Standing on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance, History

CATHERINE ROBSON

Love's the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite "The boy stood on
the burning deck." Love's the son
stood stammering elocution
while the poor ship in flames went down.

Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,
even the swimming sailors, who
would like a schoolroom platform, too,
or an excuse to stay
on deck. And love's the burning boy.

—Elizabeth Bishop, "Casabianca" (1946)

OF THE MANY RETELLINGS—USUALLY RIBALD, SCURRILOUS, OR just silly—of Felicia Hemans's "Casabianca,"[1] Elizabeth Bishop's response is perhaps the only one that is attentive to the poem's status as the preeminent choice for memorization and recitation by children of the British Empire.[2] Hemans based her poem (first published in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1826) on accounts of the death of a young Corsican sailor in 1798, informing her readers in an explanatory note, "Young Casabianca, a boy about thirteen years old, son to the Admiral of the Orient, remained at his post (in the Battle of the Nile) after the ship had taken fire, and all the guns had been abandoned; and perished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had

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reached the powder" (Wolfson, *Selected Poems* 428–29). Bishop, 120 years later, presents us with a double vision of children in solitary torment: we see both the boy sailor of reimagined Napoleonic history, waiting steadfastly for the paternal word of release that will never come, and the boy's unhappy descendant, the reciting child of a later age, doomed to stand on the schoolroom platform, his own version of the burning deck, until the task is done.

In granting the performance history of "Casabianca" equal billing with its subject matter—indeed, in proposing a connection between the two—Bishop's poem preempts and inspires my examination. I claim that Hemans's poem plays an unusually defined role in English cultural history by virtue of the uncanny alliance of its thematic concerns and its function in Victorian pedagogy. It is no exaggeration to state that this poem takes on a life of its own—or perhaps, with respect to the boy's macabre demise, a death of its own. "Casabianca" presents one of literature's most arresting examples of a corpse that cannot be laid to rest: just as the boy's body can never be gathered up and placed in a grave, so has his poem eluded decent burial in the dark backward and abysm of time. This is not to imply that the author of the poem has also enjoyed a continuous celebrity: for much of the last century, Felicia Hemans was covered in obscurity. Like many others whose undergraduate education was completed before the mid-1980s, I first encountered the name of Mrs. Hemans, arguably the most widely published, most widely read poet of the nineteenth century (McGann 182), interred deep in a footnote to the penultimate stanza of William Wordsworth's "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg," an elegy for quite a different dead poet. But if the main body of Hemans's work has only recently been exhumed, her noble boy has always stood apart.

Because of its standing as the Victorian culture's favorite performance piece, "Casabianca" lodged itself so firmly inside the English mind that adults today often know the poem without knowing that they do. The eminent Romanticist Jerome McGann gives his account of what is also, on occasion, a North American experience:

> And one of those [poems] that ran in my mind for years began "The boy stood on the burning deck." It wasn't until I was far gone as a scholar that I learned that the author of the poem was Felicia Hemans. Many more years went by before I started to realize how many worlds were not well lost because I hadn't known that poet's name. The fault wasn't my mother's. She had the poem by heart and didn't think I needed the name. (vii–viii)

As the difference between the son's "mind" and the mother's "heart" signals, the poem's hold on later generations is tenuous: the poem may persist in our heads, but certainly not in its entirety—it lives on only in shreds and tatters, gobbets even; blown into consciousness at unlikely moments and in strange places. The first line is probably familiar to many above a certain age; the first quatrain endures primarily in parodies, which frequently manifest a risible juvenile smuttiness ("knickers" are often in there for the English)[3] and a preadolescent delight in substituting bathos for the expected pathos (sometimes painful "blisters" rhyme with a self-evidently ridiculous feminine presence, "sister's" [Clarke 44; Kelly 79]). The poem has beaten time's effacement but lost its integrity.

This essay investigates the processes by which "Casabianca" established itself at the heart of one culture and attempts to understand how it has haunted another. How is it that a poem important to the people of one historical period becomes laughable, distasteful, or meaningless later? In general, responses to this familiar question examine a work's content and its formal arrangement. "Casabianca" stands indicted of serious crimes in both areas. In its supposed celebration of

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juvenile self-sacrifice, unflinching heroism, and unquestioning fidelity to the father's word, it participates in a lachrymose sentimentalism, the glorification of war, and the upholding of patriarchy. In the formal arena, the poem commits even graver sins: not so much in displaying the simplest of closed forms, hymnal measure, but in maintaining apparently regular rhymes and rhythmic patterns, a practice deemed second-rate, at best, by an academic establishment whose ideals, until recently, were those forged in modernism's heat and accepted as the gold standard of practical criticism and New Criticism. In the last twenty years or so, critical paradigms have mutated, allowing the work of a popular female writer of the first half of the nineteenth century to regain the respectful attention that it attracted in the period of its initial publication: feminism in general, and the remapping of the terrain of Romantic literature in particular, has brought Hemans back into literary discourse.[4] No longer neglected and despised, Hemans's poetry, it turns out, possesses those sterling attributes of ambiguity, complexity, and irony that are generally discovered once a work is subjected to academic scrutiny. But while I applaud the ways in which Hemans's work now enjoys skillful rearticulation, I am more concerned with "Casabianca" as a discrete cultural entity than a part of a substantial poetic oeuvre. Inspired by the work of John Guillory in *Cultural Capital*, I am interested not in canon debates fueled by identity politics but in the reception history of a particular work—a reception intimately linked to the poem's position in a specific system of dissemination and, further, to the corporeal dimensions of that system.

