



Andrea Schiavone, *Aeneas Ordered to Leave Dido*, ca. 1555–1560. Courtesy Art Resource, NY.

## THRASONICAL HUFFE SNUFFE

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It was an article of faith for the composers who followed Arnold Schoenberg to the barricades of the atonal revolution that modern audiences would eventually fall in behind them. After all, from Bach to Mozart to Beethoven to Brahms to Wagner to Debussy, they always had. But while the history of stylistic innovation adumbrated in this line of influence is long, what Schoenberg did was without real precedent. He stripped away the privileges that had always been enjoyed by the consonant intervals, the sweet-sounding thirds and fifths, and with them all the basic harmonic plots that had organized western music for centuries. The tone rows that he substituted weighted all of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale equally. What he was writing was still offered as music: you were still supposed to feel all the old sympathetic exaltations and despairs, and to be able to find it beautiful. But those responses and judgments were set on a new conceptual foundation. It was not so much (to turn to a sister art) like learning to love a new poet, nor even like learning to love poetry in French, if French is not your native tongue. Maybe more like learning to love poetry in Esperanto.

Or, like learning to love English poetry in the imaginary rhythms of quantitative meter. Quantitative meter

was never quite so new to English, so *ex nihilo*, as tone rows were to concert music: it had been around for centuries before English was born, measuring the long and short syllables of classical Latin and Greek. But linguistically speaking it was just as foreign to the younger language, just about as arbitrary in its construction—ingeniously, freely, confoundingly arbitrary—and there was a brief moment in the early 1580s when it looked like the key to a revolution. That was, at all events, the view of the Irish antiquary-chemist-translator Richard Stanyhurst: “Good God what a fry of such wooden rhythmers doth swarm in stationers’ shops,” he protested in 1582. “The readiest way therefore to flap these drones from the sweet scenting hives of Poetry, is for the learned to apply themselves wholly ... to the true making of verses in such wise as the Greeks and Latins.”<sup>1</sup> He backed up his protests with a specimen of this new art:

*Now manhod and garbroyls I chaunt, and martial horror.  
I blaze thee captayne first from Troy cittye repairing,  
Lyke wandring pilgrim too famosed Italie trudging,  
And coast of Lavyn: soust wyth tempestuus hurlwynd,  
On land and sayling, bi Gods predestinat order<sup>2</sup>*

Even in the weird spelling (which cannot, as we will see, be helped), you may recognize these lines. They

translate, with perversely vigorous liberty, the opening of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the stately verses that inaugurate Aeneas's flight from Troy and his journey to found the Roman empire: *Arma virumque cano Troiae qui primus ab oris*. It is safe to say that no reader before or since has thought of him trudging there, exactly, nor soused with a tempestuous hurlwind on the way, whatever a hurlwind is. "Thrasonical huffe snuffe!" exclaimed his contemporary Thomas Nashe.<sup>3</sup> Boastful nonsense! And as for the rhythm—well, now we have come to the heart of the matter. Stanyhurst wanted to render the *Aeneid* in the quantities he dreamed he heard in English. And his wager was, huff snuff notwithstanding, that we would take pleasure there—that we could feel for this *Aeneid* what we had always felt in response to the pace and surge and poise of great verse. That we could learn to love it.

Can we? What does that mean, to learn love, to learn pleasure? Especially aesthetic pleasure: to learn to find something beautiful; to take it for art? Stanyhurst's translation is mostly forgotten, printed in 1582 and 1583, not again until 1880, and now disinterred mostly to suffer new abuse (C. S. Lewis pauses in his survey of sixteenth-century literature only to observe that it is "barely English").<sup>4</sup> The explosive indecorousness of his diction is certainly something to reckon with. But so is the doomed ambition of his experiment in re-founding our taste. We have a few pages here to see if we can cultivate an ear for what he did, and to consider the idea that the thrasonical Irishman's would-be revolution might pose an aesthetic problem more native to our age than to his own.

