atone,' and prosody takes note of the fact. It recognises that these words may occupy either the normal time of three syllables, as in trisyllabic metre, or the normal time of two, as often in blank verse. But it does not require us to say that in the latter case the actual sound is dissyllabic. If there be the slightest fraction of extra sound, the slightest amount of 'trisyllabic ripple,' prosody is ready to acknowledge it. This does not involve recognition of a trisyllabic *foot*, such as occurs in the former case. I am as far from supposing that Milton alters his fundamental time, as from denying that he uses contractions more freely than we do, or from imagining that we are entitled to read his verse in the light of twentieth century pronunciation. That he 'must have accepted many elisions which are foreign to modern speakers' I quite believe; I also believe that he accepted in theory many which he did not use in speech. But it is hard to believe that he, a classical scholar, could regard 'Adria' as a dissyllable; and I am still unable to conceive how the last two vowels of that word can be sounded as an actual diphthong.

When we separate sounds by an interval, they doubtless take longer to utter than when continuous. But *time* in prosody does not mean merely pace of utterance, or duration of sound. A passage of music can be taken faster or slower without altering its essential time, and there seems no reason to doubt that the same thing can happen in verse.

While, therefore, willing to accept the proposed eirenicon—even if it somewhat recalls the Rainbow landlord in *Silas Marner* with his ‘you’re both right and both wrong, as I allays says’—and fully persuaded that Mr Williams and I have the same facts in view, I cannot see that attaching a Pickwickian sense to ‘dissyllable’ helps us in analysis. Take but this one line from *Comus* (636):

And yet more med’cinal is it than that Moly.

The contraction of ‘medicinal’ to *med’cinal* is a patent fact; but to call *med’cinal* a dissyllable in actual sound is surely improper.

I need not dwell on ‘the idea(r) of,’ or on the difference between hiatus and elision. To mere hiatus Southern English seems to have no great repugnance, since it is quite common to hear both ‘the fear of’ and ‘the idea of’ pronounced without a final *r* in either clause. The phonetician can but record this as a fact; prosodists may be allowed to lament that this and other vagaries of modern utterance deprive English verse of much intended sound-value.

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