

Dowson's 'Cynara' and the English Alexandrine

A STUDY OF FORM IN CONTEXT

'Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae' is Ernest Dowson's most famous poem, and one of the most celebrated lyrics of the legendary English 1890s. Why did it become so particularly famous? Supposing that its fame is no more than it deserves, the question might be approached from another direction: Why is it so good? How persuasively can its strange success be explained? The inquiry is therefore a matter of literary history, in so far as it asks how the poem took shape, and how it found its place in the English lyrical tradition; but also a matter of literary criticism, in the most fundamental sense, in so far as it wants to discover and articulate, as precisely as possible, how the poem actually works to produce its very unusual and memorable effects.

The poem has been generally reputed a great achievement in lyric, or at least a fortuitous bit of magic. Arthur Symons called it 'certainly one of the greatest lyrical poems of our time', and made it clear that he had in mind especially its 'intoxicating and perhaps immortal music'.¹ The first half of the twentieth century saw its prestige reaching the highest elevations, and it fared well amid the critical stock-takings of the 1930s. Yeats gave it a considerable push by including it in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), and thereafter, largely as a consequence of its canonization during that period, it has remained a popular anthology piece. T.S. Eliot was discussing this poem in particular, in 1935, when he expressed the

¹ *The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson*, with memoir by Arthur Symons, (New York: The Modern Library, 1919), p. 28. The memoir had first been published in 1905.

opinion that Dowson was ‘a poet whose technical innovations have been underestimated’;² and Geoffrey Bullough, a year earlier, had talked generally of Dowson’s ‘considerable metrical subtlety’, even if in subject and mood ‘the famous poem to Cynara’ was really only ‘an accomplished piece of boyish febrility’.³ Bullough was one of many 1930s critics who singled out the poem for mention in surveying the field of late-Victorian poetry. Ifor Evans, another such, thought that ‘Non Sum Qualis’ had added ‘a new melody to English poetry’, its skillful variation of rhythm overcoming the usual ‘weariness’ of the English Alexandrine, and producing instead a ‘moving lyrical quality’. These remarks were quoted with approbation by Desmond Flower, only a year later, in his edition of Dowson.⁴ Even critics generally hostile to Dowson accepted the charm of this one poem, assumed to be familiar already to readers. ‘The technical excellence of Dowson’s few exceedingly good poems, among them *Cynara*’, says Herbert Palmer in 1938, ‘must not blind us to his lack of technical achievement in general’.⁵ Thus we can feel quite sure of at least *one* of the poems meant when we read remarks along the lines of this: ‘If there is life still in one or two of Dowson’s poems, it is because [...] he had a sensitive ear’. That is R.L. Mégroz in 1932. ‘No poet is quite negligible’, he goes on, ‘who achieves an individual music, though there may be in the singing, as

² T.S. Eliot, ‘Dowson’s Poems’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 Jan 1935, p. 21. The note is a response to Geoffrey Tillotson’s suggestion in the previous week’s *TLS* (3 Jan 1935, p. 6), that the repeated phrase ‘*falls the shadow*’ in Eliot’s poem ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925) was an allusion to ‘Non Sum Qualis’. Eliot agrees that he must have been influenced by Dowson in this regard, although unconsciously.

³ Geoffrey Bullough, *The Trend of Modern Poetry* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1934), p. 7.

⁴ Ifor Evans, *English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1966; first published 1933), p. 406. Quoted in *Poetical Works of Ernest Christopher Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower (London: Cassell and John Lane at the Bodley Head, 1934), p. xxiv.

⁵ Herbert Palmer, *Post-Victorian Poetry* (London: Dent, 1938), p. 9.

in Dowson's, a very minimum of original music.'⁶ Probably he neglected to name any specific poems because the location of this small quotient of musical originality was meant to be sufficiently obvious.

The prosodic success of the poem has become, and by the 1930s had already become, a critical commonplace. Among recent critics it continues to be something generally acknowledged, frequently invoked, and needless to explain. Joseph Bristow can refer in passing, therefore, to its 'metrical perfection', knowing that for most of his readers no justification will be required.⁷ But 'metrical perfection', an ambiguous phrase whose ambiguity is thus licensed by the fame of the poem and its attributes, does not fully give the impression of oddness, irregularity, waywardness, which have usually been the most celebrated of those attributes. Instead it might be taken (though, of course, it need not) to imply the very opposite, since the word 'perfection' is commonly used to signify attainments of tidy mastery within regular and conventional forms. To an unprejudiced reader who is not familiar with the poem, or who has never taken much notice of its prosody, the sense likely to be taken from Bristow's phrase is therefore potentially quite different from that yielded by Linda Dowling's description, when she writes of Dowson's 'loosening' of rhythm, and the 'seemingly spontaneous inflections' of a speaker 'drunk with remorse as much as wine'.⁸ Dowling's account, stressing irregularity, looseness and license, is the more satisfactory, if only because more specific; and while there is a

⁶ R.L. Mégroz, *Modern English Poetry, 1882-1932* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), p. 40.

⁷ Joseph Bristow, 'How Decadent Poems Die', in Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (eds), *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 26-45; p. 33.

⁸ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 211-12.

kind of ‘perfection’ about this poem, it is a perfection owed almost entirely to the unusualness of the handling. If we are to continue referring to the formal achievement of ‘Non Sum Qualis’, we should try to keep in view the precise qualities that have made it such an egregious success; and if it is egregious, we must also make efforts to compare its character, carefully delineated, with that of those other poems from which it seems to stand apart. These are my aims, and I hope it will be agreed that the poem is sufficiently interesting to sustain the attention. (For me there is no doubt.) In any case the study will shed some light on certain prosodic practices forming the immediate background for this unusual example.

Before discussing the finer points of rhythm and cadence in this poem, it is necessary to address one small but significant point of possible doubt: the pronunciation of the name ‘Cynara’. Judging from my own experience with mostly British scholars (including a conference devoted to Dowson in London in 2016), it would seem that most modern readers incline toward ‘Sin-AAH-ra’. As the title of the poem reminds us, however, the name comes from Horace, where a long ‘a’ in the middle of the word is impossible: the middle syllable must be short.⁹ In three other places in Horace’s work the scansion is the same.¹⁰ Since all three syllables of the name are metrically short, the stress, according to the usual Latin rules, would fall on the antepenultimate syllable: i.e. ‘SIN-a-ra’.¹¹ Classically educated readers in

⁹ *N.b.* the title quotation is a line and a half, composed in the second Asclepiadic stanza form: the line break occurs after ‘bonae’, where it is given in the holograph manuscript, as also in the first printed version (*Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 6 [1891]), in Dowson’s *Verses* (1896), and in some later texts, including those containing the Arthur Symons memoir (from 1905), and the 1934 ‘Collected’ edn by Desmond Flower; but *not* in the *Second Book of the Rhymers’ Club* (1894), where the line breaks after ‘sub’—presumably because the typesetter did not realise that a line break was intended, and simply distributed the text as seemed visually best.

¹⁰ *Odes* IV.1, line 4, and IV.13, lines 21-22; *Epistles* I.7, line 28, and I.14, line 33.

