ABOUT HARRIET

CATEGORIES

Best-Sellers
Craft Work
Criticism
Foundation News
From Poetry Magazine
Group Blog
Interviews
Obituaries
Open Door
Poetry News
Politics
Publishing

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ARCHIVE

2012
2011
2010
2009
2008
2007
2006
News Archive

BLOGROLL

Nomadics (Pierre Joris)
Eclipse

Listening to Poetry

BY ANNIE FINCH

Listening—openly taking in the words of another being, while allowing the words to remain in the other being's voice—is a simple and powerful secret, one that life reminds me of in ubiquitous ways. Parenting, for example. Listening to my children, I am amazed at the insights and solutions they have to offer, steadily ignored or discounted as this wisdom usually is by well-meaning teachers, not to mention by myself. As director of an MFA program, I am also constantly reminded of the power of listening. Every problem I've encountered can be seen as the result of barriers (external ones—technological and logistical, social ones–hierarchical and political, or internal ones—interpersonal and psychological) to listening. And every problem that has been solved has been solved, eventually, through listening.

In this context, an art that opens us to the words of another person while keeping the words in the other person's voice is an art worth heeding. Do you ever hear poems aloud in your mind—maybe poems by others, or poems you are composing as you hear them? Judith Weissman's book Of Two Minds: Poets Who Hear Voices traces this common phenomenon through centuries of poets.

Such internalized poetic voices seem akin to the internalized voices of the tribe leaders, goddesses, and gods that Julian Jaynes' cult classic The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind describes as the first source of all civilization and religious tradition. Internalized voices, according to Jaynes, are not heard in the left side of the brain, where we hear speech and prose. They are heard in right side of the brain, where we hear music and metrical poetry—poetry which our brain processes the same way we process music. Whatever one thinks of Jaynes' theories about the brain, i find this distinction between the two brains useful for talking about my own experience of reading

poetic language in two different ways: one primarily by understanding it like prose, and one primarily by hearing it like music.

Poetry's connection with the musical way of hearing language may be its basic identifying use and distinction as an art form, the reason it has survived through the millennia. And perhaps this essential connection is the reason that, after a century dominated so hugely by free verse, the caricature of poetry in the popular mind still remains, against all apparent reason and the weight of a century's lived experience, inherently associated with meter (for a current example, note the role of meter and its aural companion, rhyme, in this news story: http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-03-11/sully-is-a-poet/ Essentially, poetry is distinguished as an art not by its basis in thinking, reading, and understanding—all the processes we use to encounter other kinds of language—but in something both more humble and more refined than any of these: listening to the physical resonance of the words of the poem within the internal space of our own minds. The majority of poems in the English and American historical tradition, as in poetic traditions worldwide, are so much designed for listening and reading aloud—like little reading-aloud machines—that even when reading silently, it seems right to "read them aloud" inside one's head, hearing the words physically as we go along.

But recently I had an experience suggesting that, in spite of the persistence of the old-fashioned caricature of poetry as an aural art in popular culture, the capacity to listen physically to poetry should no longer be taken for granted on the part of the educated reader. Am I wrong? I would be happy if someone would, as Rachel Maddow would put it, "talk me down."

Several months ago, I was testing out a reader's guide for a book of my poetry, which the publisher and I had planned to aim specifically at women's groups (not book groups specifically, but spiritual/social support circles, the type documented in Jean Shinoda Bolen's book The Millionth Circle. By agreement with the publisher, I arranged to visit a local women's circle in my area to see what kinds of discussion questions would help them and people like them to get the most out of my book.

On the agreed-on snowy night, I arrived and found the group to be just the kind of sensitive, articulate "general audience," attuned to nature and spiritual issues, who always seem to enjoy poetry readings from this book. But instead, this particular group seemed puzzled. They asked me

to provide a “way in” to the poems. I was honestly baffled, because in all my reading tours, I had never encountered such a response. So I said the first thing that popped into my mind: “Did you read the poems aloud?” No,” they all said, as if it were an odd question. “Did you read them aloud to yourself, inside your head?” “No,” they all said again.

So I read one poem aloud, and then we read another poem aloud, taking stanzas around the circle. The floodgates opened. They wanted to read another aloud, and another. They were enthusiastic, talking about rhythms, the fertile power of mysteries in the language, and how they felt affected by the poems on a more physical level than the level of words. Analysis and interrogation gave way to wonder and paradox. The group had quite suddenly switched from one mode of reading to another, from the understanding mode we might call “left brain or free-verse brain” to the metrical, musical mode we might call “right brain or metrical brain.”