The body of an individual who reads "Casabianca" at the beginning of the twenty-first century is different from the body of an individual who read "Casabianca" at the end of the nineteenth century. I could make this claim about any poem, but I focus on the reading history of "Casabianca" because this work grants us an unusually good opportunity to follow the course of a pedagogy whose immediate goal was the right ordering of the child's body and mind but that often continued to work its rhythms throughout the individual's life. For much of the nineteenth and some of the twentieth century, children in England were subjected, successfully or unsuccessfully, to an educational praxis that made a profound physical and emotional connection between the assigned literature and the bodies that read it. Freed from, or deprived of, such training, we will never feel the beat with the same urgency.

Until recently, such a claim would have sounded ludicrous—after all, it has been a central credo in literary criticism and other areas of study that whatever else may change, bodies and bodily experience remain the same. Paul Fussell's classic study *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* encapsulates the received opinion on the relation between literature and the human frame: "the modern reader of poetry in English, despite his vast differences in extrinsic and learned attitudes from, say, his Elizabethan counterpart, has still the same kind of physique and personal physiological rhythms as his forebears. These will still seem to seek satisfaction and delight in ways which accord with experienced rhythmic traditions of Modern English" (90). Or, to put it another way, systole and diastole produce, for nineteenth- and twentieth- and twenty-first-century persons, the same rhythm of mortal existence—in the words of the contemporary poet (and undertaker) Thomas Lynch, "a steady iambic tally / of this life's syllables, stressed and unstressed" (49). But here lies the difference: when we do not learn by heart, the heart does not feel the rhythms of poetry as echoes or variations of its own insistent beat. We contemporary readers no longer hold poems with regular iambic rhythms at our core; children no longer feel their pulse rates

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quicken as they approach the work in hand, aware that they must calm the thudding of their hearts to have any hope of reproducing the poem's rhythms effectively, or at least acceptably; adults no longer feel themselves glide into the mesmeric state of one who recites a memorized, internalized poem, when body and words beat together in measured familiarity. "Casabianca," the most memorized, the most recited poem of all, allows us to historicize meter and the heart together, to think about our relationship to literature in the most corporeal of ways.

Numerous critics have charted the major phases in the reception of Hemans's poetry, showing how a rising nineteenth-century popularity came to founder in a long but eventually interrupted period of neglect in the twentieth century (Wolfson, *Selected Poems* xiii–xxi). "Casabianca" has its place in that history, yet at the same time it enjoyed an independent existence. Like many of Hemans's works, the poem became a general anthology standard, but its unprecedented pedagogical role ensured cultural ubiquity. Seeing the poem through Bishop's eyes, we may wonder if Hemans set out to fashion a poem expressly suited to juvenile reciters. It is hard to decide whether the correspondence between the steadfast boy and the performing child occurred to the compilers of Victorian textbooks, but whatever they felt about the poem, they saw enough of the right stuff in "Casabianca" to make it the most anthologized work in all classes of nineteenth-century schoolroom readers. Presumably the anthologizers were drawn to the poem's exciting mix of bravery, suspense, a naval engagement, a child hero, and history (albeit history seen from the "wrong" side, as McGann and Wolfson [*Selected Poems*] have noted)—perhaps to some of the elements that today would make us wary of placing this combustible piece close to young minds. Indeed, if we work through "Casabianca," we are likely to find it unsuitable for juvenile perusal, let alone juvenile memorization.

Horror and violence saturate the poem: for most of its verses, we are encouraged to imagine the child's growing terror at the prospect of unimaginable pain and of the sight and smell of his own burning flesh. Even worse, Hemans, an icon of devoted maternity and gentle femininity, tells us that the boy feels the "breath" of the flames "[u]pon his brow" and "in his waving hair," and these fiery caresses become the poem's single, and singularly perverse, touches of the loving presence of a mother, a mother who may be the narrator of the tale but who is otherwise absent. Parental abandonment lies at the heart of the boy's emotional torment, for the child, unaware that his father lies "faint in death below," believes, like Christ, that he has been forsaken. All this is bad enough, but the worst is yet to come: when the flames finally reach the powder kegs, we must contemplate the blowing apart of the boy's body ("The boy—O! where was he?"), its scattering up into the air and then down into the waves with the debris of the exploded ship. Then, most horrible of all, we return in the poem's last line to something that no longer exists: all the better to suffer its loss, its fragmentation, we focus at the end on the wholeness, the integrity, of that boy's life center, his "young faithful heart." But just as "mast, and helm, and pennon fair" are now only bits of rope, wood, and cloth littering the Mediterranean, so too has that beating heart been blasted into muscle, tissue, valves, "heroic blood"—into unrecognizable particles that have already dropped into the sea.