¹¹ As commentators on both Horace and Dowson sometimes observe, ‘kinara’ is the Greek word for an artichoke. In Greek the word is accented on the middle syllable, meaning that the pitch would be

Dowson's time would have had a sense of Latin quantities (i.e. the distinctions between long and short syllables upon which classical prosody is based) drilled into them, and would have been embarrassed by a mistake. Dowson, from childhood and university days, knew quite enough Latin to read his favourite authors, such as Horace, Catullus and Propertius, in the original language, and with a sense and understanding of the metres. Anyone who could read Latin verse, including many, probably most, of Dowson's immediate literary circle, would have been expected to see the correct scansion in the Horatian title, even if they had not remembered the very famous poem from which it came. We might also recall that Dowson's contributions at meetings of the Rhymers' Club were usually recited by Lionel Johnson, a serious and fastidious classicist who is unlikely to have tolerated a mispronunciation.¹² 'Sin-AAH-ra' would have sounded simply wrong to such readers, as if one should pronounce 'Caliban' as 'Cal-EE-ban'. I have located only two early attempts to offer a formal scansion of the poem, and, as will be seen in a moment, both of these—one by George Saintsbury, the other by D. H. Lawrence—indicate clearly, despite other differences, that 'SIN-a-ra' was the accepted pronunciation, while the musical setting of the poem by Delius, begun in 1908,

raised slightly even though the vowel sound remained short. A speaker of Latin or English, trying to honour the pitch-accentuation of the Greek within the stress-accent system of their own languages, would be likely to place the stress in this case on the middle syllable: 'kin-A-ra' (short middle 'a'). Another theory, advocated by John D. Morgan, is that Horace did not write 'Cinara', as modern texts have it, but 'Cinyra' or 'Cinura' (which both occur in the early manuscripts); in which case, he may not have been thinking of the Greek word for artichoke, but rather of a Greek word, borrowed from Hebrew, meaning 'lyre'; see Richard F. Thomas (ed.), *Horace: Odes Book IV and Carmen Saeculare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 88-89. This is also accented on the middle syllable. Therefore a very esoteric defence could in theory be mounted by a modern reader favouring the pronunciation 'Sin-A-ra' (short middle 'a', as in 'cat') over 'SIN-a-ra'; e.g. the actor Richard Burton, who recorded a reading of the poem for the LP *A Personal Anthology* (Argo, 1978). It seems likely that he was motivated by Latinate scruples, and may have been advised on no account to make any of the syllables 'long'.

¹² *N.b.* Classical Latin would originally have pronounced the 'c' hard, but for Anglophone Latinists it has long been accepted practice to soften 'c' when followed by 'i' or 'e'.

provides a third early attestation of this pronunciation, the musical notation being definite on that point.¹³

Two Early Scansions

Side by side, the prosodic interpretations of the poem by Saintsbury and Lawrence make a good introduction to the problems I mean to discuss. George Saintsbury, author of the *History of English Prosody* (1906-10) and *History of English Prose Rhythm* (1912), besides many other books of literary history, is in fact perversely inclined to play down the idiosyncrasy of the poem. In his *Historical Manual of English Prosody*, first published in 1910, he offers it as an illustration of ‘Some “Unusual” Metres and Disputed Scansions’.¹⁴ But Saintsbury, while declaring the stanza form ‘an original collocation, so far as I know’, considers the versification ‘nothing new or strange in principle’. He thinks the poem ‘a rather beautiful one’, but doubts ‘how much is contributed to the beauty by the special metre’. One infers from this that Saintsbury is conscious of writing against a consensus; that to many people the metre, or more accurately the rhythm, had seemed a very large part of the success of the poem. And Saintsbury sets about proving that ‘Non Sum Qualis’ presents ‘no difficulties for foot-scansion’, the whole exercise clearly suggesting that others might have been under the contrary impression.

Saintsbury was a champion of foot-scansion as the rational basis of English verse, a system opposed both to syllabic principles, as in French or Italian verse, and to ‘pure-stress’ metre, in which the essential principle is the number of stresses,

¹³ Frederick Delius, *Complete Works*, vol. 15b: *Songs with Orchestra (part 2)*, ed. Sir Thomas Beecham and Eric Fenby (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1987), pp. 32-52; see esp. pp. 35, 37, etc.

¹⁴ George Saintsbury, *Historical Manual of English Prosody*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1919, repr. 1930; first published 1910), p. 129; i.e. Book I, ch. VI, §LI (b).

and there is greater freedom in the number of intervening unstressed syllables. In his view, individual feet could admit pretty free substitution, and variations—such as trochaic inversions, or anapaests in place of iambs—were taken as standard features rather than aberrations.¹⁵ In this poem he sees six feet in each line, excepting the penultimate in each stanza, which is a five-foot line; the long lines he calls Alexandrines, the shorter line a decasyllable. Only the first stanza is given, and the scansion consists in a division of the feet only, rather than a marking of stress.

Last night, | ah! yes | ternight | betwixt | her lips | and mine
 There fell | thy sha | dow, Cy | nara! | thy breath | was shed
 Upon | my soul | between | the kiss | es and | the wine,
 And I | was des | olate, | and sick | of an | old passion;
 Yea, I | was des | olate | and bowed | my head.
 I have | been faith | ful to | thee, Cyn | ara, in | my fashion.¹⁶

To Saintsbury, the Alexandrine in its English incarnation is a line ‘of twelve syllables or six iambic feet’,¹⁷ and in dividing Dowson’s lines into six fundamentally iambic feet (meaning that they *tend* toward iambic rhythm), it might be felt that he flattened the effect of free and irregular cadence that distinguishes the poem. He himself would not have seen it in this way at all: for him, foot-scansion did not imply the degree of regularity that it might suggest to us, and he always insisted on the enlivening quality of rhythmical variations, which he thought perfectly well accommodated within a foot-based system. Still, however, there are moments when his foot-divisions run disturbingly counter to instinct, as here:

And I | was des | olate, | and sick | of an | old passion;

¹⁵ See for example Saintsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-36, esp. pp. 16-18, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 266 (Glossary).

I experience the rhythmical phrases thus: ‘and sick | of an old | passion’. But while, *caeteris paribus*, Saintsbury would have had no problem with the anapaestic foot ‘of an old’, he cannot leave ‘passion’ as a whole foot in itself, because the feminine ending ought to add an *extra* syllable to the twelve-syllable Alexandrine (as it does in line 6); and discounting this extra syllable, as being hypermetric, he cannot have the first syllable of ‘passion’ as a foot in itself. The result is awkward. It seems rather odd to have two strong stresses in one foot (‘old passion’), and none at all in another (‘of an’). Perhaps, then, the poem *does* present difficulties for foot-scansion. Other stanzas, not quoted by Saintsbury, would also scan troublesomely into feet. He would, for example, have had to do this:

I have | forgot | much, Cy | nara! | gone with | the wind,
Flung ro | ses, ro | ses, ri | otous | ly with | the throng

But if presented with these lines out of context, Saintsbury would probably have scanned them as follows:

I have | forgot | much, Cy | nara! gone | with the wind,
Flung ro | ses, ro | ses, ri | otously | with the throng

That is, he would have detected five main stresses per line, and so scanned them as five-foot lines quickening into anapaests in their second halves.

