correspondents at large

For a Poetics of Verse

SIMON JARVIS

Reader! No time for pleasantries.

The study of poetry is still obstructed and dominated by the unsolved question as to what poetry is. Most have concluded that it is unproductive to try to answer this question too quickly or even, perhaps, to ask it. This creates a block. Where terms such as *poetry*, *lyric,* and *form* remain academically current, they may do so as a kind of revered but disbelieved magic. *Lyric* suffers from some of the same difficulties as *poetry* (Culler; Prins; Terada). These difficulties go further than those attending any indistinct yet prevalent cultural concept. They concern also the long "war embrace" between poetry and philosophy, an antagonistic cooperation (Coleridge 191).

It is hard to know what poetry is. What poetry is, is, therefore, a philosophical question. But what philosophy is, is not a poetical question. So antagonistic cooperation ceases. Coleridge's war embrace has become a patron-client relationship, in which poetry is the client.

This is why I am interested in the potential of a long-disprized term: *verse*. Wherever I use terms like *poet*, *poetry*, and *poem*, I am primarily thinking of the verse-making practice, performed by both writers and readers of verse, of cutting up language into segments (Attridge, "Poetry"; Tynianov 16). Verse possesses a specificity that is irritating to philosophers and theorists alike. But this is just its transfiguring grit. If poems are invited to display only those ideas that a philosopher or theorist could have made earlier, the relation between philosopher or theorist and poem becomes not a war embrace but a vacant commerce. Philosophical poetics is productive precisely when it operates across a deep unlikeness of kind (Jarvis, "Unfree Verse").

Philosophical poetics is historical insofar as it takes technique to be at once the way in which art thinks and the way in which the work of art most intimately registers historical experience (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*). The opinions of the poet, the political history represented or not represented by the poet, the learning, attitudes, friendships, lives of the poet, all these may be of interest, but the pressure point, the point of historical formation and action in the poem, is always that of technique, because this is where the poem

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gets made, the point at which the voices of the many living and dead (S. Stewart) that are the poet's repertoire or material are selected from, cut into, distorted, twisted, and precipitated into this or that composition—where their natural-historical antagonisms are exposed, concealed, exacerbated, or fudged.

In order to interpret all this, poetics, not excluding philosophical poetics (Adorno, "Parataxis"), has to be minutely expert in verse technique. Meter and rhythm were, mostly, the elephants in the room in *PMLA*'s recent roundtable on lyric (see, e.g., Terada). We must stop considering formalist those studies (Attridge, *Rhythms*; Bradford; Griffiths; Roubaud; Scherr; Scott, *Poetics*, *Vers*, and *Riches*; G. Stewart; Tarlinskaia; Wachtel; Wesling; Wright; Žirmunskij) that offer us minute expertise in verse. This sort of study is indispensable to any "historical poetics" (for a recent revival of the term, see Prins; the phrase seems first to have been used in the nineteenth century by A. N. Veselovskij). Poetics does not get more historical by tying cultural-political labels onto whole meters. The historical force of verse thinking may at a particular juncture depend upon rendering the metacommunications of verse less immediately legible—that is, upon preventing verse effects from shrinking to no more than a series of mere badges of belonging, of social, political, cultural, or poetical affiliation—so that verse can be reanimated as a repertoire of historically and affectively saturated paralinguistic gestures (for a more detailed account of this topic, which cannot be treated in full here, see Jarvis, "Melodics"). The formula *politics of style*, as usually wielded, empties both the terms it glues together. It diminishes politics to its least complex moment, that of wearing a badge, and then makes style be that badge.

Poetics demands the most exacting kind of historical inquiry imaginable: that which seeks to use all available partial and fragmented sources of evidence to recover habits and practices of thinking and making that have in many cases become lost. The history of verse thinking is not the same as the history of representations of verse thinking. Indeed, those representations very often are written just so that the persisting part-infantile (see Blasing's audacious explanation [27]) or even *perverse* (Barthes 228) elements of verse thinking, its embarrassing overinvestments in mere clicks, pitches, and echoes, should be concealed or rationalized. In this inquiry, some poets will necessarily be of more importance than others. That we study Pope more intensively than Charles Churchill (who really should be worked on more, by the way) need attract no more suspicion than the fact that we study Hegel more intensively than Karl Rosenkranz, and this because the criterion of significance is not merely one of taste but of the depth to which in each case, in the case of both the poets and the philosophers, significantly new *thinking* is taking place (Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* 1–32). Historicism has not been thought to entail relativism about ethics or politics. There is no reason why it should entail relativism about poetics either.

Poetics need not subserve hermeneutics. Anyone who is trying to find out and to say what a given poet's verse style is actually like will at some point or other face the urgent inquiry, But how does this help us to offer a reading of the poem? That question feels natural. Yet it assumes as an evident good a quite peculiar and not invariably valuable practice, the writing of readings of poems. What poetics may be able to say about verse style is considered to be useful insofar as it contributes, in a subsidiary and relevant fashion, to this goal. The assumption that poetics subserves hermeneutics presses connoisseurship of verse style so rapidly and so forcibly into interpretative service that it leads to falsified and unconvincing claims about verse style and its supposed effects, thus prompting many excellent scholars to set the whole domain to one side. It is hard to imagine a scholar of Rubens who would have nothing

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to say about Rubens's handling of paint, but there is no need to imagine a Miltonist who has nothing to say about Milton's handling of blank verse (though for approaches that, on the contrary, treat Milton's thinking as necessarily bound up with his work as a maker of verse, see, e.g., Creaser, "'Through Mazes'" and "'Service'"; Sugimura; and Teskey). But the setting aside of verse style has its costs, not only for students of poetry but also for intellectual historians of poets' opinions: thinking in verse is a practice and an institution different from thinking in prose, and the connection between the two is not simple or automatic even when they happen to come out of the same head. Anyone who ignores this gets intellectual history wrong.