Metrical poetry, traditionally, offers up its riches to the receptive, listening mind. The meter itself guides, and the inner or outer ear has only to hear. Reading a metrical poem aloud is rather like performing a piece of music using the instrument of your voice (and just as in music, the degree of skill in composition will significantly affect the result). When John Donne opens a sonnet with “Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so,” the weight and length of the stressed first syllable of each of these lines, in contrast to the unstressed syllable of the iambic openings of the rest of the lines in the poem, are very specifically determined. Because a metrical poem modulates individual phrases against the scaffolding of a rhythm and line-length that is mutually expected by both poet and reader, the poet can indicate, even on the page, the exact timber, tempo, and other physical characteristics the reading-aloud process should take at each point in the poem. The reader in receptive right-brain mode—in metrical brain—has only to follow, to channel, to open, in order to receive the poem, just as the members of the circle were finally doing. The effort of reading well is separate from the act of physically receiving the poem. Reading metrical poetry well consists in the quality of the attention, contemplation and reflection on what has been or is being received.

Free verse is different, and increasingly so as the progress of generations has removed it further from metrical tradition. To read free verse well with the musical /metrical part of the brain requires a

significant degree of conscious effort, since it is up to the individual reader to determine how lines and syllables are read aloud and heard. For example, there are numerous patterns of stress, tempo, and pitch that would be appropriate for reading aloud Williams' "Red Wheel Barrow." To choose and perform one of these is more like improvising a tune to accompany a piece of text than it is like performing a musical piece on a familiar instrument. Opening the mind to the meter of free verse is itself an act of contemplation and attention. To receive a free-verse poem into one's right brain is a challenging skill, and most contemporary general readers have not cultivated the subtle techniques involved in reading a free verse poem with the metrical right brain: deciding on each phrase's physical tempo, momentum, variations, and so on.

As the generational divide between metrical poetic tradition and free verse tradition has widened, the task of hearing free verse in the right brain has grown more daunting. The free verse of, say, Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, or Lucille Clifton can be read quite easily with the right brain; ironically, one reason for this is that their generation knew meter too well to allow it to protrude too obtrusively into their free verse. Meter is an implicit "exoskeleton," to use a term coined by David Cappala, within which their free verse poems play as they resonate within the musical space of the mind.

But now, two generations or so further removed from metrical tradition, meter is no longer an implied context when people read free verse. One piece of evidence for this is that meter is starting to come back into free verse, often in jarringly blatant passages of common meters, most often iambic pentameter. This obtrusion of meter can do violence to the experience of reading or hearing free verse, forcing the brain to careen between exoskeleton and endoskeleton mode, breaking the right-brain spell. Presumably poets let the meter in because it sounds fresh and interesting to them, and/or even more likely, because they no longer recognize it enough to avoid it. At any rate, It seems conclusive proof that readers are no longer expected to share an implied metrical framework with the free-verse poet as they were in the generation now starting to pass on.

Instead, general readers of free verse have now learned to read poetry with their left brains—the way they read prose—privileging ideas, images, and rhetorical shape over line, rhythm, and physical vibrancy. This is how the women's circle had been reading my poetry before I

arrived. Confronted with the printed poems, outside the typical context of a poetry reading, they had approached the book the same way they normally approach any piece of language: through thinking, reading, and understanding. They were reading not musically, but discursively. And this was a completely understandable way for earnest, educated general readers of the current day, trained as they have been by a century of free verse poetry and poetics, to approach an unknown book of poetry.

Had they encountered the book the way the shrinking number of general readers who read poetry now almost always encounter a book of poetry—at a reading—my performance itself would have provided them with an initial right-brain experience of receptivity and openness. In an age several generations into free verse, poets in performance are the ones who now claim creative control over readers' physical receiving of poetry. Without the communicative scaffolding, the shared language, of a metrical template to convey the relative weight and tempo of spoken syllables, the only way to communicate the poet's full intended experience of the poem's physical body is to speak it aloud. Hence the indispensable power of the poetry reading in today's poetry world: whatever general audience poetry still has is largely if not entirely dependent on the institution of the poetry reading, or technological equivalents (Def Poetry Jam, Bill Moyers videos, mp3s, CD's) for their physical, right brain experience of poetry. This is one reason our publishers tell us that giving poetry readings is the most effective way to sell books.

