EDWIN GEROW

A NOTE ON THE PREHISTORY OF INDIAN METRICS

A remark in Abhinavagupta's commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* 15 throws some small light on the prehistory of Indian metrics, in that it is consistent with speculations, based on other sources, that suppose deriving the fixed-syllable meters of the classical period from Vedic metrical types, particularly the *tristubh* and *jagati*.

The remark in question is the following:
tatrehādhyāye bharatamunikṛtam iti trikair makārādibhiḥ kaiścit kiñcil lakṣaṇam svīkṛtam iti dvidhaḥ pustakapāṭho dṛśyate madhye ca cintanāya pustakeṣūbhayam api paṭhyata iti: «In the present chapter, a certain way of defining [the meters] based on trisyllabic units such as *ma*[– – –] has been accepted by some as done by the sage Bharata himself; [others, however, do not accept this, and] thus two sorts of manuscript readings are attested: between [them the reader is disposed] to ponder, especially as in [some] manuscripts, [readings from] both are attested»[1].

This is one of the important loci at which Abhinavagupta shows himself aware of various versions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* text, and

---

[1] Cited also by L. BANSAT-BOUDON, *Poétique du théâtre indien*, Paris, 1992, p. 29, (translated somewhat differently), as evidence for the multiplicity of traditions at Abhinava's time. See also P.V. KANE, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, 3rd ed., Delhi, 1961, p. 13, who suggests adding *cirantaneṣu* before *pustakeṣu*.

disposed to a critique of the variety of readings thus presented. Indeed, in addition to the usual *variae lectiones* concerning individual readings and verse orderings, chapter 15 is remarkable for its two quite different recensions that presuppose two different theories of defining meters. As noted by Abhinava, one makes no use of the trisyllabic system attributed to Piṅgala; the other conspicuously does. Abhinava, to judge by the *textus receptus* of the Kāśmīra tradition, regarded the version lacking reference to the triplets as genuine. Both versions of the chapter survive, however, and are variously represented in modern editions. The Gaekwad text, as usual, follows Abhinava but brackets, for the most part, the apparently repetitive variants that employ the triplets[2]. At one or two places, references to the triplets do, however, occur in the canonized text – e.g., at 15.183: *vaktrasyāparapūrvasya cādau nau ro lagau trikāḥ*.... The composite edition of M. Ghosh largely ignores references to the triplets, but here too, occasional lapses are found, e.g., at 16.132 ff[3]. In neither edition is found any definition of the triplets, such as figure in any of the standard metrical compendia, starting with Piṅgala. The version of Bharata's text preferred by Abhinava may be considered quite archaic in that it defines even the fixed-syllable classical meters in terms of their overall line length – as so many heavy or light syllables in sequence – without reference to the eight trisyllabic units, even though it is obvious that the triplet system is uniquely suited to the definition of these meters, and was probably devised for that purpose (see below).

Now, it is at this point that the divergent recensions become interesting also from the point of view of metrical theory, for it is clear that, in its origins, Indian theory was focused primarily on line length, and paid little heed to syllable quantity within the line. The *Ṛk Prātiśākhya,* the Vedic ancillary text that devotes three chapters,

---

[2] A note, presumably by the editor, M.R. Kavi, explains: *pāṭhadvayasyāpi pāṭhāntarabhūyiṣṭhatvāt kevalaṁ saukaryāyobhayapāṭho 'pi mūlarūpeṇaiva mudritaḥ* (vol. II, p. 252). See also his notes in the prefaces to vol. II (p. x) and vol. I (p. 60 [2nd ed.]).

[3] As is well known, the various recensions differ significantly in chapter arrangement. Here, Ghosh's ch. 16 corresponds to the Gaekwad text's ch. 15.

sixteen through eighteen, to meters, differentiates the families of meters (making use, incidentally, of their now commonplace names) on the basis of verse length only, without reference to syllabic quantity. *Gāyatrī*, for example, is the "shortest" meter – twenty-four syllables – made up of three eight-syllable lines. Avestan metrics, to the extent that it can be deciphered, seems also to repose on a notion of fixed line-length; it has been suggested that this "metrics" is an Indo-European inheritance[4]. Piṅgala, the supposed author of the "Vedāṅga" *chandas,* follows the *Prātiśākhya* system, insofar as he treats of Vedic meters, but employs the trisyllabic system of description for post-Vedic meters, including variable types, such as *śloka* and *āryā,* and, of course, for the fixed-syllable meters that are the apex of the Indian metrical art.