Finally, let us briefly note one ostensible irregularity. In line 6, Saintsbury gives ‘-ara, in’ as one whole foot, which might be considered an anapaest, but he probably meant us to understand an elision: otherwise there is one too many

syllables in the line for it to count as an Alexandrine. (With the feminine ending there should be thirteen syllables, but here, without the elision, there are fourteen.) I think the elision is clearly intended, although this is not to say that one should actually make a *full* elision in recitation. Anyway for Saintsbury it did not seem to call for any comment.

D.H. Lawrence chose a different stanza to scan, and scanned it in two different ways. The commentary comes in a letter of 19th November 1913, addressed to Edward Marsh, where Lawrence is explaining that he reads his poetry ‘more by length than by stress’—more like classical quantitative verse, that is. There is ‘a double method of scanning verse’, he says, demonstrating the point by giving the example of the third stanza of ‘Non Sum Qualis’. He gives it first like this:

I have | forgot much |, Cynara! | gone with the | wind
Flung roses |, roses | riotously | with the | throng, |
Dancing | to put | thy pale |, lost lil | ies out | of mind;
But I | was des | olate |, and sick | of an old | passion, |¹⁸

This is followed by an immediate disavowal: ‘Would you scan like that?’, he demands, rather condescendingly; ‘I hate an on-foot method of reading’. But, after all, what a strange kind of foot-scansion he has provided! Whether he meant to set up a straw man, or was simply writing in a hurry, this scansion is much less rational than Saintsbury’s. Again the poem resists foot-analysis. Lawrence’s line 4 is experientially more satisfying than Saintsbury’s version, but only because he is not

¹⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann, 1955), item 39 (pp. 79-81); p. 79. Lines 5-6 are not scanned. I have given in **bold** the syllables that DHL marks with a grave accent above the line.

thinking so schematically about the number of syllables. Line 3 seems fair enough, but in lines 1 and 2 Lawrence's division of feet is clearly guided by his intuition of the shapes and gaps between phrases: it is essentially arbitrary. He could, for instance, have made line 1 begin *dactyl* + *trochee*, rather than *trochee* + *amphibrach*. Without a clear guiding principle, like Saintsbury's conception of the iambic English Alexandrine, he is free to put the foot-breaks almost wherever he likes; and so he makes lines 1-2 contain five feet each, while lines 3-4 are six-foot lines. This is an important point to which I shall return.

Leaving behind this questionable 'on-foot' scansion, based on stress, Lawrence shows next how *he* would read the stanza. Here he uses the notation employed in classical scansion, implying quantity (long and short syllables) rather than stress; and in this case he makes no attempt to divide the poem into feet, but rather leaves spaces which appear to signify pauses:

u u u u ——— ———u u ——— u ———
u ———u ———u ———uu u ———
———u u u u ——— u ———u u u ———
u u u ———u u ——— u u ——— ———u¹⁹

This is somewhat inaccurate; the number of syllables, at least in the printed transcription, is slightly incorrect. What he appears to have meant is as follows:

u u u u ——— ———u u ——— u [u] ———
u ———u ———u ———uu u [u] ———
———u u u u ——— u ———u u u ———
u u u ———u u ——— u u ——— ———u

That is, where bold type indicates *length*:

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

I have forgot **much**, Cynara! **gone** with the **wind**,
Flung **roses**, **roses** **riotously** with the **throng**,
Dancing, to put thy **pale**, lost **lilies** out of **mind**;
But I was **des**'late and **sick** of an **old** **passion**

This is a much freer way of reading the poem, which is, according to Clive Scott, 'evidently an approach to poetry based on cadence'.²⁰ Since Dowson is writing in Alexandrines, a measure associated with French verse, it makes good sense that he should have been thinking in terms of cadence rather than foot-scansion. And Scott himself believes, with Lawrence, that this is a poem that 'benefits from a Gallic, phrasal reading',²¹ although he does not comment on the fact that Lawrence's 'on-foot' interpretation is also divided up by phrasal intuition. Perhaps Lawrence, himself a poet not known for great sensitivity to prosodic convention, and to whom the fetters of a tightly controlled rule, such as syllable-count, would have seemed unnecessary and alien to his own practice, simply had not noticed Dowson's adherence to the rules of the Alexandrine—patently obvious though it must have been to Scott.

Noting that Lawrence's preferred scansion contains four stresses per line, Scott concludes that 'Non Sum Qualis' is written in a manner falling 'somewhere between syllable-stress and pure-stress'. Unlike Saintsbury's conception of it, therefore, 'the Alexandrine here is not a pentameter with an extra iamb, but a tetrametric structure very reminiscent of its French counterpart'.²² Yet the 'tetrametric' pattern revealed in Lawrence's scansion is surely not only an arbitrary

²⁰ Clive Scott, 'The Liberated Verse of the English Translators of French Symbolism', in Anna Balakian (ed.), *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* (Akadémiai Kiadó: Budapest, 1982), pp. 127-43; p. 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

matter, open to legitimate disagreement, but also somewhat accidental—that is, if Lawrence had chosen instead to scan one of the other stanzas, he would have found more than four stresses in several of the lines. I see no tendency toward pure-stress. The poem, as Scott perceives, is a peculiar blend of the French Alexandrine with essentially English prosodic characteristics, but these latter qualities invite more precise description.

An Account of the ‘Cynara’ Stanza

The stanza form in ‘Non Sum Qualis’, Ifor Evans has said, ‘cannot be easily imitated’.²³ After patient listening it can at least be analysed. In the first place, it should be clear that each stanza follows the same metrical scheme, in spite of considerable rhythmic variation. The penultimate line of each stanza is an example of the common English line-type now popularly known as the ‘iambic pentameter’, historically known as the English ‘heroic’ line. In cases like this, where extra syllables or trisyllabic ‘foot substitutions’ are not admitted, it is also aptly termed the ‘decasyllabic’ line. It is, then, a line generally tending to have ten syllables (not counting feminine endings), and tending also to have five ‘beats’, although the actual number of stresses can vary above and below five.²⁴

²³ Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

²⁴ *A note on terminology*: ‘beat’ is used, in the now currently accepted sense, to mean any of the places in a line where the metre, if strictly applied, would call for a stress, even though in reality the stress might be underplayed or displaced in the actual rhythm of recitation. It is, therefore, a *potential stress*, where the underlying metrical pattern leads us to expect one. This way of speaking about metre is particularly useful to those who reject foot-scansion; but the beat, taken together with its complement of off-beats, is essentially equivalent to the foot (e.g., an *iamb* is a structure of one offbeat preceded by one beat, while a *dactyl* is one beat followed by two offbeats): in both the foot and the beat compound, the actual stress frequently fails to comply with the expected pattern. The more theoretically neutral term ‘unit’, which is equivalent both to the ‘foot’ and the compound of beat + offbeat(s), will be used in various places in this essay, and should be acceptable to followers of both systems.

