

PREFACE

As its subtitle indicates, this book undertakes two tasks: to study the characteristics of the poetic form we call blank verse, and to study the achievements of poets who have used it from its first emergence up to our own day. These two strands of interest are intertwined throughout. While the first and last chapters concentrate on practical considerations for writers and readers of blank verse, the middle chapters, which are arranged as a historical survey, in fact carry on the discussion of technique by analyzing numerous examples written by masters of the form, as well as some by poets whose struggles with the meter fell short of mastery. The twentieth century and later receives more expansive treatment than earlier periods because this part of the story has been overlooked by scholarship. While one may feel some satisfaction simply in having filled a conspicuous gap, there is an even greater pleasure in demonstrating the continuing vitality of this form for poets writing today. There is plenty of poetic vitality to be found in earlier periods as well. Styles may change, but as Edwin Arlington Robinson reminds us in his fine blank-verse poem “Rembrandt to Rembrandt,” “in Apollo’s house there are no clocks” (313). For the young poet wishing to explore blank verse, lively models—both venerable and contemporary—abound. In examining these models, this discussion proceeds more like a poetry workshop than like a museum tour.

In the preface to his collection of essays on versification, *Vision and Resonance*, John Hollander candidly remarks, “English prosody has tended to be a subject for cranks.”¹ No system of scansion or of prosodic symbols is without disadvantages; some become forbiddingly complicated in an effort to define the more delicate rhythmic nuances. I have opted for a simplified, uncranky notation, marking the feet of a line according to their patterns of syllables that are unstressed (x) or stressed (/). I have allowed myself an additional symbol (\) to indicate an intermediate level of stress. Some prosodists may see this as admitting too much flexibility, others as admitting not enough. While I hope the scansions offered here will be persuasive, their purpose is not to score

points against competing systems. It is, rather, to be a stimulative device, reminding the reader to listen even more carefully than usual, so that the rhythmic effect of each line will register fully. A look at a contour map will alert a hiker to changes in terrain, but not with the same immediacy as the feel of an upward or a downward slope underfoot. While symbols and terminology, preferably applied with some consistency, are needed to discuss a verse passage efficiently and intelligibly, the ultimate key to its movement will be found by reading it aloud, weighing in one's own ear the levels of accent which any system of notation can only approximately chart. Readers of this book will be on the right track if they find themselves vocalizing, annoying librarians and alarming passengers in neighboring seats on the subway. This is one of the more virtuous ways I can think of to get in trouble.

My own trouble in writing this book would have been much greater without the help I have received from friends and associates. Several, in conversation or correspondence, have moved me to clarify points or have introduced me to poets and poems I might otherwise have missed. For thus sharing their experience and expertise, I am grateful to Daniel Hall, Eugene Hill, Heidi Holder, J. Wainwright Love, Joshua Mehigan, and Mary Jo Salter. Welcome encouragement came early on from Leslie Brisman and John Hollander. John M. Walsh offered valuable corrective remarks on initial drafts. My student, Sarah Giragosian, made many useful suggestions regarding the first and final chapters. David Sanders, my supportive editor at Ohio University Press, was of great help in determining the final structure of the book as well as augmenting, through his suggestions, the coverage of contemporary poets. I am uniquely indebted to Timothy Steele, who read the entire manuscript in installments and offered detailed commentary on it. Every part of the work has benefited from his vigilance, which prompted me to make many clarifications, additions, and corrections. As always, I am grateful to my wife, who put up with much strategizing and helped me through recurrent keyboard crises.

I am grateful also to Nancy Basmajian, whose thoughtful and meticulous copyediting has made the work more readable.

Two very different poets, both of them my teachers, influenced me in enduring ways when I was first beginning to write. I cannot write poetry, or write about it, without before long remembering Robert Fitzgerald and Robert Lowell with renewed gratitude. And I feel the same in remembering their friend and colleague, also my teacher, to whom this book is dedicated.