

THE SOUNDS OF BLANK VERSE

I

BLANK VERSE—unrhymed iambic pentameter—is not hard to find, and sometimes it turns up in unexpected places. Julian Symons uses the form in a short poem, “The Guilty Party,” which serves as preface to his historical study of the detective story.¹ The theme sardonically developed in the piece is that the writer of stories of murder and mayhem is in an unsettling way responsible for the violence staining his pages:

It is the author who creates the crime
And picks the victims, this blond dark girl sprawled
Across a bed, stabbed, strangled, poisoned, bashed
With a blunt instrument.

(1–4)

Later, Symons pictures the author sitting in “his butter-bright smiling room / Where crimes are kept in filing cabinets / Well out of sight and mind” (21–23), haunted by visions of the victims and villains he has created:

One paddling fingers in her own bright blood
And staining his face with it, another
Revealing the great wound gaping in his side,

The sliced-up tart carrying a juicy breast,
 Inviting him to kiss it: and the villains all
 Crowding him with their horrid instruments,
 The rope that playfully tightens round his neck,
 The blue revolver used to mutilate,
 The dagger points to pierce out jelly eyes,
 The saw and hammer at their nasty work [. . .]

(26–35)

There are mysteries surrounding—or we might better say emanating from—blank verse, and unlike questions in detective stories they do not allow for incontrovertible solutions. Some of the questions are historical. This poem, from the 1970s, uses a form that came into English in the mid-sixteenth century. What accounts for the longevity of this poetic form? Other questions, of the kind that tend to interest poets more, are practical and technical. How can the formal demands of blank verse be mastered (for that matter, what *are* its formal demands), and when one has learned to write it, what is it good for? To follow these questions where they lead us, even if that does not uncover proofs to persuade a jury, may still offer some enlightenment. And poetry being the innocent subject that it is, we may manage to get through this discussion without too much blood on the floor.

Craft is mastered only through imitation. To learn to write blank verse there is no substitute for steeping oneself in what has been written to date in the form, and the examples in this and the following chapters should supply numerous models to ponder and emulate and (why not?) surpass. Such direct confrontation with poetry of the past and the present is essential to any poet's stylistic development; commentaries can have at most an ancillary value. This book cannot pretend to teach anyone how to write blank verse apart from deeply attentive reading of the masters. It may justify itself, however, if it serves to highlight the expressive opportunities offered by the form, as these have been discovered and exploited by poets over more than four centuries. The issues treated here are useful ones to bear in mind in reading or in writing blank verse in the twenty-first century.

Let us set aside for the moment the technical aspects of prosody, with its plethora of Greco-Roman terms and its supralinear symbols. These will claim our attention in due course. Initially, though, let us consider the current and

potential uses of blank verse and, as we do so, draw some broad distinctions between it and other forms.

The lazy way to think about blank verse is to view it as a compromise between rhyming metrical verse on the one hand and free verse on the other. A poet who devotes serious attention to these three forms will quickly realize that blank verse is something more than a halfway house between rhyme and open form. It has characteristics that give it a unique set of capabilities, setting it distinctly apart from either of these alternatives. It is not a “lite” version of formalist poetry; nor is it free verse in a coat and tie. Anyone who has ever tried to write a poem first in one form, then in another, knows that even if the basic content is reproduced, the overall effect will change, especially in relation to tone. Symons would certainly have been capable of rhyming his list of murder weapons in some fashion such as this:

The rope that tightens round his neck in play,
The blue-nosed gun that blasts his nose away,
The dagger with an eyeball on its point,
Hammer and saw to rend him joint from joint.

But this would make it a jokier sort of macabre catalogue. The actual poem is not without humor, but it is tinged with a bit of hysteria, as these lines, with their brittle wit, are not. Free verse would give the material another slant:

One
who paddles fingers in
her own
bright
blood,
who stains
his face with
it

This seems to concentrate attention on the lurid image with a sort of slowed-down voyeurism that has its own interest but is different from the disquieting glide of Symons’s lines, which proceed like a sort of funhouse ride through a chamber of horrors.