All the other lines in the ‘Non Sum Qualis’ stanza are Alexandrines. Dowson himself, writing to Arthur Moore in 1891, just after having written the poem, says merely that the ‘3 first lines’ are in Alexandrines—meaning, of course, the first three lines of each stanza.²⁵ But the fourth and sixth are also Alexandrines, both with feminine endings, and with a single, quite ordinary elision in the sixth line. It is not entirely clear why Dowson was vague about them (a question to which I shall return later); but as he does not use feminine endings in any of his other poems written in Alexandrines, he may possibly have considered feminine rhymes unsuited to the English version of the line—English feminine endings being typically *heavier* than in French. This may be a sufficient explanation, odd though it appears. Also he may have been unsure about the acceptability of the implied but unmarked elision in line 6 (‘Cynara! in’): a standard elision, but, since you would not actually elide the extra syllable altogether in recitation, questionable in a strictly applied syllabic metre. If Dowson had retained the earlier reading ‘*after my fashion*’, cancelled in the manuscript, this would have disqualified the line as an Alexandrine; so it may be that he had already decided the line was *not* an Alexandrine before, in the end, he in fact turned it into one. Line 4, however, is completely unobjectionable, so the enigma remains. Sometimes modern commentators have echoed Dowson’s own explanation, noting rather non-committally that the stanza *begins* with Alexandrines.²⁶ But, if feminine rhymes and

²⁵ *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (London: Cassell, 1967), pp. 84–85. The editors date the letter (no. 134) to 7th February 1891.

²⁶ E.g. John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 112; and, in a less scholarly context, Carol Rumens’ column ‘Poem of the Week’ in *The Guardian*, 14 March 2011, which talks of the poem’s ‘dreamy music’.

elisions are admitted, then *all* the lines are Alexandrines, excepting only the fifth in each stanza. So far we are in the realm of sure, quantifiable facts.

About the decasyllabic lines themselves there is nothing which calls for special attention. But in each case the place of the decasyllabic in relation to the other lines, in the rhythmical and melodic arrangement of the stanzas, is not only very delicately handled, but absolutely necessary to the success of the poem. This can be tested by inserting a couple of extra syllables in each case, thereby making the fifth up to the same length as all the other lines in each stanza. With the relief and familiarity of the heroic fifth line, the looseness and irregularity of the other lines have a kind of musical firmness; without that sense of relief, without the pause achieved by the disparity of line length, and without the ease of rhythm afforded by the native and, in effect, natural decasyllabic, the varied rhythms of the Alexandrines lose their peculiar lyrical charm. If all the lines had been Alexandrines composed in free and various rhythms, the result would have been something like a rhyming version of the twelve-syllable measure used by Robert Bridges in *The Testament of Beauty* (1929), a manner of versification marked by a kind of *prosiness* that ‘Non Sum Qualis’, the celebrated masterpiece of lyric, does not at all share.

Also essential to the effect, and necessary to avoid the prosiness of Bridges (as anyone may test by experiment), are two other elements which work in conjunction with the decasyllabic fifth line: one is the management of rhyme, the other is the employment of burden-like repetition in the fourth and sixth lines. The handling of rhyme is a relative simple thing, and perhaps for that reason extremely effective. The point is that Dowson uses only masculine rhymes in this poem, with

the exceptions of the feminine rhymes *passion* and *fashion* in the fourth and sixth lines of every stanza. Possibly a comparable effect might have been achieved using only feminine endings as default, and reserving masculine for the refrains of lines four and six; although this would almost certainly make for a more decisive and less languid tone at the end of each stanza, and therefore a more cynical feeling overall. But, in any case, a less meticulous mixture would not have worked. In the French Alexandrine, as Dowson knew, the convention was to alternate strictly between masculine and feminine rhymes. Dowson departs from this rule, though he may have learned from it that the placement of masculine and feminine rhymes offered a great resource.

But what really matters about the feminine rhymes is that they come as part of the refrains. They help to sustain and mark the strong sense of a modulation between the first and second halves of each stanza. The second half (lines 4-6 in each case) is in effect one great refrain, incorporating variations in the shorter middle line, and inviting variation of inflection in the last. In each stanza, the first three lines only are really free, both in matter and in rhythm, and Dowson takes great permissible liberties with the prosody within the limits set by the twelve-syllable measure. In these lines, immediate experience—the night with the prostitute, the dancing with the throng, the feast with its wine and music—is given vivid expression through deft movements between free rhythmic momentum (supremely in the third stanza) and stately, well-paced rhythms such as would easily fit into Saintsbury's foot-divisions. The limitation to masculine rhymes, uninteresting in itself, is part of the formal expression of these moods; moods of both immediate definiteness (I did *this*; I could *feel* the beat of her heart), and also,

simultaneously, of flight or evasion, with its firmness of intent. To say this would ordinarily constitute a culpable over-reading, but the shift in the fourth line to a deflated and resigned tone of voice, with its dithering and hesitant cadences and the introduction of feminine endings, is made more effective by these circumstances and, in a sense, clarifies the formal nature of the foregoing lines by contrasting with them.

When we cross from the first three lines of the stanza to the second half—the burden, with its sense of failure and rest,—the poem demands a decisive change in the reading voice, and most people drop their pitch at line 4. The whole effect is similar to a modulation from major to minor. That musical shape relies on the prosody, of course, but also on the sense: the feeling of a reversion to a familiar failure. (Whatever I do, however the shadow falls, in this end it is always like *this*.) And this is governed by the use of the refrains. All elements are indispensable, and lines evoking the same mood but without the exact repetitions would not yield a similar formal result. In this case, however, experiment is harder, because it is no longer possible to prove the effects solely on the ear, without regard to the ‘meaning’. But if anyone wished to try substituting for lines four and six some different lines, of their own invention, as near as possible to the originals in length, cadence and sound-value, but using different words with a necessarily different meaning, and then repeating this procedure in every stanza (thereby eliminating any repetition of lines), they would not only produce, presumably, an inferior poem, but one with a significantly different *musical* shape. The sense of repetition, of the inevitable arrival at the same conclusion, affects the inflection of the reading voice so as to reinforce in successive stanzas the modulation of tone that the first stanza,

taken on its own, already encourages; it is no longer just a matter of sense affecting sound locally, but of the sound taking on a shape which becomes a musical and structural principle in its own right. And along with this reinforced sense of musical shape comes the song-like quality, which, without the refrains, and without their being aided and abetted by the feminine rhymes and the shortened fifth line, might so easily have been lost in the rhythmic heterogeneity of the Alexandrines, with their tendency to the prosaic.

'Non Sum Qualis' and the Alexandrine Measure

'Of all English poets', a critic wrote in 1945, 'Dowson was perhaps the most successful in handling the Alexandrine'.²⁷ But 'Non Sum Qualis' is quite different from his other performances in that measure. Quite apart from the features of stanza-building I have just discussed, the Alexandrine lines themselves seem intrinsically different in quality from those of other poems. In Dowson's small oeuvre there are five poems in Alexandrines, of which one, called 'Epigram' in *Verses*, appears in two versions. The others are 'To One in Bedlam', 'Seraphita', 'Vesperal' and 'Carthusians'.²⁸ 'Epigram' is perhaps the most ordinary of the five, from a formal point of view, and in this case it is easy to see how Saintsbury's six-foot iambic method of scanning would work.—

Because I am idolatrous and have besought,
With grievous supplication and consuming prayer,
The admirable image that my dreams have wrought

²⁷ Mark Baker, 'Ernest Christopher Dowson (1867-1900)', *English*, 5 (Summer 1945), 155-57; p. 156.