#### THEORY

Before we can listen for Stanyhurst's quantities, however, we should remind ourselves what he was turning his back on. You have probably been reading this essay in silence. Try, for a moment, reading it aloud—this essay, or any other in the magazine. As you read, listen for the beat. THERE'S a NATURAL PULSE in SPOKEN ENGLISH that MAKES some SYLLABLES STRONG and OTHERS WEAK. The capital letters in this last sentence pick out that beat, but you can hear it in just about anything you say. Listen closely and you'll notice that the beat is produced by a variable combination of higher pitch, higher volume, greater duration, and sharper articulation, together known as stress. If you bang your hand on the table to mark these stresses as you speak them, you'll notice something else, too: that they COME at ROUGHLY EVEN INTERVALS. The linguists call this phenomenon isochrony, or stress-timing, and although it cannot compete

with a metronome for precision, or get quite close enough for jazz, still you've got rhythm, without even trying.

Now, how did you learn to do that? On inspection it is no mean trick: from the examples above, you can see that the beat does not just fall on every other syllable; sometimes two or even three unstressed syllables intervene, and keeping the rhythm means compressing them into the space of one. It would be difficult to pull off by calculation, and how would we know where the stresses are supposed to fall, anyway? Fortunately this gift is just part of our ordinary linguistic competence in English, learned well before we start to study anything. To know a word is already to know where its stress falls, to say PLEASure rather than pleasURE. (A misplaced stress sounds funny enough to tip us off that you're not from around here.<sup>5</sup>) When the distribution of these stresses becomes deliberate and regular, we have crossed into poetry or, more precisely, into verse. A line of iambic pentameter simply organizes these naturally occurring stresses into repeating units that strengthen the isochrony effect, so that you get a rhythm going that you can't ignore: Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," for example, or James Merrill's found gem, "American experimental film." When we speak of a beautiful line of verse, we praise patterns that arise from ordinary competences. Natural stress is the ground of metrical form.

None of which will help you in the slightest when Aeneas begins to tinkle your ears with his traveler's tale, after washing up on the shores of Queen Dido's Carthage:

*Wee coom from Troytowne (of Troyseat yf haplye the  
rumoure  
Youre ears hath tinckled) late a tempest boysterus  
haggard  
Oure ships to Libye land with rough extremitye tilted.<sup>6</sup>*

There is stress here, as in any English utterance. But it is not organized into any regular pattern, not organized into verse, and Stanyhurst—polemically—does not care. The action is in the quantities. Those quantities he learned as a property of Latin, the language of instruction in all the grammar schools of the time, and the fundamentals will be familiar to anyone who has studied that language. Some syllables are long by nature:

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overleaf: From a lecture on prosody delivered by Jeff Dolven to middle-school student Audrey Kastner at her home, 17 September 2010. Dryden and Stanyhurst provided the examples. Photo Claire Lehmann.

~~Arms, and the men / sing~~

~~And haughty, / arms' / well~~

~~Expelled and exiled,~~

~~come Virungwe cond~~

~~Now manhood and / quibbling~~

~~blaze / these / captayne~~

~~Like wandering pilgrim~~

~~And coast of / Lays~~

who, forced by Fate

venting hate

left the Trojan shore. (Dryden)

to absent, and musted horses  
first from Troy citie repairing  
to famose Italic trading

(Stanhurst)

syllables with tense vowels, for example (like the *a* in “lay,” as opposed to the *a* in “that”), and double vowels or diphthongs. Some are long by position: syllables with a vowel followed by two consonants.

*Theare stud up Æneas, with glittring beautye redowning.  
Godlyke in his feature: for his hevnlly mooother amended  
His bush with trimming, his sight was yoouthlye  
bepurpled.<sup>7</sup>*

Notice that the difference is between long ( – ) and short ( ~ ), not strong and weak. That is because what this system of scansion measures is not the placement of stress, but the length, or quantity, of each syllable, on the understanding that a long syllable is twice as long as a short. If you pronounce your Latin that way, it is indeed a somber, incantatory language, and these principles were drilled daily into schoolboys as soon as they encountered verse (*Aarma viruuuumque canooo Troiiiieeee quiiii priiimus ab oooriiiis*, and so on). As a prize student at his Kilkenny, Ireland grammar school, Stanyhurst would have had a heavy dose of such tuition, mostly out of John Lily’s ubiquitous Latin grammar, which devotes its final fifteen pages to the details of these rules, their implications and nuances. In the punitive pedagogical culture of the era, they would literally have been beaten into him.