Such an exposition of the literal events of the poem may seem unnecessarily gory; after all, "Casabianca" wants us for most of its stanzas to think of courage, not *cœur*—of the stoutness of the heart rather than its vulnerability, its destructibility. Perhaps it is anachronistic to imagine that nineteenth-century

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readers pictured the poem's visceral devastation in this degree of anatomical detail, but if they did, we should not be surprised that they assigned "Casabianca" to children anyway. A quantitative analysis of three widely used British and American series of school readers from the 1870s and 1880s demonstrates that a quarter to a third of their pages refer to death in some way, most frequently as a result of violence or war (McGeorge 109–17). Although some anthologists spoke out against gloomy preoccupations—"Avoid dismal pieces," counsels the author of a handbook on recitation for teachers in English elementary schools; "[y]oung children should look to the light, not to the darkness" (Burrell 83)—and while gentle ditties like "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," "My Mother," and "Hang Up Baby's Stocking" are well represented in volumes intended for the youngest readers and reciters, the body count mounts up swiftly thereafter.

Given the complex and class-stratified landscape of educational provision across the long Victorian period, observations about textbooks must be carefully anchored to a detailed understanding of their intended readership (Goldstrom; Michael). Nevertheless, it is possible to make the following broad assertion: most Victorian children, girls or boys, wealthy or not, who managed to receive a continuous daily education of at least four years were familiar with many bloody and violent poems. While the selections change as the century progresses and the ultrapatriotic utterances of Rudyard Kipling, Henry Newbolt, and William Ernest Henley flood in to swell the nation's increasingly imperialist image, the roll call includes a number of doughty old stalwarts: Thomas Campbell's "Mariners of England" (1801) and "Hohenlinden" (1803), Charles Wolfe's "Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna" (1817), and Robert Southey's "Battle of Blenheim" (1798) regularly turn up in schoolbooks of all kinds throughout the period, from N. Leitch's *Juvenile Reader* in 1839 to James Douglas's *Selections for Recitation Compiled for the Use of Elementary Schools* in 1869, and, from the 1870s onward, in the numerous graded series from publishers like Chambers, Collins, Blackie, Bell, Nelson, Jarrold, and Cassell. Upper-class scholars may well have spent three-quarters to four-fifths of their time on Latin and Greek and ancient history and geography, but, by the end of the century at least, when it came to the recitation of English verses, they encountered the same martial standards, as Francis Warre Cornish's *Public School Speaker* (1900) attests. But if old soldiers never die, the young sailor is still more resilient: "Casabianca" is almost always present.[5]

But what exactly was the imagined function of memorization and recitation, particularly of poetry, in nineteenth-century pedagogical theories? How do we understand the meaning of the reciting child, that most Victorian of images? Learning by rote has, if not a distinguished, a long and persistent history in Western education, and while it is largely associated with catechisms and the declension of verbs, it has played a role in nearly every subject. Present in almost all pedagogies of the past, rote learning is particularly important in the period that saw England's educational system reach a mass population.

Although the proportion of children attending day schools doubled between 1818 and 1851, at this latter date the average continuous period a working-class child spent at school was only two years, and fully one-third of the nation's children received no education at all. By the end of the century, nearly ninety percent of British children went to school for seven to eight years (Adamson; Wardle; Hurt). All the policies and actions, of voluntary and state bodies, that helped bring about this massive explosion in educational access have been carefully studied, but the Revised Code of 1861–62 claims special attention. Introducing a series of six graded standards

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with a certain level of competence expected after each year's instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, the code also ushered in the infamous "payment by results" system, recommended by the Newcastle Commission and implemented with meticulous force by Robert Lowe (Sylvester). In consequence of the financial pressure it exerted on overextended educators, the code also plays a significant role in the history of memorization: because schools and teachers were subject to monetary penalties if their pupils did not satisfy visiting examiners, rote learning, particularly in reading, became the norm. As Inspector John Morley lamented in 1868, the system did not ensure that pupils learned to read: while he had heard all children in a certain school's Standard I read with apparent fluency from their schoolbook, not one was able to read the simplest words in a similar, but hitherto unseen, volume (Ellis 94). Fortunately, the code was gradually liberalized over the course of the century, but since it inadvertently enforced the practice of chanting texts and overtly specified that poetry be studied, it offers a convenient vantage point from which to examine the place of the memorized poem in a widespread pedagogy.

In 1867 "English Literature" was introduced into the code as an optional "specific subject" (qtd. in Gordon and Lawton 83), leading to a special examination for individual pupils in the three most advanced standards; poetry recitation became an officially mandated section of these tests in 1875. According to the Committee of Council on Education, children offering this subject in Standard IV (around ten years of age) were expected to "read with intelligence a few lines of poetry selected by the Inspector, and *to recite from memory 50 lines of poetry*" (my emphasis); for pupils in the year above, it was "not less than 75 lines," and for those in the top class, Standard VI, "50 lines of prose, or 100 of poetry" (1874–75 report [cxlix]).[6] In 1882, however, English became a mandatory general subject, and to pass the examination children in the top three classes now had simply to read a passage of literature of unspecified length (1881–82 report [132]),[7] but the zeal of those drafters of the 1875 code tells us something about the general position on poetry memorization. We gain a sense of what the Victorians thought it reasonable to expect of a competent child of ten, and we can thus see that the placing of "Casabianca," a forty-line poem, in Standard II (the position it always occupies in the graded readers) is more or less in line with these opinions. When we think of the boy on the schoolroom platform, we should imagine an eight-year-old child.[8]

