

Annie Finch, *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse*.

University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Is there such a thing as an American prosody? The question has puzzled many, particularly poets of a nativist bent like William Carlos Williams, but answers have not been persuasive -- largely, I think, because they have been sought in some kind of mystique about the "American language." Gay Wilson Allen's study *American Prosody* (1935), sidestepping the question, simply offers descriptions of prosody in selected American poets. Edwin Fussell ventures more daring speculation in his *Lucifer in Harness* (1973), but until Finch's book, no one, I think, has contributed significantly to the conversation.<sup>1</sup>

Annie Finch's *The Ghost of Meter* has the merit of seeking answers in the right place: American cultural attitudes that we have long recognized. American poets resist the domination of iambic pentameter, she notes, because it is the dominant mode of English poets. This tendency appears not only in Whitman's free verse and its progeny, but in the irregular quatrains of Emily Dickinson, as well as in later poets. Her study pits iambic pentameter against a phenomenon that she names -- perplexingly -- "dactylic" meter, a blanket term that covers a variety of trisyllabic and "falling" meters that oppose the tyrannous pentameter of English poetry. On this point, Finch suffers some

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<sup>1</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, *American Prosody* (New York: American Book Company, 1935; Edwin Fussell, *Lucifer in Harness: American Meter, Metaphor, and Diction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). Stephen Cushman's superb *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) advances the thesis that, while American poets tend to despise inherited forms, they conversely tend to overvalue the formal elements of their poetry.

conceptual and terminological confusions, and she misses some obvious opportunities, but essentially she is on the right track.

For this is more a poet's than a scholar's book: there is nothing of the scientific apparatus imported from linguistics to shore up the scansion; it is not loaded down with theoretical polemics or exhaustive analyses or tables of statistics. As a book on prosody, it is remarkably pleasant to read. Amid much that may prove misleading to the unwary, there are moments of sharp insight here, as well as a sketched out strategy for an answer to my initial question.

In ten compact pages, Finch outlines three general approaches to the meaning of meter: the classical theory of decorum, the iconic theory of onomatopoeia (sound must seem an echo to the sense), and the theory of the "metrical frame," condensed from the work of John Hollander -- the understanding of meter as a convention that situates a poem in relation to the prior metrical tradition. Finch's strategy is to adopt the frame theory as a way of analysing a poem's movement in and out of meter as a metacommentary on its own versification.<sup>2</sup> Her deployment of this strategy seems most successful in the analysis of quasi-metrical free verse like that of Whitman or Eliot.

The chapter on "Dickinson and Patriarchal Meter," however, bogs down in misplaced feminism. Isolating scattered lines of iambic pentameter in the poet's *oeuvre*, Finch constructs an argument that Dickinson is making a series of statements against the male domination of poetry. When this chapter appeared in *P.M.L.A.*, it struck me as wholly quixotic; in the context of this book, it makes somewhat more sense. But I utterly

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<sup>2</sup>I adopt a similar strategy in "The Metrical Contract of *The Cantos*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 15 (Summer 1988), 55-72.

fail to understand why the meters of hymnody and ballad that Dickinson adapted are any less "patriarchal" than iambic pentameter. After all, she notes herself, "Blake and Dickinson looked in the same place for an anti-meter" (18). Surely the contrast is between literary meters and popular ones. And in isolating some of her examples, Finch ignores vexed questions about Dickinson's lineation. Still, when she claims that "The Soul selects her own Society -- /Then -- shuts the Door" "gains strength from the denial of the initial of iambic pentameter rather than from its appropriation," she is speaking with a poet's insight.

The chapter on "Iambic and Dactylic in Whitman" is more rewarding, though it suffers from Finch's unfortunate choice of the term "dactylic." This loosely signifies, she says, a "tendency consisting of predominantly falling rhythms and triple feet," rather than a true dactylic line; but she then turns about and claims that the term (the *term* -- not Whitman's meter itself) "evokes the cultural legacy of the classical dactylic hexameter, which seems to play no small part in Whitman's sense of the meter" (39-40). A curiously circular argument!

Furthermore, Finch misses a crucial point in contextualizing Whitman's language experiment. Though she appeals to Bryant's plea for trisyllabic substitution and makes a nod to Longfellow, she misses the obvious: the wholesale embracing of falling rhythms and "anti-pentameter" by many American poets of the period. She never cites Poe's prophetic claim that "the possible varieties of metre and stanza are infinite -- and yet, for centuries, no man in verse has ever done, or ever seemed to think of doing, an original thing." (This in explanation of the bizarre stanza of "The Raven.") Set Whitman

and Poe beside Longfellow's *Hiawatha* and *Evangeline* and his other explorations of continental forms (foreshadowing those of his younger relative Ezra Pound), plus Emerson's insistent trochaic cadences, and one perceives a broad cultural phenomenon. The explanation, I think, lies in the imagination of the poet not as a cultured gentleman writing the King's English, but as bard and prophet, source of magical utterance. In America, the poet is shamanistic. Finch tiptoes around "dactylic" as a sign of epic poet, but her claims are not nearly large enough.

Still, Finch's analyses of Whitman offer startling discoveries: her strategy, as with Dickinson, is to isolate iambic pentameter lines amid Whitman's expansive free verse, which she names "metapentameters"; and then to argue, with considerable conviction, that these function in association with certain topics, or at key structural points, contrasted with lines in "dactylic" meters. Her analysis of the alternation in "Song of the Exposition" between true iambic pentameter and "dactylic" lines is productive in an exemplary way.

Subsequent chapters on Stephen Crane, T.S. Eliot, and Contemporary Free Verse continue this mode of analysis with similar mixed success. Annie Finch's *The Ghost of Meter* is not the definitive answer to the question of an "American prosody." Its simple binary opposition of "metapentameter" versus "dactylic" clearly omits other points of conventional prosodic reference (rhyming couplet, say, or sonnet). But in its extension of Hollander's notion of the "metrical frame," it points the way. It invents the useful concepts of "anti-pentameter" and "metapentameter." It offers sensitive metrical analysis. And above all, it relates the question of an American prosody not to anything

inherent in American language, but to the ways in which American culture imagines the figure of the poet.