There is nothing we more comfortably identify as learning than this, getting the rules by rote under threat of being, as we say, taught a lesson. Nor was the burden on brute memory a matter of rules alone, for any careful reader of Virgil or Ovid would soon recognize that the masters took substantial liberties with the quantities they assigned to particular words. Therefore, because the poets’ authority was as great, or greater, than that of the rules themselves, these historical exceptions became matter for study, too. The full horror of this enterprise is legible in a textbook like Rudolf Gwalther’s *De Syllabarum et Carminum Ratione* (1573), which not only refines the rules to a nearly capillary specificity, but offers up hundreds of exceptions for memorization. As Gwalther put it, “you are allowed to use any quantity that you see the proven poets used.”<sup>8</sup>

*With thesee words flaming her brest was kendled in  
hoatlove:*

*Shee graunts to her tottring mind hoape, shame  
bashful avoyding<sup>9</sup>*

Now we know, therefore, that Dido’s “hoatlove” (or hotlove) for Aeneas is a trochee, long-short. “Fie on the

forged mint that did create / New coin of words never articulate!” cried his critic Joseph Hall.<sup>10</sup> But the point of lingering over this regimen is to show how Stanyhurst learned what Latin poetry (and Latin language) sounded like: not at his mother’s breast, not in the street, but in school, by a heroic effort of memorization, at which, to judge by his progress on to University College Oxford and later to legal study at Lincoln’s Inn, he excelled.

“[T]he final end of a verse is to please the ear,”

Stanyhurst insists, and as his own schoolmaster doubtless did, he promises that with effort you will get the hang of it: “this much I dare warrant young beginners, that when they shall have some firm footing in this kind of poetry, which by a little painful exercise may be purchased, they shall find as easy a vein in the English, as in the Latin verses.”<sup>11</sup> It is a familiar schoolroom promise: if you put in the “painful” labor (“painstaking,” he means, but still—), you will be rewarded with a facility and a felicity that you cannot know in advance. Then and now, some of us will resist the idea. It seems not only to make our pleasure dependent upon our knowledge, but to confuse them with one another. Then again, without that knowledge—without having taken its pains—how are we to say the quantities are not sweeter than anything we have ever heard before?

#### PRACTICE

No one would ever accuse Stanyhurst of lacking that knowledge, nor of being selfish with it. His *Aeneid* is a polemic and a gift: how fortunate we would be if our rustic stress-heavy English could be redeemed into this rigorous and formal purity, if we could find experience of beauty in the fruit of these rules. And why not? Surely it is just a matter of transplanting them into the vernacular, where they ought to flourish like native stock. English comes from Latin, after all, or at least some of it does.

*Then wyl I round coomasse with clowd grim foggye  
these hunters.*

*When they shal in thickets thee coovert maynelye be  
drawing.*

*All the skye shal rustle with thumping thunderus hurring.*

*Thee men I wyl scatter, they shal be in darcknes al  
hooueld.*

*Dido and thee Troian captayne shal jumble in one den.<sup>12</sup>*

To make all this work—to get the six feet of the hexameter in order—the rules have been adapted a bit. Stanyhurst relies upon double vowels to mark a syllable long by nature, and his consonant-clotted diction ruthlessly exploits the rule by position. He also reserves the

right to make precedent-setting exceptions of his own. But if you accept such adjustments, then these lines scan as regularly as Virgil's, and you can stride on like a scholar as Juno explains how Aeneas and Dido, out hunting with their entourage, will be caught in a fateful thunderstorm. The storm will separate them from their companions and force them to take shelter together in a cave, where they will, as she says, jumble in one den. (Jumble in one den: one can hear Nashe again, what "strange language of the firmament never subject before to our common phrase"!<sup>13</sup>)