How much of the soul of strongly rhythmical poems, whether in the metrical or free verse tradition, is lost when it no longer feels appropriate, safe, and worthwhile to approach an unfamiliar poem on the printed page by listening to it? Can this phenomenon also be the cause of the poetry-phobia that leads so many book groups to forgo reading books of poetry altogether? Do these general readers sense that they have lost their connection to the right brain mode of approach towards language which poetry is at base designed to engage?

Is it possible for poetry once again to inspire an audience of general readers to listen physically to a poem on a page? I hope so. It's a pleasure I would hate to think was no longer available to readers. The women's circle urged us to include in the reader's guide explicit advice for readers to speak the poems aloud, even if only inside their own minds. They told us to stress that reading aloud was the key that would

unlock the poems, transforming the encounter with the book from a mental experience to a holistic one. They even requested that some scansions be included, to guide readers in picking up on the rhythms of the poems. I was moved and encouraged that the group was so sure this would be helpful to others.

A friend asked me a few months ago, as I was discussing one of the poems I had been writing, “does it ever depress you, thinking that most people won’t know what you are doing with meter?” Maybe it should depress me, but honestly, it doesn’t. Meter just gives me too much joy for me to worry too much about it. After all, humans are still humans, with the same breaths and pulses that inspired meter in the first place. Meter is like music; you can enjoy it whether or not you understand why, and you can easily enjoy poems in meter by reading aloud to yourself, even if you are only used to reading free verse. As this group seemed to prove, it doesn’t take work, and it isn’t hard, to get back in touch with the enjoyment of listening to poetry. And hopefully, to listening to other kinds of communication too. In fact, hard as it feels sometimes, really on a basic level, it’s much easier than not listening.

Meanwhile, just in case, my publisher is busy producing an audio version of my book on CD.

COMMENTS (142)

On March 14, 2009 at 10:06 am Jason Guriel wrote:

Thanks for this thoughtful post, Annie. It’s strange to think the brain divides this way, though I suppose it’s strange to think in the first place.

“A friend asked me a few months ago, as I was discussing one of the poems I had been writing, ‘does it ever depress you, thinking that most people won’t know what you are doing with meter?’ Maybe it should depress me, but honestly, it doesn’t. Meter just gives me too much joy for me to worry too much about it.”

This is a nice moment, and I’m glad you shared it. Still, we probably do worry too much about the question of audience – which is why the book on CD, just in case, made me laugh.

On March 14, 2009 at 10:18 am Anna Evans wrote:

Alas, I don’t think I can “talk you down,” Annie! I think you’re spot on. This also relates to Jason’s recent post on memorization. The only way I was able to memorize that free verse poem was to assign it a musicality (variations of tempo and stress), which became the mechanism of recall rather than the words themselves. I see now that what I was doing was not reciting the poem per se, but PERFORMING it, and my performance would have little in common with how another might read the poem out loud, or indeed how Tony Hoagland would have envisaged the poem being read.

On March 14, 2009 at 11:06 am Michael Martin wrote:

Hmm… intelligent article. I'd read it again and again just for the knowledge alone.
I tend to think of free verse as unconscious meter. Most who use free verse, and then read it aloud to edit, are augmenting their verse to "sound right". I think this syncs with Frost's 'sentence sounds'. Correct me, but I don't think he counted syllables or invested in meter with regards to his 'sentence sounds' theory. Not to say he didn't use meter, though.
Naturally, humans speak with rhythms. The brain is set up to recognize and gravitate towards pattern, which is why readers/listeners tend to enjoy poetry, or think of being as being metrical. And which is also why discordant poetry has its place. When you break that wall of expectation, it's like a bomb going off. And you ever notice how you're brain will pick out similar rhythm patterns in a random string of musical metrics?
I think its possible to unify the left and right brains. I think this is what happens when you write, and then read aloud, then rewrite. Within metrical lines, it becomes more difficult, but that is the challenge. Even within, let's say, a heroic couplet — the words written that fit the metrics exactly may just not sound right when read aloud. This is the magic. There is more to it than one side. We gotta use all our resources, ya know?
In regards to the latter half of the article — I like performers who allow the poem to use them as a conduit — if the poem calls for the passion which shakes the body, and imbues a fired soul (vibrancy), so be it. If the poem only requires small inflections within the voice, and not the extremities of our physical selves, so be it. I just don't personally enjoy monotone voice unless the poem calls for it. And when that is how a poet may read all their poetry, that to me becomes the poet speaking and not the poem —
I mean, you ever notice how sometimes you set out to write a poem a certain way, and it ends up as what you never imagined? The poem leaves you and becomes an entity itself. So, in my opinion, a poem should speak, not the poet. Rather, maybe I should correct myself and say, it should be an amalgamation of poet and poem. And when this happens, you can feel the energy in the room. It need not be a "wave your arms, shout shout shout!' type of reading… its more something you feel.

