Introduction

Now, of versifying there are two sorts, the one Auncient, the other Moderne: the Auncient marked the quantitie of each silable, and according to that framed his verse; the Moderne observing onely number (with some regarde of the accent), the chiefe life of it standeth in that lyke sounding of the words, which wee call Ryme. Whether of these be the most excellent, would beare many speeches. The Auncient (no doubt) more fit for Musick, both words and tune observing quantity, and more fit lively to expresse divers passions, by the low and lofty sounde of the well-weyed silable. The latter likewise, with hys Ryme, striketh a certaine musick to the eare: and, in fine, sith it dooth delight, though by another way, it obtaines the same purpose: there beeing in eyther sweetnes, and wanting in neither majestie. Truely the English, before any other vulgar language I know, is fit for both sorts. (Smith, 1, 204–5)

Sidney's scrupulous apportionment, in his *Apologie for Poetrie*, of equal praise to the traditional English manner of writing verse and to the imitation of classical metres in English, strikes the modern reader – as it must have struck most readers from a decade after its publication in 1595 to the present – as astonishingly over-generous to the latter species of verse. Sidney himself played a far from minor role in the advance to maturity and greatness of English verse in the native metrical tradition during the last quarter of the sixteenth century, and none of the experiments in classical metres of the period, from his or any other pen, provides the slightest challenge to that achievement. This judgement of Sidney's is, however, only one of the puzzling manifestations of a literary movement which, in the many accounts of it in commentaries on Elizabethan poetry and in separate studies, is characteristically discussed in a tone of

perplexed bafflement, often coupled with a sense of modern superiority to such folly. Why should so many writers, among them poets of such distinction as Sidney, Spenser and Campion, have devoted so much time and effort to an enterprise which held out such slender hopes of success? And even more puzzling, why should the results of their experiments have been presented with such evident satisfaction, and received with approbation in so many quarters, when, in contrast to the verse they and others were producing in traditional accentual metres, it is so patently weak? Why, too, should so much of the Elizabethan theoretical and critical writing on literary topics (as a glance at Gregory Smith's collection of critical essays will indicate) revolve around the question of quantitative versifying?

To find the solutions to these and other problems posed by the quantitative movement it is necessary to consider in some detail the background to the whole enterprise, for it is impossible to tell from the experiments alone, or from the discussions that surround them, exactly what these men – and at least one woman – thought they were doing. We need to know just what an educated Elizabethan took to be the metre of a Latin poem, and this means we need to know how he pronounced the individual words, how he delivered the lines of verse, and how he had been taught Latin, and in particular Latin prosody, at school. It will also be useful to know what he would have learned from the prominent classical scholars of his day if he consulted their works. Part One deals with this background, after a brief consideration of the present state of our knowledge about Latin metre. The argument in Part Two is based on the conclusions reached in Part One, and takes the discussion into the realm of English poetry. I have tried to show why the prospect of English verse in classical metres held such temptations for the sixteenth-century poet, and why the results seemed far more successful to many among his immediate audience than they have to later generations; and I have given an account of the frequently misunderstood theoretical writings, concentrating particularly on those features which commentators have found hard to explain. This part also includes a chronological survey of the English experiments, largely to give an idea of the

hold which the movement gained in the Elizabethan literary world. In Part Three the individual contributors are discussed, the more important figures separately, and the others grouped roughly into four schools, according to their approach to the problem of naturalising classical metres. Although the book as a whole is not organised chronologically, I have attempted in the final chapter and the epilogue to give some idea of the changing intellectual climate at the end of the century which resulted in the virtual abandonment of quantitative experimentation.

Although I have made some value-judgements on the verse under consideration, this has never been my prime objective; most of the verse is, by present standards, unquestionably bad – but it is for this reason that I believe a study of it has wider repercussions on our understanding of Elizabethan literature, and of late sixteenth-century aesthetic tendencies in general, than may at first sight seem to be the case. The obstacles to the full appreciation of the art of an earlier age are often most clearly evident – and hence most available for confrontation and, if possible, sympathetic consideration – in the works which to us seem the least successful of that age. I hope to show that an examination of these experiments and the theoretical writings which surround them reveals an understanding of metre which is the direct result of Renaissance humanism, and in particular its educational programme, and which provides an exceptionally clear example of some of the tendencies of sixteenth-century aesthetic thought most foreign to modern taste.

This conception of metre is also worth studying as a factor in the development of English versification from the stiff jog-trot of poulter's measure and fourteeners in the work of Googe and Turbervile to the fluid grace of the late Elizabethan lyrics, from the end-stopped regularity of the pentameters in the *Mirror for Magistrates* to the beautiful variety of Spenser, Daniel and Drayton and the expressive forcefulness of Donne, and from blank verse as a blunt instrument wielded by Sackville and Norton to a superb tool capable of almost any effect in Shakespeare's hands. Its part in this achievement was a negative one, for it was an attitude which existed as an obstacle to the flowering of the Elizabethan poetic genius, and it was only

when it had been supplanted that English poetry could reach full maturity; but it is no accident that both the chief architects of the new mode of writing – Sidney and Spenser – should have faced in their own experiments the shortcomings of quantitative verse, and the conception of metre which lay behind it, before going ahead with their successful attempt to base English verse on the phonetic properties of the living language around them – thus taking up a tradition descended from Chaucer, but largely lost sight of since Wyatt, and laying new foundations for a way of writing poetry which has only recently been challenged.

