

## BRENNAN'S "WANDERER" – SOME REMARKS ON SCANSION

In a letter to Richard Pennington, 16th June, 1930, Brennan gave a brief account of the scansion of *The Wanderer*, "as I know some people are troubled" (Prose vol., Chisholm and Quinn edition, p.254). Though Brennan's account when first read appears to dispose of the problem succinctly, there appear on closer examination some tantalising contradictions and ambiguities. For instance: Brennan, after stating that there are two blank-verse measures used, one an "ordinary" line of five stresses and another of six stresses, adds that "the menagerie of English verse does not contain these outsiders". He then explains that, to save perplexity, he has almost everywhere made stress and accent agree, adding that, "Properly read aloud the measure ought not to worry anybody."<sup>1</sup> Thus armed, the reader may care to 'properly' read, say, Poem 91, noting beforehand that Brennan describes it as having a line of six stresses. With some practice, a meaningful reading with six stresses per line can be achieved, but it is very easy to read certain lines (for example, 5, 7 & 11) as five-stress lines, and in such cases it is not always evident where the additional stress is to go, particularly if it is a case of two stresses together (for example, line 1, poem 91). Some students have sought to make a virtue of this possibility of scanning individual poems of *The Wanderer* in lines of varying stress-number, and have accordingly discerned regular 'patterns' which they assume to have been intended by Brennan. Indeed, it does appear that in some cases acceptable alternative readings can be made, although there is of course a resultant difference in aesthetic affect.

It is desired to present here some further material of a circumstantial nature which may help in the understanding of these 'outsider' verses.

Firstly, Randolph Hughes,<sup>2</sup> writing four years after the Pennington letter, has stated that Brennan sometimes employs Greek measures and not English ones. He states that "Nothing is more natural than that Brennan, steeped as he was in the rhythms of Aeschylus and Pindar, should attempt to introduce Greek metres into English verse."<sup>3</sup> In Hughes' opinion, "Brennan's experiments in classical measures are confined to certain of the poems constituting the section of his work called *The Wanderer*."<sup>4</sup> He states that the smoothness and strength that seem lacking in certain of Brennan's verses appear as soon as the right metrical scheme is applied.<sup>5</sup>

H. M. Green<sup>6</sup> has contested this theory of Hughes' on the grounds that Greek quantitative verse and English accentual verse are incompatible. Strictly speaking, this view is correct, but it has not prevented poets from attempting to emphasize the quantitative element of English on the lines of classical models.

The dominant feature of Greek verse-measures is the regularity of verse-constructions based on fixed syllabic quantity in time; long and short syllables alternating with each other in various patterns related to a harmonic beat. Any accentuation is a late and subordinate feature. English verse-construction, on the contrary, is not based on syllabic lengths fixed in themselves but on accentuation; important syllables receive accentuation, and syllables vary in quantity in relation to their placement in the verse.

Modern languages imply a relative increase in intellectual character and their rules of prosody are ultimately derived from grammar. It is to be noted that Brennan's copy of Friedrich Schlegel's 'Prosaische Jugendschriften' (pub. Minor 1906) has numerous pencilled markings of Schlegel's views on Greek poetry, covering these points.

Among modern European languages, English probably shows the greatest readiness to yield its accentual principle in favour of natural quantity-values. There is certainly no question here of eliminating accent but merely of increasing the role of the quantitative principle. From this interplay of accent with the musical, quantitative principle, there arises a particular speech quality of the verse.

The direct transfer of Greek metres into English verse is thus not possible in the sense of obtaining uniform dominance of the quantitative principle, but it is possible to order the syllables and stresses in English so as to 'stress' the quantitative element vis-a-vis the accentual. Randolph Hughes, by equating stress in Brennan's English verse with the long syllables of Greek verse, attempts to find the 'right' Greek metre. However, in attempting to fit poem 90 (4th in *The Wanderer* sequence) to a tetrasyllabic foot based on the *Jonicus a minore* he certainly goes too far in looking for a regularity of pattern that is not properly there. The present writer can find no metrical consistency nor enhancement of the text in proceeding on Hughes' method. Even the example given by Hughes<sup>7</sup> (the three lines of poem 90 beginning "where the blessing is shed . . .") shows a variety of inconsistent metres, including only one ionic!