On March 14, 2009 at 5:37 pm Desmond Swords wrote:

A traveller on the love-bus, fresh and high from reading Kristeva, Perloff and A Wild Salience from Rae Armantrout, told me of a theory which came to them in a dream one day when listening to invisible stars above call them to account and make a map of what becomes of love when roses fade and birds migrate beyond the realm of meaning, subverted, staid and losing faith in the pleasure of abandoning reason.
They said there is a musicality within we are born to hear and perform: pre-programmed in our pineal gland, where resides what Descartes identified as the Seat of the Soul, which melatonin discharges and can be found in Evan Boland's New Collected Poems. Consciousness, the colleague stated, is where a universal metrical template forms, forged by vibrations, karma and emanations which surround us as we gestate within the womb, mirroring the process and progress we all experience prior to our birth as blooms born to wither in a brief flash of eternal light, before being snapped back into the vacuum of pre-existence.
Life, the colleague conveyed as we sat drinking coffee in an annoymous victorian square, much like any other annonymous victorian square, and through which a body of free flowing physical traffic tarried hither and tither in pale weak light of the overcast March evening – acting as a liquid signifier of the human lexicon contextualising what was being said at that moment, several hours since — is spoken of at length in the celestial sonancy our listening for a cosmic voice can wrought. Its first observance is what's occuring in a piece of verse as the pre-verbal tweet

of an idea, afloat on an opaque signifier; alert and unspeaking of what lifts beneath waking the voice within. Beginning in silence.

On March 14, 2009 at 10:53 pm Lucia wrote:

It made me happy to see you mention a book of my old professor Judy Weissman, who died of breast cancer (which she was struck with in her 40 ′ s) a decade ago. I read in Antonio D'amasio's The Music of What Happens that Julian Jayne's theory of the bicameral mind was discrecdited in neuroscientific circles, yet, as a poet, I find the notion of the bicameral mind quite useful, and Judy was committed to it in rhw scholarly work ahe produced in the 80 ′ a..

On March 14, 2009 at 11:03 pm Mary Meriam wrote:

Hi Annie, wonderful essay. I think attentiveness is like listening. I copied this quote from somewhere recently (maybe you!): "Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul." Nicolas Malebranche (17-18th century priest/philosopher)
You say, "Presumably because it sounds fresh and strange, it is starting to come back into free verse, often in jarringly blatant passages of common meters, most often iambic pentameter." This worries me, because it sounds like you're giving IP a bad rap. Are you saying that strict IP is always jarringly blatant and "common"? Sure, I've read jarring and bad lines of IP, but IP can be the most beautiful, soaring meter of all, if it's done skillfully, don't you think?

On March 15, 2009 at 9:56 am Patrick Gillespie wrote:

Annie,
This is a good post – lucidly written.
I tried to follow the link you provided – the news story – but the link dead-ends.
//One of the saddest aspects of this experience for me is that not only my book, but the entire tradition of metrical poetry, as well as much free-verse poetry, is essentially lost to readers who no longer remember that it can be appropriate, safe, and worthwhile to approach an unfamiliar poem with the right brain.//
I have to question your phrase "the entire tradition of metrical poetry". What did that tradition entail? Did readers of prior centuries really *know* how to read metrical poetry – any more than contemporary readers? Though I'm agreement with the gist of the article, I question your underlying assumption, which is that something has been "lost" from the perspective of the reader.
I'm more apt to suspect that literacy has played a large roll in the dominance of free verse. In prior centuries, I wonder how many individuals could actually *read* the poetry they enjoyed? How many Elizabethan playgoers were literate? Probably the minority, if that; and in later centuries, the same. A number of the actors in Shakespeare's company couldn't read. They memorized their lines by having someone else recite them. So, historically, poetry was more of an aural experience. The use of meter and rhyme made the experience recognizable as poetry. It was in *this* respect that meter mattered.
When literacy became the norm, rather than the exception, it was no longer necessary to aurally indicate poetry through meter and rhyme. One could simply look at the page, see the lineation, and know that one was reading a "poem".
Aurally, however, there is frequently ZERO *practical* difference between a free verse poem and a paragraph from any given novel – unless the poet resorts, as you say, to recognizable rhetorical patterns or other "poetic" devices (and to a degree that most free-verse poets are unwilling to adopt).