But it is more broadly instructive to examine the mass of writings, in the form of inspectors' reports and textbook introductions, that surround these departmental prescriptions, for here writers explained what they believed children were gaining in the exercise. For Arthur Burrell, the author of *Recitation: A Handbook for Teachers in Public Elementary Schools* (1881), the benefits amounted to a universal panacea. Reciting children practiced elocution, gained an enhanced sense of rhythm and more refined deportment, developed an aesthetic appreciation in themselves and in others, strengthened their memory, and were set on course for surefire upward mobility. Both the individual and society were improved: "The acquisition of a good style in recitation is invaluable in almost all walks of life. A quiet voice, freedom from mannerism in word or action, gentlemanly ways (all of which recitation will lead to if it be properly taught) are elevating influences everywhere" (4). Matthew Arnold's many pronouncements on this topic may be differently angled, but they are no less exhortatory. An inspector of schools from 1851 until 1886, this exceptionally hardworking poet and cultural critic brought together the complete range of his professional and literary concerns when he

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held forth on the place of memorized literature in school and society. He comments in his report for 1882:

> The poetry exercise, if properly managed, is of very great use, and this is why I have always been in favour of it and am glad to see further development given to it by the New Code. People talk contemptuously of "learning lines by heart": but if a child is brought, to *throw himself into* a piece of poetry, an exercise of creative activity has been set up in him quite different from the effort of learning a list of words to spell, or . . . of flesh-making and heat-giving foods . . . and [one] capable of greatly relieving the strain from learning these and of affording a lively pleasure.
> (*Reports* 257–58)

Unsurprisingly, Arnold was vehement about which works should be taught in schools. As early as 1860, he was expostulating on readers containing "a literature over which no cultivated person would dream of wasting his time":

> I have seen school-books belonging to the cheapest, and therefore most popular series in use in our primary schools, in which far more than half of the poetical extracts were the composition of the anonymous compilers themselves, or of American writers of the second and third order; and these books were to be some poor child's Anthology of a literature so varied and so powerful as the English!
> (*Reports* 87–88)

This criticism was to find partial redress sixteen years later (the 1876 code specified that pupils should be able to name the authors of the "English literature" they were reciting) and a more complete response in 1882, when the Department of Education for the first time recommended specific writers for classroom study ("Shakespeare, or Milton, or"—and here the net is cast rather wide—". . . some other standard author"). And yet, even after guidelines were in place, there could be no guarantee that an educator would achieve a suitable fit between a class of pupils and a literary text. "Sometimes a teacher's enthusiasm led to rather inappropriate results," remembered a Sussex man of his state education at the beginning of the twentieth century, "as at Harting Combe, where eight-year-olds in Standard II began to read Shakespeare and had to learn by heart the scene from *King John* where Arthur pleads with Hubert not to put out his eyes" (Burnett 159).[9]

The years after 1870 and up to the First World War may have seen impressively large developments in the general spread of educational provision and in the particularities of pedagogical programs, but there are elements of the late Victorian and Edwardian educational experience that still can shock, or at least trouble, us. The fact that sensitive children might have had nightmares about imagined medieval eye burning, or that boys and girls everywhere were regularly thumping out lines about blood and guts and fiery death, may seem neither here nor there. I do not wish to make heavy weather of the psychological pain disturbing literary material might have caused, or to downplay the genuine pleasure many children must have gained from recitation (numerous memoirs and autobiographies, from all classes of individuals, confirm that Arnold and the others were not in a fool's paradise when they expatiated on the child's joy in memorized poetry).[10] Nevertheless, like many educational experiences in this period, the learning of a poem at school was generally compulsory, not elective, and the threat of physical pain could hang heavily over this compulsion. To put this more plainly (indeed, to call a cane a cane), although we can find evidence of pockets of more enlightened educational policy, corporal punishment was an integral part of English pedagogy and general childrearing, at all social levels, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. At home and at school, children received physical correction for a range of

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undesired behaviors and demeanors, but they were also beaten—or threatened with beating—for the failure or inability to complete an assigned task. It is perhaps too glib to assert that the boy who stands stammering knows to his cost that learning by rote can be the same as learning by the rod, but the atmosphere in which a poem like "Casabianca" was memorized invariably involved the child's body.

Corporal punishment was so widespread in English schooling in the nineteenth century that we should be warier than we have been about the application of Michel Foucault's ideas to Victorian society in Great Britain. The theory of power in *Discipline and Punish* that argues that control of the populace becomes a question of mental, rather than bodily, practices in this period is more obviously relevant to the situation south of the English Channel—corporal punishment was repeatedly outlawed in French schools in the nineteenth century, and a comprehensive ban was ratified in 1887. In England, such a prohibition did not make its way through Parliament until 1986. But to speak more specifically about the practices of birching, caning, and so forth in English schools is surprisingly difficult, for there are few reputable historical studies of this phenomenon.[11] Nevertheless, there is enough evidence from the relatively sober testimonies in governmental and judicial investigations to convince us that "the English vice" is not mere flagellant fantasy. It is often maintained that the nation's mania for beating was given prestige by the bastions of upper-class education and then imitated elsewhere. That the practice made its way down the social scale to the schools of the middle classes is apparent from those reports by Arnold, who in 1866 makes clear his distaste for what was to him a savage abomination, one that made England embarrassingly anomalous in Europe. Writing with more hope than assurance, he argued that flogging "will more and more come to appear half disgusting, half ridiculous, and a teacher will find it more and more difficult to inflict it without a loss of self-respect" (*Schools and Universities* 113). Unfortunately, as English education extended its empire over the working classes, it carried into the new dominions its disciplinary techniques, so that the procedure Arnold despised was more rather than less prevalent by the end of the century. "Every single teacher of every rank had his cane," wrote an inspector and former teacher, F. H. Spencer, reflecting back over pedagogical experiences that began in 1886. "We used these canes, not often brutally, but commonly, without much discrimination and without scruple, indeed without thought" (73).