PART ONE

The Elizabethan understanding of Latin metre

1

Problems of Latin prosody

Since we shall find in the succeeding chapters that the average educated Elizabethan had a very peculiar notion of what Latin metre was, it will be prudent to begin our investigation with a brief look at present ideas on the subject, if for no other reason than to forestall, by showing how many problems remain to be solved, any unwarranted feeling of superiority on the part of the twentieth-century reader. It will also be useful to give at the outset a sketch of what *is* known about Latin prosody, and to establish the senses in which some technical terms are to be used.

The nature of quantity

Classical Latin verse is based on an initial categorisation of all syllables into two groups. These two types of syllable are arranged in predetermined patterns to makes lines of verse. The classification of syllables is not according to stress, or accent,[1] as in most English verse, but according to quantity, and one of the central questions around which much discussion has revolved and still revolves is simply, 'What *is* quantity?' To those not accustomed to close examination of metrical and phonological matters – and this includes the Romans and many twentieth-century readers of Latin as well as the Elizabethans –

[1] Because the English accent is, and the classical Latin accent in all probability was, a stress accent, I have tended to use these two terms interchangeably, except when it has been necessary to distinguish between the prominence of one syllable over others (accent) and that particular method of achieving this prominence used in languages like English and German (stress). (Fortunately, the further problems posed by the nature of stress itself need not concern us, though it should perhaps be noted that pitch, duration and intensity all play a part, probably in that order of importance – see Lehiste, 1970, ch. 4, for a survey of recent work on the subject.)

the traditional definition explains everything in a very simple fashion: 'quantity' refers to the duration of syllables, a long syllable taking twice the time of a short syllable, or thereabouts, in pronunciation, so that lines of verse can be constructed with patterns (or temporal rhythms) of longs and shorts. Thus Edwards, in his introduction to *The Eton Latin Grammar* of 1826, states:

> By QUANTITY, then, we are to understand the time *actually* and *practically* devoted, in the act of speaking, to the enunciation of a syllable: thus, a syllable uttered *quickly*, as to time, is said to be short – but a syllable, uttered *slowly*, is said to be *long*. (p. viii)

Every sixteenth-century Latin grammar contained a similar definition, though without so much emphasis on what 'actually' and 'practically' occurred (a significant omission, as we shall see), and modern textbooks also often assume that quantity is simply a matter of duration.

The origins of this explanation of quantity are, of course, Greek and Roman; Zirin (1970) gives a useful survey of the statements by ancient grammarians and discusses the two ways of looking at quantity that developed side by side: that of the *metrici*, who were concerned only with two kinds of syllable, short and long; and that of the *rhythmici*, who, by assigning time-values to the constituents of syllables, found a whole scale of durational values (pp. 42–54). These two attitudes could never be reconciled, since the arbitrariness of dividing the continuous durational scale into two could not be accounted for, and, in fact, by adding up time-units, some 'short' syllables emerge as longer than some 'long' syllables. Though this contradiction in the durational theory suggests that 'long' and 'short' syllables are distinguished by some other criterion, none of the ancient grammarians went further than pointing out the contradiction; and the Renaissance inherited the idea of quantity as something concerned purely with time.

To appreciate the unsatisfactoriness of this theory, it will be necessary to look first at the rules for determining the quantity of a syllable. These rules rely on a classification of every vowel as either long or short; however, since the difference between the two forms of a Latin vowel was one of quality as well as

duration (see Allen, 1965, pp. 47–9), and this is clearly also the case with the so-called 'long' and 'short' forms of English vowels, I have preferred to use the terms 'tense' and 'lax' when referring to the phonetic properties of vowels in either language.[1] This will have the advantage of leaving 'long' and 'short' free to be used of the classification of vowels for prosodic purposes even when this classification bears no relation to the actual pronunciation of vowels as either tense or lax. Similarly, I shall use the terms 'heavy' and 'light' (following Allen, 1965, pp. 91–2) to refer to the two kinds of syllabic quantity that actually existed as a phonetic property in classical Latin, and 'long' and 'short' to refer to the two types of syllable distinguished on a theoretical level according to the rules of prosody (in both Latin verse and English imitations), whether or not there is a phonetic distinction in the pronunciation of the syllables.