Ironically, this has given the wider public less and less reason to read poetry and less reason, especially, to *listen* to poetry. If there's little to differentiate it, stylistically, from a short story or a novel, why read it, let alone listen to it? Imagine if RAP went free verse? It would be the death of the art form (as it practically has been for poetry in the latter half of the 20th century – to judge by its popularity and recognition among the general public).
I don't want this to sound like a diatribe against free verse. It's not. I think it's important, though, to recognize that free verse is a very different art form than "traditional" poetry, and the expectations for the two can't be the same – an assertion to which, I'm sure, any number of poets will vehemently object. But the demonstrable and diminished place of the last generation's poetry reduces any objections to little more than denial – either that or another explanation needs to be offered for the near irrelevance of contemporary poetry. I think that most everyone, historically, believed that free verse was, first and foremost, poetry and a continuation of an older tradition. As it turns out. It wasn't (if the response of the general public is to be considered). Much free verse is only poetry in name – sharing little or nothing with the formal poetry of prior centuries. Free verse poets were creating a new genre and art form that has had mixed success. This doesn't mean free verse is an inferior art form. It's not. Walt Whitman demonstrated the greatness inherent in the form – but the richness of his rhetorical patterning all but makes up for the absence of meter or rhyme.
Jeez… maybe I should just make this a post at my own blog?
Anyway, Annie, I'm including your post in a week-end round up. Come take a look at my blog. I think you might like it. I'll be buying one of your books to review. Which do you recommend?

On March 15, 2009 at 10:23 am Patrick Gillespie wrote:

//When John Donne opens a sonnet with "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so," the weight and length of the stressed first syllable of each of these lines, in contrast to the unstressed syllable of the iambic openings of the rest of the lines in the poem, are very specifically determined.//
By the way Annie, I take issue with your reading of Donne's poem. In poem's from this period, if you can read them as Iambic, then you probably should. In the first line, I put the emphasis, a *lot* of emphasis, on the verb *be*. Emphasizing *death* is a 21rst century way to read the poem, but misses the vehemence of Donne's argument. To emphasize "Death' is to imply that Donne is calling the figure out by name. "Hey you! Yeah… You! Death!" The meter wants us to put the emphasis on the verb. The point of the poem is "death's attitude", as it were, not that Donne is addressing Death.
BE not proud, Death.

On March 15, 2009 at 12:37 pm Michael Martin wrote:

@ Patrick
'Imagine if RAP went free verse? It would be the death of the art form'
Huh? Hip hop is just poetry set to beat. Orally communicated verse. There are already lyricists who's entire style is offbeat, such as E-40, for one. I can't really think of the five others that are in my mind, and I'm in the middle of something so I can't go research them out, but there already exists off-meter rhyming. (The Last Poets weren't trying to be on beat, they were grooving to the rhythms). It wouldn't die, I don't think.
'Aurally, however, there is frequently ZERO *practical* difference between a free verse poem and a paragraph from any given novel – unless the poet resorts, as you say, to recognizable rhetorical patterns or other "poetic" devices'

What do you mean? If a poem is a poem, it will naturally resort to “poetic devices”. It’s a poem. When you take into consideration the integrity of the poetic line, a free verse poem carries vast differences between a novelistic paragraph. That paragraph is an entire unit, where separating the lines does more damage to the whole unit, than say, if you were to focus on a particular line of a poem—that line exists in a more concentrated/potent realm than its prose counterpart. When you consider a prose poem, the prose aspect takes forefront, so its poetic devices working within the system of prose. Not prose working in the system of poetry.
‘(and to a degree that most free-verse poets are unwilling to adopt)’
You sure?
‘When literacy became the norm, rather than the exception, it was no longer necessary to aurally indicate poetry through meter and rhyme. One could simply look at the page, see the lineation, and know that one was reading a “poem”.’
I agree.