²⁸ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, pp. 57, 10, 56, 42, 71-72 respectively. The alternative version of 'Epigram' is found on p. 164

Out of her swan's neck and her dark, abundant hair:
The jealous gods, who brook no worship save their own,
Turned my live idol marble and her heart to stone.

In the first line one could reasonably read four main stresses with a long run of short unstressed syllables ('**idolatrous** and have **besought**' = $u / u-u-u-u-u \wedge$), but this does not seem strange and is within the usual bounds set for a notionally hexametric line: it is simply of matter of downplaying some of the stresses implied by the metre ($u / u [/] u [/] u \wedge$). Likewise in line 4, depending on the weight of stress given to the two words 'neck and', one *might* read a quite irregular rhythm, but Saintsbury or anyone else could easily explain this in terms of the inversion of feet. The other lines all have a quite strong six-stress structure, which makes the reader feel sure of a six-unit or six-beat prosodic system, and, but for the kinds of inversion familiar to all readers of English verse, the rhythm is generally iambic; it is strongly binary (one unstressed syllable to each stress, alternating except in cases of inversion) rather than ternary (two unstressed syllables to each stress, in a dactylic or anapaestic structure).

In 'Non Sum Qualis', on the other hand, especially if we say 'SIN-a-ra' rather than 'Sin-AAH-ra', the feeling of slipping from binary into ternary rhythms is a frequent and characteristic effect. Some instances, taken on their own, could be explained away in the same way as the examples from 'Epigram'; i.e. the three supposed unstressed or short syllables in 'Cynara! thy breath' might just represent a failure to linger over the final syllable of 'Cynara', in a way licensed by the exclamation mark; and in 'the kisses and the wine', again, the downplaying of a stress on 'and' would be normal enough within a poem otherwise lending itself to foot-scansion. But in 'Non Sum Qualis' the instances keep adding up, and are so

emphatic that they seem part of a calculated aesthetic plan:—‘sick of an old passion’, ‘gone with the wind’, ‘riotously with the throng’. The line ‘I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion’, repeated often enough to invite, even require, variations in the inflections of the reading voice, can certainly be taken in either of these ways: (i) ‘**faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion**’; (ii) ‘**faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion**’. In the first case, the juxtaposed stresses give an effect like ‘sprung’ rhythm,²⁹ while in both there is some freedom how smoothly to read the elision: to slide, either fluidly or trippingly, through ‘Cynara! in’—a consideration closely connected to the choice how strongly to pause at the point of exclamation. In both cases there is some enlivening element of irregularity, if one is expecting a binary rhythm (to which the second reading is closer); but the first way of reading is livelier.

One way of looking at the comparison between ‘Epigram’ and ‘Non Sum Qualis’ would be to say that in neither poem is Dowson writing foot-based prosody; the Alexandrine in both cases is syllabic and based on a relatively free manipulation of cadence, as in French; only, in ‘Epigram’ he falls more fully into the habit of an English writer, and so produces something that looks more like a binary rhythm in six units or feet. This is perhaps true enough, but there are two potential implications which ought to be resisted: first, that the versification of ‘Non Sum Qualis’ is more essentially French; and second, that people like Saintsbury are miles wide of the mark in speaking of the English Alexandrine as a six-foot line.

²⁹ See Hopkins’ explanations in his ‘Author’s Preface’ to the poem of MS. *B*, and in his letter to Bridges of 21 Aug 1877, where he distinguishes between ‘sprung rhythms’ (i.e. local instances, as arguably here) and ‘sprung rhythm’ as a whole system of versification (his own). Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, rev. 2002), pp.106-09, 227-29.

To take the second point first. Alexandrines in English have always tended toward iambic rhythm and six stresses or beats, in the same way that the decasyllabic or ‘heroic’ line has generally tended toward iambic rhythm and five stresses or beats—to such an extent that schoolchildren and students for the past hundred years have been taught to think of it as ‘iambic pentameter’. Historians of prosody have good reason to resist this notion, but iambic and pentametric conceptions of the heroic line have been common enough, and forceful enough, over the centuries to make us feel that the essence of the heroic line is to be an iambic pentameter; and in the majority of cases, the Alexandrine, technically a twelve-syllable line, has similarly tended to be realised and presumably experienced as in essence an iambic hexameter. Since the Elizabethan age, the reader who has experienced blank verse or heroic couplets as being structured in five units is likely, on the whole, to have experienced most English poems in Alexandrines as being written in measures of six units. Look at Sidney’s Alexandrines in *Astrophil and Stella*: these are written in exactly the same way as his other sonnets, but with an extra foot or stress-unit added to each line.³⁰ Most later poets have similarly given the impression of an extended heroic line when composing in Alexandrines; the rhythm is not noticeably freer, nor less pronounced. So Saintsbury is not wholly wrong to treat the Alexandrine according to the same principles as the heroic line.

Of course, the French models available to Dowson were entirely different from those known to Sidney, and late nineteenth-century French prosody had seen a substantial loosening of cadence within the Alexandrine. We know that Dowson

³⁰ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, rev. 2002); see sonnet 1 (p. 152) or the fifth song (pp. 191-93). *Astrophil and Stella* was composed in the 1580s.

was interested in modern French poetry, and it is likely that he had these models in mind as much, if not more than, earlier English examples, although clearly he was very conscious of his immediate contemporaries and associates, such as Lionel Johnson, who favoured this metre. But this alone does not explain the music of 'Non Sum Qualis'. If in 'Epigram' he was influenced by the habits of English versification, in 'Non Sum Qualis' he shows different but equally strong elements of English influence.

The poem is characterised by a strong rhythm lurching between binary and ternary patterns, and in this respect it is reminiscent of Swinburne's most idiosyncratic stanzaic verse. Certainly the French Alexandrine also admits more variations between binary and ternary rhythms than the English heroic line.³¹ With a strong medial caesura—and therefore, in syllabic organisation, 6 || 6,—the division of the half-line may be either in the form 2+2+2 (three stresses, binary rhythm), or in the form 3+3 (two stresses, ternary or anapaestic rhythm). Arguably the line 'I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind' could be construed as a line in the form 2+2+2 || 3+3, although with the actual caesura pushed back a syllable (2+2+1 || 1+3+3). But in any case Dowson need not have learned these techniques from French, nor need he have chosen Alexandrines in order to produce them. Tennyson and other Victorian poets—pre-eminently Swinburne and Christina Rossetti—had decisively normalised such 'mixed' rhythms within the English tradition, and within a range of metres (dimeters, trimeters, especially tetrameters, and six- or seven-foot non-syllabic lines). And if, in this, they were inspired by French or Italian verse at

³¹ The comparison is well illustrated by example in P.S. Porohovshikov, 'The Metric Canon of the French Alexandrine', *The French Review*, 6:2 (Dec. 1932), 123-134; pp. 123-126 esp.

times, they could also look back for precedent to Latin and Greek versification, as well as to the rhythms of the British ballad tradition, which had a very considerable influence on the style and sound of Victorian romantic poets and the Pre-Raphaelite school, and that of their more immediate forebears, such as Coleridge and Scott.