The traditional account of quantity in Latin verse, which is still taught today (see Raven, 1965, pp. 23–5, for a detailed exposition), is, in outline, as follows (in the examples, only long vowels have been marked):

(i) a syllable containing a long vowel or diphthong is long (*mōs*, *vae*);
(ii) a syllable containing a short vowel followed by a 'double consonant' (*x* or *z*) or by two consonants (in the same or different words), *h* being discounted, is long (*nox*, first syllable of *culpa*, first syllable of *et dōna*); *unless* the consonants consist of a plosive (*b*, *c*, *d*, *g*, *p*, *t*) followed in the same word, or, in compound words, in the same part of a word, by a liquid (*l* or *r*), in which case the syllable is short *or* long (first syllable of *patrius*, second syllable of *adlacrimō* – but the first syllable is long since it constitutes one part of a compound word);
(iii) all other syllables are short.

Syllables of type (i) are traditionally described as being 'long

[1] A full description of the phonetic differences between tense and lax vowels is given by Chomsky and Halle (1968, pp. 68–9, 324–6), but for present purposes it will be sufficient merely to give some examples: the vowels in *bean*, *bane*, *balm*, *pawn*, *bone*, *boon* are tense and the vowels in *bin*, *Ben*, *bat*, *bun*, *pot*, *put* are lax. I have followed Chomsky and Halle in regarding diphthongs phonologically as tense vowels (an equivalence implicit in the bracketing of 'long vowels or diphthongs' in traditional accounts of Latin quantity and accent).

by nature'; those of type (ii) as 'long by position'. It will be obvious that the theory of quantity as duration stems from these rules, especially if consonants are thought of as adding arithmetically to the time taken for the pronunciation of a syllable. But further consideration reveals problems. Though the common assumption is that two consonants take about the same time to pronounce as the vowel they follow, and therefore double the duration of the syllable, whereas a single consonant is not sufficient to increase the length significantly (an assumption improbable in itself), it is difficult to explain why a long vowel or diphthong followed by two or more consonants (such as *mēns*) is no longer than a long vowel or diphthong alone (such as *mē*). Moreover, how is one to explain the fact that consonants at the beginning of a syllable play no part in determining its quantity, while consonants at the end are of crucial importance? Attempts have been made to explain quantity in terms of duration from syllable-peak to syllable-peak, and not from syllable-boundary to syllable-boundary, none of which, however, has succeeded in accounting for the details of the rules of Latin versification (see the discussion by Zirin, 1970, pp. 58–61).

It seems likely, therefore, that the distinction between 'long' and 'short' syllables in Latin was not simply a question of duration, but that a qualitative difference of some kind was also involved. The rules for ascertaining quantity are now often given in a form which relates more closely to the phonetic character of the two kinds of syllable, and makes the inadequacy of the theory of quantity as duration even more apparent (see, for instance, Allen, 1965, pp. 89–90). The rules in this form depend on an initial procedure of syllable-division (corresponding, presumably, to the division of syllables in classical Latin speech – see Hale, 1896), on the following principles: of two or more consonants at least the first goes with the preceding vowel (*fal-sus*, *flam-ma*), except in the case of a plosive plus liquid within a word, when *either* the first consonant goes with the preceding vowel, *or* both consonants go with the following vowel (*at-rox* or *a-trox*). Using the phonetic terms instead of the traditional ones, and referring to a syllable that

ends in a vowel as an 'open' syllable and one which ends in a consonant as a 'closed' syllable, the definition of quantity can be stated as follows: a closed syllable or an open syllable with a tense vowel is heavy, while an open syllable with a lax vowel is light.

Various theories of quantity have been proposed which attempt to find an alternative to duration as the most important difference between light and heavy syllables. Jakobson (1960), for instance, has suggested that it is a matter of 'simpler and less prominent syllables opposed to those that are more complex and prominent' (p. 360). The notion of 'prominence' as the distinguishing characteristic is a more useful one than duration, but 'complexity' does not seem sufficient to account for it. Marouzeau (1954, 1955) has elaborated a theory which proposes as a basis for the distinction between heavy and light syllables the 'suspension' which occurs when consonants succeed one another, and although he does not solve all the problems (see Zirin, 1970, pp. 61–4), he at least does not feel obliged to prove that heavy syllables are markedly longer than light ones.

Writers on the classical languages tend to emphasise that habits of English speech can only obstruct our understanding of quantity, since it is a phenomenon foreign to the nature of English. However, Chomsky and Halle (1968), in their analysis of the rules governing stress-placement in English, arrive at some conclusions which suggest a close connection between the phonology of English and that of Latin. They refer to a lax vowel followed by one or no consonants as a 'weak cluster', and contrast this with a 'strong cluster', consisting of a tense vowel followed by one or no consonants, or of a vowel (tense or lax) followed by two or more consonants. They can then state their first approximation to a stress rule for verbs as follows: 'Primary stress is placed on the penultimate syllable if the final syllable terminates in a weak cluster; and...a final strong cluster receives primary stress' (p. 70). The structure of strong and weak clusters corresponds exactly to the structure of heavy and light syllables (Chomsky and Halle's definitions do not, of course, apply to syllables after syllable-division, but to strings of phonological elements within a word, so theirs is closer to the