On March 15, 2009 at 1:03 pm Annie Finch wrote:

Thanks very much to all for the comments which I will meditate on and respond to in greater depth later since it’s family time here today. But a couple quick responses for now:
Lucia, how wonderful that Weissman was your professor. Her book is one of those special books where a topic that seems so central–the idea of the internal heard voice in poetry–seems to have hit a dead spot in the criticism overall and finally someone writes about it; I’ve always been so grateful for it. Re Jaynes, I have heard that some of the left-brain/right-brain dichotomy has since been replaced by other models in neurophysiology (I read a wonderful more recent book called The Right Brain and the Unconscious which argues convincingly, from a psychologist’s pov, that these two are one and the same), but I agree with you that it remains a very creatively suggestive set of ideas from a poet’s point of view!
Mary, I don’t mean at all to imply that strict iambic pentameter is always jarring; thanks for pointing that out–I agree completely that it can be soaring and magnificent–there are iambic pentameter lines, by everyone from Chaucer to Herbert to Marlowe to Keats to Wordsworth to Brooks to Hart Crane, to name just a few, that I would put among the best lines of poetry ever (though as a firm believer in a concept I have called “metrical diversity,” I don’t think at all that the other meters aren’t perfectly capable of attaining the same greatness). All I meant to say was that, when one is hearing free verse and expecting to hear free verse, the intrusion of a line of iambic pentameter is in itself a jarring experience. Personally, when I hear (presumably unintentional and unconscious) lines of meter within a free verse context, I literally feel as if my brain is being physically jarred, perhaps because I am responding by going from left brain mode to right brain mode.
Patrick, thanks for remarking on the link. I have added the actual URL to the news story, above. (guess I haven’t gotten the right method for embedding hot links). Anytime I use the phrase “entire tradition” I should go back and rewrite it, so I will look at that part again–but let me say for now that I think you are quite right that a lot of trouble would be saved by treating free verse as simply a different tradition from metrical verse. Perhaps different musical traditions, say jazz and folk, would be a useful analogy? i will definitely check out your blog.
As for the Donne line, I am of course reading the poem as iambic pentameter. The opening two lines are much more irregular than the rest of the poem. I scan them this way:
(x) DEATH/ be not/ PROUD, THOUGH/some HAVE/called THEE (the line is a headless or acephalous iambic pentameter, meaning it is missing the first unstressed syllable. This is followed by a pyrrhic and a spondee (a well-known configuration, something of a metrical

signature of Shakespeare's). The rest of the line is regular. The stress on "have" is very light stress: I might mark it as a half stress. This is a tricky line, because it has such a strong trochaic lilt that it seems simple to scan it, "DEATH be not/ PROUD though/ SOME have/ CALLED thee. But this would be only four feet, and would not fit into the iambic pentameter pattern of the poem; Donne would never have done that. Instead, the trochaic suggestion remains a strong undertow of falling rhythm that creates a sense of instability and unease at the poem's opening. MIGHTy / and DREAD/ ful FOR/ thou ART/ not SO (trochaic substitution in first foot, otherwise regular)

What I meant was that the WAY that these lines are irregular, and do something other than the expected pattern, is executed very precisely, This precision is possible only because of the metrical structure that is being varied. So there is a very precisely palpable weight to the syllable "DEATH," as to the first syllable of "mighty; I feel thatl Donne had precise control over exactly how a reader hears those syllables.

What you say about the word "be' is fascinating and, as I find is typical of subtle metrical cruxes and conndrums in the work of poets for whom meter is so skilled and expressive that it essentially IS the poet's voice, a prosodic unpacking of this little scanning puzzle spirals into a very complex and revealing reading of the poem and gets to the core of the poem's theme…

So, I agree that "be" is the pivotal syllable of the line both prosodically and thematically. In terms of the prosody, Donne is playing with the reader's expectation that the line is not headless– since there is no way to know it's a headless line until the line is well underway. If the line opened with two regular iambic feett, as it first appears to do, then the meaning would be a straightforward command to death: "Death BE/not PROUD." However, by the third foot, it is becomes clear that it was a headless line–that is the only way it can fit into the iambic pentameter pattern. So, in retrospect, there is no stress on "be." This subtle prosodic trick echoes the thematic trick of the poem, where death which seems so inevitable really cannot "be" at all; where death itself dies.

Y

On March 15, 2009 at 1:42 pm Colin Ward wrote:

Patrick:

"In the first line, I put the emphasis, a *lot* of emphasis, on the verb *be*. Emphasizing *death* is a 21rst century way to read the poem, but misses the vehemence of Donne's argument."

While your argument would be stronger if there were a comma after "Death", I think Annie is saying only that, as the subject of the sentence or invocation, "Death" is accented (which it clearly is in any century). Whether "be" is stressed or not–whether the first foot is a trochaic or spondaic substitution–or which of the first two words is emphasized more seems a separate issue.