Also Dowson shares with Swinburne, and may have picked up from him, the trick of occasionally interrupting the flow of the rhythm with clusters of strong consecutive stresses, often syllables which demand stress for semantic reasons as well as by virtue of length (as affected both by the weight of the vowel sound and the position of consonants).³² Swinburne was not the only English poet to do this with notable frequency, but in him it is exceptionally frequent and pronounced. ‘Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind’, for instance, sounds Swinburnean not only because of the alliterations, but because, having quickened the pace with the on-stress opening of the line, the slowing-down at ‘pale, lost lilies’ asks for an extra stress on ‘lost’. And in the preceding line, ‘Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng’, both the sound and the sense of ‘flung’ call for an emphasis, which, depending on how strongly one makes it, can produce something like a sprung rhythm from ‘flung’ to the first ‘roses’; and in this case the slowing is at the start of the line, with its heavy repetition (‘Flung roses, roses’) producing a kind of rubato effect, and then a counter-balancing lightness or quickness in the second half: ‘riotously with the throng’. So it does not seem right to conclude that this poem’s special character results primarily from French inspiration, nor that it is necessarily best to think of its prosody as far removed from prevalent English models of metre.

³² See discussion of these features in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Selected Verse*, ed. Alex Wong (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), pp. xxvii-xxxii.

It is, however, clear that Dowson in ‘Non Sum Qualis’, as in the other five poems mentioned, was consciously writing Alexandrines, in most cases strictly keeping to the twelve-syllable count; it is not just a six-foot measure. This is crucial in ‘Non Sum Qualis’ especially, where several of the lines do not feel at all like six-foot lines. The poems in Alexandrines are to be held, as the author must have held them, in sharp distinction from another class of poems in six-foot or six-beat lines, with mixture of binary and ternary rhythms and a varying syllable-count. Examples of the latter class are ‘To A Lady Asking Foolish Questions’, and ‘Libera Me’, both published in *Decorations*, and both showing Dowson inspired by Swinburne’s six-footers.³³ ‘Libera Me’ even echoes the theme of one of Swinburne’s most famous free-rhythm hexameters, the ‘Hymn to Proserpine’.

ACS: I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love hath an end;
 Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend.
 Thou art more than the day or the morrow, the seasons that laugh or that weep;
 For these give joy and sorrow; but thou, Proserpina, sleep.³⁴

ECD: Goddess the laughter-loving, Aphrodite, befriend!
 Long have I served thine altars, serve me now at the end,
 Let me have peace of thee, truce of thee, golden one, send.³⁵

In Dowson’s third line the main caesura (or diaeresis) is evidently intended to be placed after ‘peace of thee’, with a lingering on the anyway long syllable ‘thee’, so as to give six strong stresses to the line. In these metres the number of stresses, not the number of syllables, is what matters. ‘Non Sum Qualis’ is peculiar in that it seems to partake of the strong, song-like, binary-ternary rhythm of poems such as

³³ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, pp. 94, 97.

³⁴ *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 6 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1904), vol. 1, pp. 67-73; p. 67. The poem first appeared in the *Poems and Ballads* of 1866.

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

this, but without the sense of a regular six-stress pattern, and *within* the bounds of a carefully observed syllabic rule.

And yet in some of Dowson's Alexandrines one can find the occasional license taken with the syllable count. In 'Carthusians', we find the line: 'It was not theirs with Dominic to preach God's holy wrath', which is two syllables over the ordinary limit, given that the line does not terminate in a feminine rhyme.³⁶ 'Dominic', read more or less as 'Dom'nic', might be defended, from the aesthetic point of view, as an exploitation of the strong medial caesura classically associated with the Alexandrine, so that an extra syllable does not sound too strange smuggled in before the pause; the half-line effectively becomes like a line in itself, admitting a feminine end. The prosodic form resulting from this is quite natural in English verse and not uncommon; a famous example is Cory's paraphrase of Callimachus, beginning 'They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead', where one line in each of the two stanzas is a fourteener, and all the others are six-foot lines following this pattern—only differing from the Alexandrine in the consistent introduction of the extra off-beat syllable before the diaeresis.³⁷

Dowson, however, *does* seem to have intended 'Carthusians' to be a poem in Alexandrines. With a single ambiguous exception, all the other lines respect the syllabic rule. His first thought for the Saint Dominic line is shown, it seems, in the manuscript version, and is metrically far less awkward: 'Not theirs to feel the spell of Dominic's holy wrath'.³⁸ Here again we see the trisyllabic 'Dominic' taking the place of two syllables in the metrical groundplan, and so we may conclude that the

³⁶ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, p. 71.

³⁷ William Johnson Cory, *Ionica*, ed. A.C. Benson (London: George Allen, 1905), p. 7. The poem first appeared in the *Ionica* of 1858.

³⁸ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, p. 268.

author considered the middle syllable light enough to be admitted hypermetrically. It may not be irrelevant, either, that one of the exceptions listed by Robert Bridges to the syllabic system of versification he imputed to Milton was that ‘unstressed vowels separated by *n* suffer syllabic loss’.³⁹ Perhaps Dowson was following this convention, consciously or otherwise; but in the published version, ‘Dominic’, even as ‘Dom’nic’, is still one syllable overlength in any case.

The other ambiguous case in ‘Carthusians’ is the line: ‘Desire and mirth, the world’s ephemeral lights shall fail’.⁴⁰ Again the seeming admission of a trisyllabic foot-substitution can be explained away if we accept the elision of ‘*r*’ as a standard exception (‘ephem’ral’, if you choose to make the elision starkly). This again is accommodated by Bridges into his conception of the syllabic prosody of Milton.⁴¹ Likewise in Lionel Johnson’s short poem in Alexandrines, ‘The Church of a Dream’ (1895): ‘Swaying with tremulous hands the old censer full of spice’,⁴² where ‘tremulous’ adds another unlicensed syllable, licensed if we consider the ‘*l*’ inclined to be elisible,⁴³ and in any case quite acceptable and unremarkable to the ear accustomed to ordinary English prosody. In Johnson’s poem ‘Bagley Wood’ (1890) can be found another instance of a similar liberty taken in the notionally syllabic form: ‘What passionate music poured in passionate love’s defence!’⁴⁴ The middle syllable of ‘passionate’ is twice allowed in, half elided, lightly sounded. All these things—unmarked, mid-word elisions—go a step or two beyond the most

³⁹ Robert Bridges, *Milton’s Prosody*, rev. final edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921; first published 1889), p. 33.

⁴⁰ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, p. 72.

⁴¹ Bridges, *op. cit.*, p. 29: ‘If two unstressed vowels be separated by *r* there may be “elision”; that is, the two syllables may count for one, the syllabic loss falling on the first of the two’.

⁴² *The Collected Poems of Lionel Johnson*, ed. Ian Fletcher, 2nd edn (New York and London: Garland, 1982), pp. 65-66; p. 66.

⁴³ Bridges (*op. cit.* p. 30), likewise admits ‘The rule of L’.