But the rhythm, the rhythm: it is obdurately difficult to hear, and painstaking even to mark on the page. First, because we still perceive those English stresses, but they are neither organized into any pattern, nor do they have a steady relation to the quantities. Anyone trying to attend to both will confront a chaotic mash-up. Second, the quantities are frequently achieved by entirely adventitious, not to say preposterous, changes in spelling. So the short first syllable of "covert" becomes the long "coovert"—just have the printer toss in an extra *o*—when Stanyhurst needs it to be long to fit the meter. By dint of its final consonants, afterthought "-ing" is as long as mighty "thump." Most egregiously, the article "the" is stretched to "thee." The tether between Stanyhurst's Virgilian idiolect and spoken English would seem simply to have snapped.

If tether there ever was. There are no tricks of spelling in English that make it plausible to pronounce "covert" with two stresses. (Nowadays it is one of those relatively rare words that can be stressed on either syllable, COVERT or covERT, but still, you have to choose.) The fact that Stanyhurst can change his scansion by poaching a piece of lead from the printer's letter case makes it clear that these quantities are, notwithstanding his assertions, indifferent to the ear. Stress was and is a vital property of spoken English. Its rhythms are founded there and nowhere else. Quantities are a principle of construction so refined—so learned, in both the single- and double-syllabled senses of that word—that they cannot actually be heard, not in a way that has ever compelled general agreement. Indeed, even Latin quantities may have been neglected when it came to actually intoning the verse in classrooms: the scholar Derek Attridge goes so far as to suggest that, for the Elizabethans, they too were a merely "intellectual apprehension."<sup>14</sup> Which brings us back again to the modernist analogy. Many of the formal devices that structure musical composition in tone rows are intricate beyond the ear's power to pick them out, appreciable only by study of the score. They are intel-

lectual apprehensions. As a consequence, they have met with a distinctly modernist, or counter-modernist, accusation: not that this music is bad, or for that matter good, but that it is *not music at all*. Stanyhurst knew the same charge: he took Virgil "out of a Latin heroic verse, into an English riffe raffe," said Barnaby Rich.<sup>15</sup> And then there is Lewis's judgment: "barely English."

#### PLEASURE

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter," says Keats to his Grecian urn. Unfortunately for Stanyhurst, most of his contemporaries focused on what they *could* hear. That virtuoso satirist Thomas Nashe got particularly exercised, piling up some of the translator's favorite words into this parody of a Stanyhurstian-Virgilian tempest:

*Then did he make, heavens vault to rebounde, with  
rounce robble hobble  
Of rufft raift roaring, with thwick thwack thurlery  
bouncing.*

"So terrible was his style, to all mild ears," Nashe continued, "as would have affrighted our peaceable Poets... our speech is too craggy for him to set his plough in... retaining no part of that stately smooth gate, which he vaunts himself with amongst the Greeks and Latins."<sup>16</sup> We cannot disagree about the rhythms. The translation's neglect, and its revolution's failure, may be laid to the fact that (like the new music) its form is grounded in features of the poem that are appreciable only, as it were, by eye and mind. There's no playing them by ear. Perhaps we shouldn't underestimate the power of a perverse spirit like Stanyhurst to hear them all the same. (Is it relevant that he was arrested sometime in the 1570s for alchemical forgery?) But such hearing is more or less what we mean by the phrase "hearing things." If the recognition of form is always partly a power of perception, an organization of experience *in* experience, then we see why the project was doomed. Those dactyls and spondees are too abstracted from the ear. It may be that we can learn to love anything, but if we are to love it together and for long, that anything still has to be something.