-o-

On March 15, 2009 at 3:19 pm Henry Gould wrote:

How does this left brain/right brain – ratiocination/rhythm binary compare with Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility"?

Eliot hypothesized an historic split between feeling & thought, which resulted in a weakening, an affective blunting, of style in poetry…

Ironically, it was Eliot's much-maligned Romantics who found a sort of solution (which Eliot did not acknowledge) to this problem of dissociation. Wordsworth (& many others) asserted that all these alienated sources of feeling were buried in childhood, & could be regained through

memory (folk-memory, childhood-memory…).
I am leery of efforts to apply biology & brain science to literature, myself. When I think of rhythm & meter in poetry, I think not of brain waves, but of children playing hop-skotch. My own first poem (I was 4 yrs old) goes like this -
Play, play, it's time to play!
Play all day, that's what I say!
Your work is done,
Come out in the sun -
Play, play, play!
Now to my mind the rhythm & rhyme of this poem is like many a children's game – it's meant to accompany a sort of dancing around. The rhythm matches the timing of a dance movement. So I would suggest that the TIMING of poetry emerged from physical movement itself, rather than some deep cavity of the left or right brain. Words were TIMED TO MOVEMENT.
But thought also has movement. Argument has movement. Rumination has movement. Ideas have movement. Dreams have plots. It's the complex interaction of physical & intellectual movement which underlies poetry. & I am skeptical of a hard-&-fast division between metrical & non-metrical verse, based on the theoretical idea of a 2-sided brain. (I'm ambidexterous, myself.)

On March 15, 2009 at 5:16 pm Mary Meriam wrote:

Annie, whew! I got the wrong impression from this essay, too, which I read the other day: "…iambic pentameter is so hackneyed and familiar-sounding that, inserted into prosy free verse without strong counterbalancing rhythms, its presence (especially in the final line of a poem, where it is most likely to appear) can add a smug, flaccid, or pedestrian quality to otherwise good free verse." http://www.cprw.com/Misc/finch1.htm
I totally agree with you about the jarring impact of IP in otherwise free verse, but I'm so in love with writing in my dear IP that I feel a bit defensive and don't want her to get a bad reputation. Thanks for singing her praises.
Henry, that's an adorable first poem!

On March 15, 2009 at 5:16 pm Annie Finch wrote:

Henry,
I love the idea of poetic rhythms being timed to movement. That was certainly the case for one of those you mention, Wordsworth, who would write long poems including "Tintern Abbey" while walking, and remember and write them down when he got home.
Hard to imagine this happening with a poem that didn't have a regular rhythm. Maybe rhythm is the missing link between metrical and non-metrical poetry. Usually when people tihink of metrical poetry, they think of accentual-syllabic meter, which is basically what I was discussing in this post. But accentual poetry, like your wonderful childhood poem (!), while not in the more literary accentual-syllabic type of meter, nonetheless has powerful, and regular, movement/rhythm.

On March 15, 2009 at 5:19 pm Rob wrote:

Why do self-proclaimed formalists and metrical poets have such a chip on their shoulder? Why must they always congratulate themselves for their brave trod through indifference? This is the same dreck that Stallings deposited when she blogged–oh!–why does everyone hate us! So, reading Ginsberg aloud would not give the reader pleasure? Reading Simic in a circle of New

Hampshirites wouldn't make their ears ring? And, seriously, this right brain/left brain hippy-dippiness is not true. It's just used to sell terrible self-help books.

On March 15, 2009 at 7:55 pm Annie Finch wrote:

Well, there are different kinds and traditions of free verse (five are delineated in this essay http://www.cprw.com/Misc/finch1.htm.) Ginsberg, like Whitman, is part of the most oral-based; a lot of the "free"ness of effect in this highly rhythmcal type of free verse is, I think, simply a result of its noniambicness. As for a hypothetical Simic reading, absolutely it would make the NH's audience ears ring. That was part of my point about the key role of performance in contemporary poetry.

As discussed in another the comments above, the right-left model remains suggestive, even though it has been replaced by others. Anyone who knows me knows I am an unrepentant hippy . . .

Annie

On March 15, 2009 at 8:21 pm Patrick Gillespie wrote:

'Imagine if RAP went free verse? It would be the death of the art form'

//Huh? Hip hop is just poetry set to beat.//

You're right. It was easy to misconstrue my statement as meaning that RAP would evaporate without meter. That's not true. What I meant was that RAP without sprung rhythm (the meter of the measure as it were) and without Rhyme wouldn't be RAP. RAP is all about sprung rhythm and rhyme – esp. mosaique rhyme. In these two respects, RAP has much more in common with poetry in meter and rhyme than free-verse. This is what I meant.

