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Striking Down Some Arguments for the Existence of an Ictus in Latin Poetry

We present two arguments against the existence of an ictus in Latin poetry. The first takes the form of a refutation of the very seductive idea that sound play relies exclusively on the *arsis* (or stressed part of the foot). The second is that the *arsis* did not need an ictus to be perceived as a guidepost by the listener.

N. Hérescu advances several arguments to prove that the phonetic structure of Latin quantitative poetry is built into the *arsis* (or stressed part) of each of the feet concerned. His demonstration not only concerns where to hear the phonetic beauty of poetry, but it also defends the notion of an ictus. Conversely, when we show that, in fact, sound play occurs in any part of the foot, we cast doubt on the notion of an ictus.

Passages whose phonetic architecture N. Hérescu means to attribute exclusively to the stressed part of the foot actually demonstrate by their subject matter that the poet's concern with sound extends to other parts of the verse. Hence, in Vergil's *Georgics* 4,465-466, the phonetic structure of the *arses*, one of a dominant *e* (italicized, only gives the effect of a lovely back-ground or *basso continuo*, but has little relation to the melody. This is carried by the pronoun *te*, which represents Eurydice in the eyes of Orpheus, and by its recurrences as a syllable (bold faced):

te, dulcis coniunx, **te** solo in litore secum
te ueniente die, **te** **decedente** canebat

This pronoun is, in fact, the text of Orpheus' song. By stating that this musician sang (*canebat*) this text, Vergil is corroborating our phonetic analysis: *te* (*de* simply containing the voiced form of the palatal stop in *te*) is the melody in these lines of verse.

There is a more reasonable way of looking at the *arsis* in light of its being somewhat favored over the thesis: It is a consistent element, one that in dactylic verse returns invariably as a long in every foot (even if for distichs the unit of measure is larger than for consecutive hexametrical lines). The mere repetition of a pattern is enough to ingrain it in the listener. No artificial stress above that provided naturally by the word accents is necessary. This argument also applies to lyric strophes because two or more lines are built on exactly the same sequence of longs and shorts, while even the lines that vary usually start or end with the same feet as do the dominant lines. Finally, in the case of iambo-trochaic verse, where substitution and condensation prevent this type of regularity from imposing itself, there is a strong correlation between word accent and *arsis*.

In addition, we comment on one of G. Duckworth's criteria for judging dactylic poets: The extent to which they vary fourth-foot homodyne and heterodyne (coincidence or non-coincidence of ictus and accent) in consecutive hexametrical lines animated by their favorite metrical pattern. We demonstrate that, because different metrical patterns differ as to which metrical word types may enter or span the fourth foot, *dsss* is more favorable to fourth foot homodyne-heterodyne variation than *dsds*. Was what G. Duckworth

interprets as sensitivity to such variation not simply a matter of probability? By extension, another of the arguments in support of the existence of an ictus becomes questionable.