Perhaps, then, Stanyhurst's neglect is the consequence of a *studium* that takes leave of the senses. That may not settle the question of what it means to learn pleasure, but it may mark out one limit to what pleasures we can learn. Having rendered that verdict on the experiment, however, there is still something left over in Stanyhurst's verse, a remainder that lays obdurate

claim to the hearing, the sensuous pleasure, that his metrics balked. For if the verse has, finally, no heard rhythm, it is nonetheless filled with perverse and arresting sounds, sounds with the power to call forth an echo even from its most vehement critics. One more excerpt, telling of Dido's despair after Aeneas has cooled his hoatlove, banished memories of happy den-jumbling, and deserted Carthage to fulfill his Roman destiny. She wishes that he had left her a son. "Why do I breath longer?" she asks,

*yf yeet some progenye from me  
Had crawld, by the fatherd, yf a cockney dandiprat  
hopthumb,  
Prittye lad Aeneas, in my court, wantoned, ere thow  
Took 'st this filthye fleing, that thee with phisnomye  
lyckned,  
I ne then had reckned my self for desolat owtcaste.*<sup>17</sup>

A judiciously modernized version: "Why do I breathe any longer? If only some progeny from me had crawled, fathered by you; if only a cockney dandiprat hopthumb, a pretty lad Aeneas, wantoned in my court before you took this filthy fleeing, [a boy] that was linked to you by physiognomy—then I would not reckon myself a desolate outcast." Stanyhurst the Irishman had some polemical reasons for this crazy diction, with its old-fashioned words, its alliteration, and its free compounding, a sound like the "gross draff" of old Ireland and an antidote to the "costly and delicate woodcocks"<sup>18</sup> served at English tables. (A patriot and a Catholic, he had written the history of Ireland for Holinshed's great *Chronicle* a few years before.)

But beyond these language politics, there is outrageous mouth-pleasure to be had in his phrases, for which the quantitative meter often seems like nothing more than an excuse. No pattern of accents could license such a perpetual logjam of strong stress. If, however, your guiding principle is the double consonant, then you can spawn cockney dandiprat hopthumbs to your heart's content. The recurring astonishment of those phrases—do they sound more like *Beowulf*, or *Finnegan's Wake*?—commands an attention that we might as well call aesthetic, even if we have to set aside our worries about form to do so. The failure of the verse liberates something else, making a distinction between the claims of economy and purposiveness on the one hand, and a kind of spastic invention on the other. Not all of art is form, or has anything to do with form. We could almost call his willful transgressions *unlearning*: and if his learned

experiment has been almost entirely ignored for more than four centuries, and it is safe to say there is no future in his method, there may yet be something to unlearn from his words.

1 Virgil, *Translation of the first four books of the Aeneis of P. Vergilius Maro*, trans. Richard Stanyhurst, ed. Edward Arber (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1895), p. 10. Commentary by Stanyhurst cited in this essay is taken from his dedication to the poem and his epistle "To the Learned Reader." I have modernized spelling throughout this essay, except in the case of Stanyhurst's poetry, where it is absurdly material to his prosody.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

3 Thomas Nashe, preface to Robert Greene, *Menaphon* (London: 1589), A1r.

4 C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 365.

5 In this case, perhaps, from France, where they say *plaiSIR*. French is sometimes said to be a stressless language, but there is an unmistakable rising emphasis in most French disyllables, just as there is falling emphasis in German disyllables, like *FREUDe*. The rhythmic interest of English has a lot to do with this dual heritage.

6 Virgil, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

8 Rudolf Gwalther, *De Syllabarum et Carminum Ratione* (London: 1573), B7r (my translation).

9 Virgil, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

10 Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum* (London: 1598), p. 14.

11 Virgil, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

13 Nashe, preface to *Menaphon*, A1r.

14 Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 76. Attridge's is the definitive account of the era's experiments with quantitative verse.

15 Barnaby Rich, *The Irish Hubbub* (London: 1617), B2r.

16 Nashe, preface to *Menaphon*, A1r.

17 Virgil, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

18 Stanyhurst to Sir Henry Sidney, in the preface to his *Description of Ireland* (1577), quoted in Virgil, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.