Given the systemic nature of the phenomenon and the lack of systematic studies of its practice, it is hard to assert confidently that children were regularly beaten for failing to recite an assigned poem adequately. While "punishment books" were officially mandated from 1870 onward, few have been saved, and classification is necessarily a crude affair in the quotidian rush of school life: the headings "disobedience," "insubordination," "unsatisfactory work," or even plain "laziness" must cover a multitude of sins. Yet if we turn from the archive to the library of nineteenth-century fiction, a wealth of examples connect children's failed performance and corporal punishment. I look to such scenes not to learn "the truth" about what happened in any given classroom but to watch a particular literary genre mount a defamatory action on the hegemonic sway of another. We may also gain a useful sense of the affective experience of pedagogical beating, as it was represented to readers who likely had undergone, or witnessed, similar trials themselves.

Whatever type of punishment, whatever age or whichever sex of child, whatever level of school we are looking for, we can find it somewhere in the nineteenth-century novel. A tap with a ruler on the outstretched palm

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of the youngest board school infant; a dozen strokes with a bunch of twigs on the back of a girl's neck in a genteel charity institution; fifty lacerating lashes with a willow switch on the buttocks of England's richest and highest-born sons—the beatings come thick and fast. Indeed, a novelistic episode of juvenile education that does not forge a bond between learning and hurting is the exception: the sentence "I am going to teach you a lesson" is more likely to preface a sound thrashing than a disquisition on the Norman Conquest or on the physical geography of Greece. In such familiar and socially diverse Victorian works as *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield* (or practically any Charles Dickens novel), *Tom Brown's School Days*, and *A Child of the Jago*, children are beaten for their failure to complete a school assignment. When the focus is narrowed to inadequate recitation, nineteenth-century European fiction still has much to offer: a devastating episode in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* illustrates how much violence can be concentrated around the failed production of a single consonant, while another painful autobiographical novel, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, provides a comprehensive taxonomy of scenes in which children falter over their assigned texts. In other prose genres, and on another continent, too, enforced juvenile performance is a popular subject: in nineteenth-century American comic writing, Stephen Crane's short story "Making an Orator" depicts Jimmie Trescott's agonizing experience with "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Mark Twain's depiction of this pedagogical practice some twenty-five years earlier in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* shows that the performance of reciting scholars on examination day is backed up by the threat and actuality of "rod and ferule." By this stage in the text, we know a great deal about the "merciless flaying[s]" of schoolmaster Dobbins: "Only the biggest boys, and young ladies of eighteen and twenty, escaped lashing. Mr. Dobbins's lashings were very vigorous ones, too." His pupils' experience of "terror and suffering" is displaced from center stage by the more humorous topic of their revenge, but we should not discount the role that beating has played in the preparation of their "declamatory gems" for public performance (131–33). In *Tom Sawyer*, both prose and poetry come to us under the sign of the rod. And which poems? "You'd Scarce Expect One of My Age to Speak in Public on the Stage," "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "The Assyrian Came Down," and, of course, "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck."

In "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America," Richard Brodhead argues persuasively that the prose fiction he examines is "singularly open to middle-class disciplinary imaginings at this time not because the disciplinary is everywhere, but because of the way fiction's position as a cultural category is configured at this moment" (90). That is, the novel of the period presents odious tableaux of "bodily correction" as part of a strategy to advance its own, differently organized "correctional model," which makes "warmly embracing parental love the preferred instrument for authority's exercise" (92). This explanation offers a useful starting point, yet once we shrink the topic from general beating to punishment for inadequate recitation, we might reasonably assume that the novel has an additional, and equally self-interested, ax to grind. If the novel, as Brodhead claims, is keen to propagate a kinder, gentler mode of discipline, might it not also be attacking the right of the recited short poem to constitute the prime example of the literary in elementary curricula? There are many complex reasons why vernacular poetry becomes the preeminent literary genre once juvenile education spreads beyond the tiny, classically trained elite from the eighteenth century onward (Guillory 85–133), and there are also obvious practical factors, connected

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to straitened resources of time and money, making a forty-line poem more teachable than a four-hundred-page novel. Nevertheless, the number of times that prose fiction attacks poem memorization suggests that a specific animus may be at work.[12]