The fact that Brennan was even more deeply concerned with the nature of Greek metre than Hughes indicated is shown by a study to be found among Brennan's literary remains. This is a 47-page leather-bound quarto volume containing a manuscript in Brennan's own hand, bearing the title *Freie senkungen: eine randbemerkung zur germanischen metric*.<sup>8</sup> The main thesis of this 'marginal note on germanic metric' is that, quantity as the regulative principle of Greek metric owes its occurrence to the struggle and final fusion of two original measures, a syllable-counting principle and the "enoplian" principle which calculates according to a constant number of stresses (hebungen, arsis) with an indeterminate number of unstressed syllables (senkungen, thesis). Hence, the title of Brennan's thesis—literally, "Free unstressed syllables . . .". This latter principle has an affinity with some old German metres. It is to be noted that in the argument of his 'marginal note', Brennan is plainly much influenced by the prominent German scholar Wilamowitz-Moellendorf and that this latter metrician, apart from seeking to establish an original verse or 'Urvers', classifies certain enoplions as 'free iambs'<sup>9</sup> — a term which fits with Brennan's remarks on his own verse, in the Pennington letter.

The dating of Brennan's study is not certain. The latest internal date, a reference to the *Classical Quarterly*, appears to be October 1909, which of course means that the study was written after at least the majority of *The Wanderer* poems. However, the essential references are placed in the last decade of the preceding century, and there appears to be no reason why the argument could not have already been embryonically present in Brennan's mind prior to the writing of *The Wanderer*. Brennan's

career, from his early student years, on through his time at the University of Berlin, was essentially that of a classicist. Wallace Kirsop<sup>10</sup> states that there is ample evidence in Brennan's library that he read Wilamowitz's works with great attention through almost forty years. Brennan died in 1932.

Thus there is offered here a possibility of enhanced perspective on the nature of Brennan's metre. From the Pennington letter, it is clear that Brennan did not deliberately choose the metre beforehand but, under pressure of the need to articulate a particular quality of line, he intuitively expressed himself in an 'outsider' verse having a fixed number of stresses and an indeterminate number of unstressed syllables. These features are possessed by old Germanic verse which accordingly had great freedom and mobility, including the capacity to place stresses against each other with complete absence of the unstressed syllable, or as Brennan puts it "I have used mobility of stress so as to bring two stresses together . . . and the freedom of varying—within the limits of the norm—the number of syllables in the unstressed space."<sup>11</sup> In principle, this was the kind of line Brennan saw as a basis of Greek verse.

While further remarks could be made, it is suggested that these considerations as they stand justify us further in resisting the tendency to read certain passages of *The Wanderer* either as classical metres, verses of varying stress number, or even, and it can happen, as prose. Brennan's verses, of free rhythm and constant stress-number, have a wonderful flexibility in articulating the diverse qualities of *The Wanderer's* thematic development. More could be said, but as Brennan has said in another connection: "The superficial and exterior science of rhetoric would here expend a wealth of technical terminology — to no effect: for if the swell and pause of the imagination itself be not perceived, then nothing has been perceived."

N. L. MACAINSH

## REFERENCES

1. *Prose* vol. p. 255.
2. Randolph Hughes: C.J. Brennan—An Essay in Values. P.R. Stephensen and Co. 1924. Chapter VIII.
3. *Ibid.* p. 155.
4. *Ibid.* p. 157.
5. *Ibid.* p. 148.
6. H.M. Green: *Christopher Brennan*. Sydney & London 1939.
7. *op. cit.* Chapter VIII.
8. Uncat. MSS. 344, Item I, Quinn papers, Mitchell Library. Brennan dispenses with the normal use of capitals in his German text.
9. cf. A.M. Dale: *The Lyric Metres of Greek Drama*. Cambridge 1948, pp. 150 ff.
10. Wallace Kirsop: Brennan, Critic and Scholar. *Southerly* (3), 1963 p. 209.
11. *Prose* vol. p. 255.