All this together suggests – as has long been recognized – that syllable quantity was a feature introduced only gradually into the Indian metrical system, as it was into Indian poetry. Indeed, Vedic metrics is remarkably "free" as regards the quantitative structure of the line, though certain constraints can be adduced at all periods of the early language[5]. The epic • *loka,* based on the Vedic *anuṣṭubh,* evidently constitutes a middle ground between the "free" Vedic line and the "fixed" classical line (though, here too, the details are much in dispute), for not only has the cadence of the eight-syllable line been contrastively fixed, but certain variations *(vipulā)* have been codified that restrain even the "freedom" of the opening syllables[6]. And, as well, the • *loka* remains constrained within a total line length (eight syllables, replicated four times). The so-called *viṣamavṛtta* meters – usually four lines of unequal length – probably constitute an alternative phase in this development[7].

---

[4] So, e. g., E.V. ARNOLD, *Vedic Metre*, Cambridge, 1905 (reprinted several times), pp. 19-20.

[5] The standard treatment is still E.V. Arnold's *Vedic Metre.*

[6] See ch. 4, "Epic Versification" of E.W. HOPKINS' *The Great Epic of India*, New York, 1901.

[7] A speculative, but highly cogent, essay on the historical development of the classical meters is A. MUKHERJI's *Sanskrit Prosody: Its Evolution*, Calcutta, 1976. See also my essays on *chandas* and *vṛtta*, in *Le science extraeuropee* of the Italian Encyclopedia's *Storia della scienza*, vol. III (forthcoming).

The *āryā* class of meters – perhaps of "popular" or at least of Prākritic origin – seem to presume a different kind of line than the Vedic meters or their derivatives, namely, a line made up of a fixed number of temporal "instants" (mora), a heavy syllable counting for two morae, rather than a line defined by a fixed number of syllables, be they heavy or light. Still, the «line» is fixed, and constitutes the basis of versification, though most varieties of *āryā* also subdivide the line into units of fixed moric length – usually four morae. In this sense, the *āryā* meters represent a different way of calculating the total line length, rather than constituting a radical break with metrics based on line length. Like the Vedic meters, *āryā* meters show great internal freedom as far as syllabic quantity is concerned.

By a gradual process of determination[8] the fixed-syllable meters emerged from the above types – that is, by determining the options that the Vedic or moric line presents internally. Thus the *upajāti* meters evolved out of the Vedic *triṣṭubh,* leaving only the first syllable "free", and from the *upajāti,* the *indravajra* and *upendravajra,* by determining even that anceps. Similarly, a meter like *dodhaka* emerged from the freer moric matrix by fixing the heavy syllables at initial position in all four quadrimoric units, lights elsewhere, with the exception of the final two *morae*, which are fixed, for variety, as a heavy syllable: (– ∪ ∪) (– ∪∪) (– –). The *trika*, system, which Piṅgala does not even attempt to apply to the "free" Vedic meters, seems best to serve in describing these fixed-syllable meters – that is, meters whose every syllable is quantitatively determined, in a line of fixed length. For example, the classical *mandākrāntā* is described thus by Piṅgala: *mbhau ntau tgau g* – to be read: '*ma* and *bha*; *na* and *ta*; *ta* and *ga*; *ga'* – which gives the seventeen-syllable prosodic line – – – – ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ – – ∪ – – ∪ – –. Four of the eight possible triplets are here illustrated: *ma* (– – –), *na* (∪ ∪ ∪), *bha* (–∪∪), and *ta* (– – ∪); the term *ga* serves to designate a single heavy syllable. That the triplet system is also applied by him to the freer *āryā* class and to the • *loka* is quite significant, because, of course, only a portion of their line can be so

[8] See esp. A. MUKHERJI, *op. cit*, chs. 4 and 5.

designated (often by exception, as in the restriction applying to the classical *āryā* that its uneven moric units may not – but the sixth may – have the form ∪ – ∪ (the triplet *ja*). It thus seems quite reasonable to suspect that the application of the triplet system to moric meters was retrospective – a *fait accompli* that was widening its zone of utility. It seems far less likely that the reverse direction of influence is to be supposed, especially as the moric system of equal moric units allows for groups of two (– –) and four (∪∪∪∪) syllables, as well as three.

Back to Abhinavagupta: the two recensions of which he takes note suggest that the triplet system was an innovation, both in the sense that Abhinava prefers the "authentic" nontriplet text, and in this, that the fixed-syllable classical meters are there described without any reference to the triplets – which shows that, at least for some, the triplets had not yet been applied to the very subject matter to which they seem best adapted. The classical meters can be, and indeed were, in this version of the metrical tradition, still described as variations on the Vedic theme of fixed line-length. Thus, this recension of Bharata's text appears to antedate even Piṅgala's *Chandaḥśāstra* – or at least represents a parallel development – and to continue the very fluid type of description, based on line length, that begins in the *Ṛk Prātiśākhya*. That this tradition continued even to Abhinava's time (eleventh century) is indeed remarkable, both because the apogee of composition in fixed meters was long past, and because the authority of Piṅgala – by this time confused with the Vedāṅga *chandas* itself – would otherwise seem to have become absolute.