While we reflect on how the pecking order among genres might determine the presentation of one sort of literature within another, we might start to think about how our ranking of past cultural forms affects the general conclusions we reach about other times. Consider, for instance, the orthodoxy of the most significant account to date of the relation between the literary and the construction of subjectivities in the Victorian period. In a landmark essay, D. A. Miller advanced the notion that the novel played a key role in drilling its nineteenth-century consumers in "the rhythms of bourgeois industrial culture": "Discipline in Different Voices" maintains that "the characteristic length" of the era's fiction trained the reader to engage and disengage, to accept and internalize the "close *imbrication* of individual and social, domestic and institutional, private and public, leisure and work" (83). This elegant and compelling piece extends Foucault's argument about the pervasiveness of technologies of interiorized power and suggests that the archetypal nineteenth-century fiction, in its form and content, constructs a self-regulating model of subjectivity for character and reader alike. Yet I would counter that at least in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the experience of novel reading came to an individual who had already received a comprehensive schooling in a different discipline and whose relation with the literary involved rhythm more directly. However seriously we take the novel's charges about the connection between the poem and bodily punishment, we see that the acquisition of the literary at school was a corporeal experience inasmuch as the anticipation, and then the actuality, of performance was often attended by symptoms of the fear of failure—clammy palms, shaking legs, and pounding hearts. Children who found pleasure in their recitations—in the extraordinary richness and intensity of poetic language and in their competence therewith—nevertheless were also caught up in a heightened state of physical awareness. Throughout an individual's life, too, the poem inhabited the body in a manner now hard to comprehend—for many, the memorized poem lurked deep in the self, and they called it up not so much by a conscious act as by simply allowing the body to utter what the body stored.[13] I am thus claiming (and now I draw closer to the topic of meter) that the compulsorily memorized poem inserted itself into individuals and established its beat in sympathy with, or in counterpoint to, their bodily rhythms. When people learn poetry by heart, their relation to measured language—and especially to regular meter—carries a distinct, corporeal difference from that experienced by readers of other, alternatively disciplined ages.

Attempts to understand that special relationship between body and poem have been hampered by the following problem: the poems that formed one side of the bond became for many years bywords for the worst kind of poetry. Nowadays, the mainstream of critical opinion has decided that no transhistorical standard of value grants utility or justification to the terms *good* and *bad*, let alone *worst*. But even though poems like "Casabianca" have thus been recovered as objects of legitimate scholarly interest, recent attention has been given mainly to their content, analyzed in relation to historical contexts and values. New readings have rarely considered the wider meanings of the form of a poem, but if they have, they tend only to position the poet and his or her stanzaic or metrical choices within literary history, rather than history more generally.[14] Thus, in the case of "Casabianca," if the topic is touched on at all, it is probably to

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note that Hemans uses a traditional folk song measure and perhaps to gesture toward the ballad revival movement of the eighteenth century. The minute particulars of her use of this form's meter are generally ignored[15]—presumably because it is believed that there is little to say or, worse, because we fear that the only thing we could say would plunge us back into that quagmire of adjudication. After all, if we know anything about "Casabianca," we know that is a "ti-dum ti-dum ti-dum ti-dum" poem—and at some level, we believe this is self-evidently and eternally a bad thing: is it not axiomatic that successful, or strong, poets deviate from the set rhythm of a given line, while weak poets stick to it? Yet it is exactly this "ti-dum ti-dum" factor that we need to examine, that we need to reunderstand in relation to history. And the historical context we must consider is not the moment that Felicia Hemans sat down to write a poem but the subsequent experience of her work in the mouths and bodies of tens of thousands of children.

Given that memorization of literary material became a standard element of late Victorian curricular design in England, it is not surprising that the texts most frequently assigned tended to be written in closed forms. Such poems gave a fighting chance to the largest number of children, who had a wide range of abilities. Although like Elizabeth Bishop we might well see an ominous or ironic connection between the topic of child torture in "Casabianca" and the experience of its recitation, the truth is that children in Standard II would think themselves a deal luckier to be assigned Hemans's poem than, for example, forty lines of *Macbeth*. It was hard mental and physical labor to memorize and perform "Casabianca," but better that than many other texts—whether you love or hate its "message," you cannot deny that it is thrilling stuff. True, its narrative could have a stronger forward thrust, but once you get past the maddening near repetitions of the boy's three utterances, it is mostly plain sailing. Furthermore, its diction is relatively uncomplicated: despite that strange polysyllabic title, eighty-six percent of the words are monosyllables. But more to the point, "Casabianca" is relatively easy to memorize because of its form.

When Wordsworth wrote in the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* that meter works to soothe our pain, he probably was not implying that a regular rhythm might help a reciting child escape the rod, but the fact remains that the ballad stanza provides some intrinsic aide-mémoire features. Differentiating between those elements of the genre that are inherently easy to remember and those we assimilate more quickly because they resemble the form of materials we have already committed to memory is difficult, but certainly the rhymed quatrain constitutes the most familiar organization of patterned language in English and has a long history as a sung and spoken form (Fussell 141). Usually organized as one divided sentence, or two sentences with a natural pivot or place for breath, the quatrain is long enough to paint a scene, to express a thought, to feature dialogue in the form of question and response, or to describe a narrative movement but not long enough to permit complicated elaboration. And while rhymed couplets close in on themselves and offer no convenient bridge to the next lines, an alternate rhyming scheme helps lead us forward. Above all, the regular pattern of four iambs, three iambs, four iambs, three iambs offers tremendous security. Built from accumulations of the iamb (the most familiar foot, the heartbeat of English poetry), the tetrameter-trimeter combination also seems to have established its supremacy through two other features. First, a pattern of alternating line lengths seems easier to keep in order than a series of potentially interchangeable same-length lines; second, the shortness of the tetrameter and the trimeter lines makes it more probable that regularity of meter will

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be maintained. Or, to put it another way, a poet has less scope for variation in a four- or three-beat line than in, say, a line of iambic pentameter. The form that Hemans chose for "Casabianca," then, was inherently unlikely to deviate from its duty.