⁴⁴ Johnson, ed. Fletcher, pp. 50-51; p. 50.

basic kinds of elision, where an open vowel at the end of a word is followed by a vowel at the start of the next word; but all are nevertheless normal in English prosody. They show that the poets were not deliberately throwing aside the usual English conventions, in submission to a some close approximation of the more rigorously syllable-counting French method, where even syllables normally unsounded (silent ‘e’) are scrupulously enunciated and made to count. The putative method is not so far away from that of Bridges, in his case adapted from a thoroughly interpreted Milton; although in these other poets, outnumbering the eccentric Bridges, it was in all likelihood much less theoretically self-conscious, much less distinctly rationalized. And partly, no doubt, as a result of this difference in approach, they produced much neater and more familiar rhythms.

The loose Alexandrines used by Yeats in poems such as ‘The Valley of the Black Pig’ seem to be based on a freer application of such rules (or exceptions) to the original syllabic form; free enough for the form to have become in effect only a six-foot line treated with the same gently relaxed attitude to prosody that we see in Yeats’ versions of the heroic line:

unknown spears
Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,
And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.⁴⁵

With its introduction of extra syllables, it is less strictly syllabic than, say, Sidney’s Alexandrines, but certainly not as boundingly ternary in rhythm as a poem of the ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ type. These lines are clearly related to the Alexandrines of

⁴⁵ W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J.M. Dent, 1990, rev. 1994), p. 83. The poem is dated 1896, and was included in the collection *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

Yeats's Rhymer *camarades* Johnson and Dowson, in the poems just discussed; but they do seem a little more relaxed. In most cases the English Alexandrines we have seen of this period represent a compromise between the customs of nineteenth-century English verse, with its rhythmic habits and susceptibility to foot-scansion, and French-style syllabic verse, with a relative freedom of cadence but strict attention to line length.⁴⁶ Yet the accommodation of English habits of elision and half-elision, or foot-substitution, to a fundamentally syllabic metre that we see in a small way in 'Carthusians', 'Bagley Wood' and 'The Church of a Dream', and more liberally in 'The Valley of the Black Pig', are different in both principle and effect from the lines to Cynara, and much less mysterious. All the others feel much more like six-unit lines. 'Non Sum Qualis', as ever, is a special case. Its untidiness is part of its merit; and it is a lyrical untidiness.

Fives and Sixes

From Saintsbury's point of view, the lines to Cynara offered no problems for foot-scansion. But division into predominantly disyllabic feet, while possible, seems much less appropriate to this poem than it would to 'Carthusians' or 'Bagley Wood', or any of the others I have mentioned. In 'Non Sum Qualis' an instinctive, rather than systematic, division into feet would probably end up, like Lawrence's attempt, by giving six feet to some of the Alexandrine lines and only five to others.

⁴⁶ Observation of the twelve-syllable rule is naturally a pre-requisite in the English Alexandrine, and it is puzzling to find that many of the examples of 1890s Alexandrines listed by Meredith Martin clearly do not qualify as Alexandrines at all. Arthur Symons's 'The Flowers' and 'Weary of Love' are metrically mixed and combine five-beat and six-beat lines in a manner broadly comparable with 'Non Sum Qualis'; Michael Field's 'Saint Sebastian' is in a polymetric stanza containing no Alexandrines; John Gray's 'A Une Madone' (from Baudelaire) is in standard heroic/decasyllabic lines; and Naidu's 'Indian Dancers' is composed in seven-foot lines with predominantly anapaestic rhythm. See Martin, 'Did a Decadent Metre Exist at the *Fin de Siècle*?', in Hall and Murray [eds], *op. cit.*, pp. 46-64; p. 57, n. 34 (p. 64).

This ambiguous combination of lines that feel essentially pentametric, and those which feel hexametric, is one its most vital qualities.

Roughly the same phenomenon can be found more locally, without the total musical effect, in other examples of English Alexandrines. This has largely to do with the English poetry-reader's overwhelming familiarity with the heroic or 'pentameter' line, and relative unfamiliarity with the twelve-syllable Alexandrine; it is easy, therefore, to hear a five-stress or five-beat line at any reasonable opportunity. In Swinburne's 'Stage Love', for instance, where the syllable-count is carefully observed, there is sometimes an ambiguous number of stresses or beats. A devoted foot-scanner like Saintsbury would, of course, find six feet in every line, but the casual reader might occasionally reach the end of the line sooner than expected,—that is, having passed through five beats only, or trodden through five metrical units, when six is the usual number; e.g.—

*When the game began between them for a jest,
He played king and she played queen to match the best;
Laughter soft as tears, and tears that turned to laughter,
These were things she sought for years and sorrowed after.*

*Pleasure with dry lips, and pain that walks by night;
All the sting and all the stain of long delight;
These were things she knew not of, that knew not of her,
When she played at half a love with half a lover.⁴⁷*

Most of these lines seem to pass through six units; but those which I have given in italics, especially the first, because it is the opening line of the poem, are liable to be read as heroic lines with an extra off-stress syllable at the start—lines of *five units*. Because it is a more familiar form, it is naturally apt to suggest itself to readers not

⁴⁷ *Poems of Swinburne* (1904), vol. 1, p. 118. The poem appeared first in the *Poems and Ballads* of 1866.

yet sure of the overall prosodic scheme of the poem. An opponent of foot-scansion would explain that this is all irrelevant, because the Alexandrine is open to all rhythmic combinations of the twelve syllables, there is no regular number of beats-per-line, and feet are not involved at all. But the present essay has argued that the English Alexandrine does not normally leave behind English prosodic habits, and that it normally falls more or less comfortably into a six-beat measure: if there is no regular number of beats in *principle*, there is a strong tendency in *effect*.

In Johnson's 'The Church of a Dream', which generally resolved without difficulty into the six-unit pattern, two lines stand out because, by using polysyllabic words and downplaying some of the potential stresses that the English ear expects, they somehow seem to provide a flourish by failing, or declining, to tread out the more predictable measure.⁴⁸ The lines are: 'Murmuring holy Latin immemorial', and 'Melancholy remembrances and vesperal', both requiring careful negotiation of a final masculine ending which in normal pronunciation one would leave unstressed. The first of these lines could be a heroic or pentameter; the other, with its three strong stresses, feels like a five-beat or five-unit line with two hypermetric off-stress syllables at its end. The whole effect is appealing because Johnson takes advantage of the freedom of cadence offered by the syllabic metre, but does it only in well-calculated moments, pleasantly interrupting the more customary rhythms of the rest of the poem. In Dowson's poem 'To One in Bedlam', where perhaps he comes closest to the energy and vitality of the Alexandrines in 'Non Sum Qualis', the most exciting lines likewise take liberties that the rest of the poem does not. Like Johnson's 'murmuring' and 'immemorial', and like the parts

⁴⁸Johnson, ed. Fletcher, p. 66.

of ‘Non Sum Qualis’ I have described above, it trips briefly into a ternary rhythm; and again there is a line that feels pentametric:

O, how his rapt gaze wars
With their stupidity! Know they what dreams divine
Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchanted wine,
And make his melancholy germane to the stars?⁴⁹

The line I mean is, ‘With **their** stupidity! **Know** they what **dreams** divine’, which at its centre has a rhythmic structure, as I think most people would read it, that is ternary for two feet (or two beats). And, thus read, it is a line of five stresses. The merit of this passage is due in part to the skill with which Dowson skips into this lively line at the crucial moment in the thought-process of the poem, breaking the established habits of the metre, and then slows the pace back down to the six-unit measure. This slowing is achieved by use of consecutive stresses (**‘long, laughing’**), as in ‘Non Sum Qualis’ (**‘pale, lost lilies’**); and also by the accumulation of long or heavy vowel sounds: ‘long’, ‘laugh’, and ‘enchanted’ with its deliberately old-fashioned spelling. Thus the two lines following feel like lines of six *units* even while the reader might very well pronounce only five main stresses in the first case, and as few as four in the second.