It is in fact this commanding momentum, this sense of ongoingness, that is one of the leading characteristics (and advantages) of blank verse. This affects sound regardless of what we have been calling the tone of the passage (by which we meant its implied as well as its stated range of emotions). If we momentarily abstract the sound of the lines from the meaning of the words composing them—and it is difficult to do this more than momentarily—we glimpse, as the passage proceeds, a special quality of blank verse. Freedom and fixity are both at play in the form. Unchecked and unsegmented by patterns of rhyme, it can accommodate prodigious flows of utterance; in that sense it is freer. At the same time, unlike free verse, it has a set length of line and recurring number of beats, and while poets in practice may allow themselves flexible rhythms and even occasional metrical substitutions, these attain expressive power precisely because the standard iambic pentameter is there as a basis, a point to vary *from*. (Like many twentieth-century poets, Symons allows himself considerable deviation from the strict metrical pattern in several of his lines, but the standard sound of blank verse, which comes through starkly in

x / x / x / x / x /
The blue revolver used to mutilate,

is what he is consciously tugging against.) Developing these notable features of blank verse that set it apart from other forms into a strong and versatile array of tactics has been the communal effort of many generations of poets.

One obvious index of the form's versatility is the heterogeneity of subject matter to which it has been applied, which seems only to increase with the passage of time. If one does not care to be accosted by Symons's murder victims, the blank-verse canon offers more appealing images in sumptuous quantity. Many of these are mentioned in the following pages; but here, as a foretaste, are the beautiful closing lines of Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning":

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make

Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

(VIII, 9–15)

Especially since the burgeoning of short descriptive or lyric poems in blank verse, it has become clear that it would be foolish to assume any topic ruled out. Classical notions of decorum, which deemed certain poetic forms proper for treating certain subjects, have never had much staying power among poets of the English-speaking world. Just as this form diversified in terms of mode—moving successively from drama through epic to other narrative, meditative, descriptive, and lyric types—so it has proven able to deal with subjects decorous or rough, exalted or mundane. The poet wishing to give blank verse a try has, in this respect, an apparently limitless field to explore, and it would be otiose to suggest any particular sorts of topic as more promising than others.

Some suggestions can be offered, though, in regard to modes. While the history of the form has demonstrated that virtually all modes are available to it, some have been less widely used than others, and some have been exercised within what may be an unwarrantably restricted scope. Narratives, for instance, have gravitated to shorter lengths; the book-length poems in blank verse that so frequently occupied E. A. Robinson and others have been in recent decades hard to come by. Truly enormous works like James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* are not blank verse in their entirety; Anthony Hecht's "The Venetian Vespers," at twenty-six pages, is what now seems to pass for a "long" poem in the form, though free-verse poems of the modern and contemporary eras run hundreds of pages without exciting surprise. The novel-in-verse is so neglected a notion that it might be possible to make something fresh of it, and in such a case blank verse would seem a more suitable medium than many others. If the thought of something this sizable is daunting (as it no doubt should be), there are other neglected areas. For instance, the epistolary poem is a much underused form in our time. Letters in verse, which may have seemed a stilted concept for much of the twentieth century, are now more intriguing to contemplate in a time when e-mail has made letters of the older sort exotic. The concept is so old that it might seem new. And if writing a letter which requires a stamp has become something of a ceremonial act, this would seem in many respects compatible with the assumptions and processes of formalist poetry.

Some of the most exciting possibilities are in the dramatic sphere. The monologue continues to attract poets who persist in mining the rich veins previously worked by Browning, Robinson, Frost, and others. The dialogue poem, or narrative largely in dialogue, is much less common. The interest in this (and the technical challenge) is in effectively differentiating the voices. This can be more difficult than creating a single speaking character; in a monologue there is ample room for gradual disclosure of character, whereas in dialogue the voices must define themselves more compactly and through contrast in the course of verbal interchange. Frost is talented at this. The married couples in “Home Burial,” “The Fear,” and others; the mother and son in “The Witch of Coös”—these offer pairs of easily distinguished voices. (Interestingly, the contrasts in temperament portrayed by Frost often parallel differences of gender.) Not many poets have followed Frost’s lead; solo performances greatly outnumber duets. This is a pity, for blank verse remains a supple form in which to set one voice against another. We get a rare contemporary glimpse of how this is done in some of the dialogue-laden poems of Philip Stephens. Here are two derelicts escaping winter weather by camping out in the public library, conversing as they play a clandestine chess game:

“Virge,
You know how you said you’d like just one chance?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I know how. Near Union Mission
At this house called Men’s Place, you get a room,
Three squares, a job. They even let you stay
Long as you like, but it don’t cost you nothing.
Just all you got to do is get the word
Of God.”

“What do you mean I got to get it?”

“You know, you got to beg for God’s forgiveness.”

“What’s God got to forgive me for? He needs
To beg for my forgiveness, is what he needs
To beg.”

(“March,” 14–25)