But here's the rub. It is not true that Hemans wrote a poem with an unvarying meter. The rhythm is consistent enough to make the poem memorizable by a diverse population, but I believe that "Casabianca" *became* an ultraregular poem, and thus a byword for unthinking jog-trot meter, through the process of constrained recitation I have been examining. Because meter aids memorization, meter becomes the dominant force whenever a poem has to be committed to memory and will, if necessary, overthrow the meaning of a line. This is apparent when we consider the performance history of the poem's first words. Hemans opened her poem with an irregular line, which places its second strong stress on the word *stood*: "The BOY STOOD on the BURNing DECK." If mimetic meter is a feature of the work of "good" poets, then Hemans earns her stripes, for we are pulled up short by two adjacent stresses, and movement is arrested in the line as it is for the boy, who is literally going nowhere. And yet who, outside the hypereducated elite, says it this way? Half knowledge of the words as a derided remnant of another age or as the beginning of something like a smutty limerick dictates that a singsong rhythm override the sense of the line, and so most English people, at least, would chant "The BOY stood ON the BURNing DECK." How would a child in a state of bodily anxiety have recited it? Not slowly, not with feeling, not thinking about how to fit sense to the syllables, meaning to the meter—instead, when you have to get through something, you gallop along with your eyes on the finishing post, with no desire to introduce significant pauses or reversed stresses or indeed anything that might hamper the progress of your thundering hooves. When finally at the end, would not the reciting child also be likely to murder the tender pathos of Hemans's final irregular, meditative stress on "that YOUNG FAITHful HEART" by chucking in for good measure an unstressed "and" between "young" and "faith" to regularize and thus speed up the line?

"Casabianca" has been remembered as a poem with uniform meter because of the circumstances of its assimilation into a culture: poems that were already fairly regular and hence suitable for a certain practice became more and more so through that practice. Once individuals were no longer put through this particular pedagogical mill and thus "forgot" why unvarying rhythm had been such a necessary and desirable element in it, then the poems that had been worn out in its service became pariahs. Now, there was additional force behind disparagement of metrical regularity in the abstract: generally derided in theoretical discussions of prosody over the years, uniform meter in the twentieth century carried the extra burden of all those barely educated nineteenth-century recitations. A regular poem became a bad poem, a lying poem, a false poem. It is more accurate to say that a regular poem is a low-status poem, but this fact was subject to an extended and now well-examined process of disavowal: we are familiar with the modernist moves that on the one hand split literature into high and low and audiences into elite and mass and on the other obscured historically specific and ideologically laden value judgments behind a smoke screen of ineffable aesthetic taste.

Suffice it to say that the decks were stacked against Hemans's boy: history brought in its revenges against a poem that had for a time represented the essence of the literary to a large and diverse constituency. "Casabianca" was in a sense sent back to where it came from, to the place of popular song, to the ballad's natural home with the folk. Even now, when fashions have changed and Felicia

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(no longer Mrs.) Hemans is warmly invited into the room, the cut of her measures has been decorously ignored because of our intact belief that her poem fails in that department—after all, great poems achieve "organic meter" and effect "prosperous departures" from external form. But poets do not have control over the journeys their works make through the years—over how their poems are read and by whom; over the circumstances of acquisition, performance, and retention. "Casabianca" could not be that ubiquitous, recited that many times by so many individuals—willing or unwilling, proficient or incompetent—without undergoing exaggeration, overfamiliarization, and ultimate rejection. The poem's fragmented survival in English popular consciousness is the last remaining trace of its pedagogical past, of a time when poetry was experienced in and through the body and when the iamb connected to the heartbeat in a manner that we no longer appreciate and cannot feel.

Notes

[1] The version of Hemans's poem that most frequently appeared in nineteenth-century textbooks in England follows:

The boy stood on the burning deck
  Whence all but he had fled;
The flame that lit the battle's wreck
  Shone round him o'er the dead.

Yet beautiful and bright he stood,
  As born to rule the storm:
A creature of heroic blood,
  A proud though child-like form.

The flames rolled on—he would not go
  Without his Father's word;
That father, faint in death below,
  His voice no longer heard.

He called aloud: "Say, Father, say
  If yet my task is done?"
He knew not that the chieftain lay
  Unconscious of his son.

"Speak, Father!" once again he cried,
  "If I may yet be gone!"
And but the booming shots replied,
  And fast the flames rolled on.

Upon his brow he felt their breath,
  And in his waving hair;
And looked from that lone post of death
  In still yet brave despair,

And shouted but once more aloud,
  "My father! must I stay?"
While o'er him fast, through sail and shroud,
  The wreathing fires made way.

They wrapt the ship in splendour wild,
  They caught the flag on high,
And streamed above the gallant child
  Like banners in the sky.

There came a burst of thunder sound—
  The boy—O! where was he?
Ask of the winds that far around
  With fragments strewed the sea:

With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,
  That well had borne their part!
But the noblest thing which perished there
  Was that young faithful heart.

On one important point, this differs from the version that first appeared, in 1826, and that is now generally reproduced in scholarly editions. In the original text, the word "And" at the beginning of line 19 is included in the quotation marks designating the child's speech, which is thus dramatically interrupted at this point. In every Victorian textbook version I have seen, the child's outburst ends after "gone" in the previous line; thus, all the words of line 19 are given to the narrator: "And but the booming shots replied." As will become apparent in my developing argument, the textbooks' elimination of the original version's metrical irregularity at this juncture is not without significance.