In another of Dowson’s Alexandrine poems, ‘Seraphita’, again the manipulation of the number of beats and stresses is well done, especially in the second stanza:

But when the storm is highest, and the thunders blare,
And sea and sky are riven, O moon of all my night!
Stoop down but once in pity of my great despair⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, p. 10.

The first of these lines has exactly the same cadence as ‘But when the feast is finished, and the lamps expire’; there are five stresses, and in other circumstances one would be likely to scan it as five feet; which is to say that it would be experienced as a five-beat line, were it not for the sense, provided by the context, that perhaps there is a beat at ‘and’ (which no one would wish to realise as an actual stress). The succeeding line takes us back to the stability of the Alexandrine as a six-unit line, with its strikingly classical middle caesura—‘riven’ scanning monosyllabically, as custom dictates. This alternation between the line strongly inclined to five-beat reading, and the line definitely advertising itself as a six-beat measure, allows for some not unwelcome ambiguity in the third line given here, which asks for five main stresses, but which, if read slowly or gravely, nevertheless still feels like a line of six units or beats.

The experience of coming across a line which seems to have one beat (or one foot) too few, even in a metre which in theory has nothing to do with feet or regular beat-counts, is therefore an experience rather common in reading English Alexandrines of the nineteenth century—Swinburne, Johnson, Dowson, and so on. And indeed a certain amount of freedom in ambiguously varying line-length is something one sees even in Dowson’s non-syllabic poems: ‘Breton Afternoon’, which is predominantly seven-footed (the lines are not fourteeners, but free in rhythm), contains a number of lines which one would normally read as six-footed.⁵¹ Again this is a matter of mixed rhythms rather than clear-cut alternations between

⁵⁰ *Poetical Works*, ed. Flower, p. 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

recognisable line-types. These are probably among the technical innovations that Eliot had in mind, and arguably played some not negligible part in the freeing of rhythms associated in the long run with the development of free and 'freed' verse.

Is there, then, something special about the way 'Non Sum Qualis' negotiates the sense of *fiveness* and *sixness* in its Alexandrine lines? In the first place, the proportion of ambiguous lines is unusual. If the poem were made up entirely of lines like the following, how would one be inclined to read it?

There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed;
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
I cried for madder music and for stronger wine;
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire;
I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind;
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng;
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind.

Many of these can decently be taken either way. It does not sound wrong to read them all, in sequence, with five stresses apiece. So it would be no great folly, though a pity, to give up on the idea of beats, feet or stresses altogether and claim this as a poem given over entirely to free cadence within syllabic rule, in spite of some of the qualities I have described. But that would be to ignore the way in which the shifting fives and sixes experienced by the reader are made profitable by that other crucial element of this poem, the decasyllabic introduced as the penultimate line of each stanza.

The juxtaposition of ordinary decasyllabic lines against Alexandrines, the latter frequently of indeterminate rhythmic value and resistant to foot-scansion, was also a method employed sparingly in *The Testament of Beauty*, with a broadly

comparable rationale. It is a kind of reverse of the practice of interpolating occasional Alexandrines into long poems in heroic couplets, which had been common since the time of Dryden. But in this reversal Bridges, in his long unrhymed poem, produces a very different aesthetic result from that of Dowson, where the stanza form is all-important. Nor does Dowson's single decasyllabic have an effect comparable with the use of single Alexandrines among pentameters in, say, the Spenserian stanza. Actually, in this respect Bridges and Dowson have more in common with one another than with a Dryden or a Spenser, because of the unusual prosodic heterogeneity of their Alexandrines, which often depart substantially from the normal habit of binary rhythm.

In 'Non Sum Qualis' it is this feature, the exploitation of the decasyllabic, which makes the irregular mixture of five- and six-beat lines musically so productive. It provides an unambiguous and calmed version of the five-beat pattern in a predictable position in every melodic unit, every stanza. 'Calmed' because the ternary rhythms necessary to a five-beat line of twelve or thirteen syllables, which are seen in some of the Alexandrines, disappear into the binary rhythm of the standard heroic line.

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A reader who has followed to the end of this essay is likely to have shared, in some degree, its basic premise: that the poem under discussion is a peculiar thing, outstanding in Dowson's work and in the history of English lyric, and this largely on account of its memorable, unfamiliar and, under scrutiny, fascinating qualities of form; worthy, therefore, of so many pages of criticism. I have tried to go deeper than previous evaluations have gone; to explain and situate the phenomena that so

many commentators have felt and acknowledged. These is surely always *some* profit in attending closely to poetic form in its literary-historical contexts; but while this may be true of all good poems, it is true particularly of poems which are either typical, or exceptional. 'Non Sum Qualis' has been celebrated so greatly because it has been taken to be both.

The present essay has not discussed the thematic content of the poem, which has been given close attention by many critics over the last century. This should not be misunderstood as a tacit implication that the 'matter' of the poem is negligible or uninteresting; on the contrary, it is obvious that the handling of the matter, its themes, images and sentiment, was a necessary element of its success, historically and critically speaking; it is, even if was not intended to be, a brilliant symbolic summation, starkly laid out, of certain motifs and preoccupations Dowson shared with many other 'Decadent' and Symbolist artists of the *fin de siècle*. Paraphrased into Russian prose, however, and then into French, and back again into some unspecified form of English verse, it would possibly be extremely dull, and the very qualities which in fact make it seem an emblem of its phase of culture, would likely strike us as merely derivative and stereotyped. The success of the poem is surely a formal business, and indeed it seems, like many surprises and departures in artistic form, to have emerged almost by accident out of a situation of some uncertainty or confusion in theory and practice.

Needless to say, the accident, if that is what it was, has been brilliantly handled, and well directed by a subtly trained instinct for poetic sound: it cannot have been entirely adventitious. But the uncertainty is undeniable. When Dowson says that the first three lines of the Cynara stanza are Alexandrines, and is vague

about the rest, it may be because of the feminine endings, or the questionable elision, as suggested above. But in the same letter he also talks about the poem as ‘an experiment’ in the Alexandrine form, described as ‘a favourite rhythm of Lionel’s’, and a metre in which, he confesses, ‘at present my own Muse is not quite at her ease’.⁵² So much the better? Taken altogether, these casual remarks plainly suggest that Dowson was aiming for some kind of neatness or perfection of the Alexandrine that he did not think he had fully achieved. This is explicable if we suppose that Dowson conceived of the English Alexandrine—the line as practised by many of his friends and contemporaries—as essentially characterised by a relatively neat binary rhythm, and therefore in effect a six-foot or six-stress line. The evidence of Dowson’s other Alexandrines is consistent with such speculations: they are neater, rhythmically more regular, and closer to Johnson and others. To my ear they are less compelling for that reason, and none of them has become famous.

⁵² *Letters*, ed. Flower and Maas, p. 184.