Widespread indifference to rhythm and meter in poetry is, for sure, partly a symptom of what the close study of these topics has come to look like. Far from having been solved, most of the main descriptive questions concerning what rhythm and meter actually are and how they work remain controverted (such valuable works as Groves; Wright; and Tarlinskaia present mutually incompatible theories). The unsolved nature of basic questions in metrics discourages critics from treating such questions as central to the study of poetry. It is not surprising that many critics of poetry would rather hypothesize upon a precious inkblot in a manuscript—as though this were the auratic stuff itself—than scan a line of verse when the questions of what rhythm and meter themselves are, and how they work, remain so uncertain (cf. Michaels; Jarvis, "What").

Worse, this uncertainty can in principle never be brought to an end. To scan a line of verse is not to describe the properties of an object. It is, instead, to make a diagram of a performance, of an interpretation, and of an experience. If a scansion of a line of verse does not in some way record some salient elements of some particular performance, vocalized or silent, of that line, it is contentless, an aprioristic fantasy. But no diagram of a performance, of an interpretation, or of an experience can be adequate to them.

Accordingly, the remedy for indifference to verse technique may not be to throw all our efforts into devising an unchallengeably scientific description of metrical rules. The problem may, instead, lie in the very underdeveloped nature of the aesthetics of verse when compared, for example, with the aesthetics of music or of painting. Because of the default priority of hermeneutics over poetics in the study of poetry, the aesthetics of verse continues overwhelmingly to rely on the logic of a mimetic relationship to paraphrasable content. The questions of the possibility and centrality of verbal mimesis are too large to be settled here (for further discussion see Jarvis, "Melodics"), but when verbal mimesis is allowed by mere want of alternative to be treated as the acme of poetical achievement, the result is rather as though the occasional birdcalls that find their way into symphonies and concertos were to be considered as the summit of musical art. To be interested in the history of verse style, and to believe that this history is nonidentical with that of (say) prose fiction or political or economic history, need by no means be to set up a series of claims about the specialness of poetic language. Verse, as Wordsworth exhilaratingly discovered for himself, has no inevitable connection with poetic language at all. Language is one of the materials deployed by the practices of verse making and of thinking in verse.

All this leads to the following series of reflections. First, verse is not a subset of language. It is an institution, a series of practices as real as the belief in them and the capacity for them. Verse adepts cut up, mutilate, select from language—using intonation contours, rhythms, print, gesture, and so on. (The argument does not apply in the same way to prose, in which rhythmic recurrence or, minimally, segmentation are not "constructive" factors

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[Tynianov 32].) When language has had all this done to it, it is no longer only language.[1]

This leads on to my second point: poetics is not a subset of linguistics. If language is one of the materials of verse, then the historical study of verse style is no more a subset of linguistics than the history of the handling of color and line in painting is a subset of the study of the chemical composition of paint.

Third, all poetics is critical poetics. That is to say, there is no purely descriptive poetics of verse. The history of verse thinking can no more proceed in mere avoidance of evaluation than can the history of philosophy.

Fourth, there is a need to renew and extend the poetics of repertoire. By repertoire I mean the quasi system of local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on or develop in particular authorships, coteries, periods, and genres. The devices of verse have no fixed effects, but readers are seduced into conjecturing effects with them (Barthes 220), as they notice poets sinking the most powerful thoughts and feelings into even the most abject little phonetic and printed bits and pieces. In the work of no important poet can this peculiar, this perverse thinking that verse undertakes be understood as at all times pressed into the service of paraphrasable meaning: of some story, plan, idea, moral, or effect that the poet may be presumed to have had in mind. Versification is in each case a second repertoire of thinking, interfering with, interrupting, complicating, and competing with the poet's explicit thinking more readily than it can merely cooperate with, support, or illustrate it.

So that, at last, when Rei Terada says, "Let's let 'lyric' dissolve into literature and 'literature' into culture, using a minimalist definition of 'culture' from which no production or everyday experience can be excluded" (200), I say, Let's not. Let's not let everything dissolve into everything else in this way, into this indeterminable blancmange of (mythical) everydayness, but let's instead give up our unhappy and only apparently democratic flight from evaluation; let's subject our large ideas about poetry or lyric (or "textuality" or "culture" or "everyday experience"—since all these terms can also be made to go inside quotation marks, just like "lyric" and like "poetry") to the most minute test of verse-historical connoisseurship; let's reanimate the connection between advanced verse practice and reflection on its history (cf. Wilkinson); and let's at the same time understand the entire history of verse meters, rhythms, instrumentations, intonations, italicizations, punctuations, gaps, breaks, and absences as that extraordinarily intricate record of thinking through making whose contours we have hardly begun to be able to interpret. Farewell.

Note

1. Allen Grossman said this to me the first time I met him, at Johns Hopkins University in February 2005.

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