[2] "Casabianca" also has an important place in the history of classroom recitation in the United States, a history that I barely touch on but that is analyzed in Angela Sorby's forthcoming book and in two essays by Joan Shelley Rubin ("'Listen'" and "'They Flash'"). Because English speakers on both sides of the Atlantic (and elsewhere) share this past to greater or lesser degrees, my article on occasion addresses its readers as the common descendants of poetry reciters. Nevertheless, my primary focus is on the topic in the context of English cultural history.

[3] The best-known American parody is more benign: "Who does not know, 'The boy stood on the burning deck, eating peanuts by the peck'?" (Rubin, "'They Flash'" 259).

[4] Susan Wolfson's edition (*Selected Poems*) and Gary Kelly's edition provide useful bibliographies of the grow-

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ing number of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century books and articles on Hemans. Stuart Curran, Marlon Ross, and Norma Clarke are generally recognized to have heralded the recovery. In addition to their writings, the works by Jerome McGann, Tricia Lootens, and Isobel Armstrong have been especially helpful to me in the composition of this essay.

[5] This claim is based on my examination of a wide range of school textbooks in the British Library rather than on thoroughgoing statistical analysis. Ian Michael's *Teaching of English* reveals Hemans's popularity in its tabulation of the number of times works by select authors appear in a swath of schoolroom readers, but it does not correlate these occurrences with patterns of assignment or textbook sales. J. M. Goldstrom provides useful information about the typical content and structure of the most frequently assigned working-class school readers in England and Ireland between 1808 and 1870, but there is no comparable historical study of the teaching of English literature in middle- and upper-echelon schools in the nineteenth century. To be sure, the Clarendon Commission (1864) and the Taunton Commission (1868), which inquired into the state of education in the public and grammar schools, respectively, were both dismayed by the general neglect of the subject (*Irish University* 9: 14, 26; 17: 25–26), but there is evidence that recitation found a stronger foothold in well-to-do institutions in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. See also Gordon and Lawton; Shayer.

[6] The following year the bar was raised: to award a pass an inspector needed to hear a ten-year-old repeat "one hundred lines, got by heart, with knowledge of meaning and allusions," while the eleven- and twelve-year-olds were required to deliver two hundred and three hundred lines "not before brought up," respectively (qtd. in Gordon and Lawton 83).

[7] And yet, as Matthew Arnold's *Reports* and an 1887 article from the weekly publication the *Teachers' Aid* make clear ("Recitation: Why It Should Be Taught, and How"), although the new code of 1882 no longer required memorized lines of poetry, it was the sanctioned practice of teachers to train their charges to prepare a piece for recitation in the examination.

[8] This swift history of the code and its adjustments during the 1870s and 1880s reveals that recitation was never compulsory for every child in every standard. Nevertheless, all the numbers of the graded series of regularly assigned textbooks for this period are clearly geared toward classroom recitation. My assumption that recitation is thus a regular feature of the life of eight-year-olds is also supported by the allotment of time to this practice in the elementary school curriculum. In 1886, for instance, "Drill, Singing and Recitation" are expected to claim one hour and twenty-five minutes a week in standards I–IV and one hour and forty minutes a week in standards V–VI. "Grammar and Poetry" merit one hour and thirty minutes a week in all six standards (*Irish University* 34: 542–43).

[9] "Recitation: Why It Should Be Taught, and How" (published in the *Teachers' Aid* in 1887) reveals that this particular educator was not unusually sadistic. The article advises teachers to choose carefully the pieces pupils will perform in their examinations: "*Do not select hackneyed ones*. An Inspector told me he was heartily sick of 'A fair little girl sat under a tree,' for nine out of every ten schools had selected that for Standard I. For the same reason it would be well to avoid 'Mark Anthony's oration' from *Julius Caesar*, and 'Heat me these irons hot,' from *King John*" (419).

[10] Burnett 135–211. In *Lark Rise to Candleford*, Flora Thompson tells of the enjoyment she and her siblings derived in their North Oxfordshire school in the 1880s from Nelson's *Royal Readers* (a graded series of reading books produced just after the 1870 Elementary Education Act, which were widely used and which contained nine of Hemans's poems, including "Casabianca"): "'Lochiel's Warning' was a favourite with Edmund [her brother], who often, in bed at night, might be heard declaiming: 'Lochiel! Lochiel! beware of the day!'" (193).

[11] Existing accounts are bedeviled by two often interlinked factors: they tend toward pornography, and they frequently draw their supportive illustrations from questionable sources (Gibson, for instance, sometimes affords evidence from memoirs, newspaper exposés, and private letters the same status as that from government reports [see, e.g., 48–98]).

[12] A full consideration of this issue would require a careful examination of the opinions of nineteenth-century novelists about the status of poetry and about their own genre and is beyond the scope of this essay.

[13] For illustrations of the phenomenon of lifelong retention in the twentieth century, see Rubin's "They Flash upon That Inward Eye," which provides excerpts from the fascinating testimonies of around five hundred individuals who learned poetry at schools across the United States between 1917 and 1950.

[14] Attempts in nineteenth-century studies to consider poetic form in relation to changing historical contexts are far outweighed by investigations of the forms of prose fiction, which, it seems, is assumed to be more dynamically conjoined with social and cultural shifts (see, e.g., Jameson, ch. 2).

[15] See, however, Wolfson (who attends to metrical stanza and line in her study of Hemans and Byron ["Hemans"]) and other considerations of questions of poetic form and genre in Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk's collection of essays.

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