//but there already exists off-meter rhyming//

True, but this gets a little a blurry. There is always a beat in music (at least in popular music) and even off-meter rhyming depends on that beat. The effect, as before, is usually one of a sprung rhythm.

//What do you mean? If a poem is a poem, it will naturally resort to "poetic devices".//

No it won't. Plenty of free-verse poets deliberately and studiously avoid rhetorical figures of any kind, let alone figurative language, meter, metaphor, simile, rhyme, etc… There are plenty of poets who have, in very precise language, declared all such "poetic devices" off limits.

//a free verse poem carries vast differences between a novelistic paragraph//

Some do, Some don't. Those poems that carry a *vast* difference are the exception, not the rule. Of course, we may not be using the term "vast" in the same sense. Here's what I mean: How many rhetorical figures does one find in a given free verse poem? Since free verse already excludes rhyme and meter, the only differences remaining (in terms of "poetic devices" are rhetorical – in the full Elizabethan sense of the word. Since rhetoric isn't wholly alien to novelistic writing, the differences between a free verse poem and a prose paragraph may not be as extreme as you imagine.

//if you were to focus on a particular line of a poem—that line exists in a more concentrated/potent realm than its prose counterpart//

Yes, I suppose, *if* you did. That's a separate issue though. What I'm referring to is the aural experience of having a paragraph or poem read to the average person. Why not test it? Pick out a paragraph, at random, and a free verse poem at random. Pick an average reader, read them both samples, and see if they can guess which is the poem and which is the paragraph. If they guess correctly, ask them how they know. Usually, it will be because the poem was written in the first person -and that's about it…. I just tried it on my wife (Algebra Teacher).

//the prose aspect takes forefront, so its poetic devices working within the system of prose//
Yes, but that hair splitting will be meaningless to the average listener.
I wrote: '(and to a degree that most free-verse poets are unwilling to adopt)'
//You sure?//
Yes, Some of them have said so – like Rita Dove.

On March 15, 2009 at 9:29 pm Patrick Gillespie wrote:

[I've been having ISP problems. In case this post didn't make it through the first time...]
//(x) DEATH/ be not/ PROUD, THOUGH/some HAVE/called THEE (the line is a headless or acephalous iambic pentameter, meaning it is missing the first unstressed syllable. This is followed by a pyrrhic and a spondee (a well-known configuration, something of a metrical signature of Shakespeare's). The rest of the line is regular. The stress on "have" is very light stress: I might mark it as a half stress. This is a tricky line, because it has such a strong trochaic lilt that it seems simple to scan it, "DEATH be not/ PROUD though/ SOME have/ CALLED thee. But this would be only four feet, and would not fit into the iambic pentameter pattern of the poem; Donne would never have done that. Instead, the trochaic suggestion remains a strong undertow of falling rhythm that creates a sense of instability and unease at the poem's opening.//
Hi Annie,
The mistake you make is in considering *called* a monosyllabic word – which is a frequent error made by 21rst century readers unfamiliar with the metrical habits of the Elizabethans (and later). You'll find, if you read Donne as he was originally published, that the printers (if not the poet) would frequently indicate whether words like these should be elided. For instance, in sonnet XIV the printer (or Donne) writes "usurpt" instead of "usurped". In this case, if Donne had wanted "called" to be elided, he could have written "call'd" or even "calld", as he does in other cases. Without this indication, called is read as callèd. The first line is regular Iambic Pentameter, Death BE/not PROUD/though SOME/have CALL/ed THEE.
There is no precedent, even in Donne's poetry, for any Elizabethan poet having written a line, in a sonnet, as you have scanned it.
I can agree with your scansion of "Mighty"
//What I meant was that the WAY that these lines are irregular, and do something other than the expected pattern, is executed very precisely//
This assertion is only true of one misreads the line. To assert that this pattern is "executed very precisely" is an "enactment fallacy". You ascribe intentions to Donne based on, in this case, an anachronistic reading.
//However, by the third foot, it is becomes clear that it was a headless line–that is the only way it can fit into the iambic pentameter pattern.//
Again, only if you misread the word "called".
//While your argument would be stronger if there were a comma after "Death"//
Not to be a pitbull about this but… I would respond that your argument would be stronger if Donne weren't writing Iambic Pentameter. You can, if you wish (even in correctly pronouncing "called") choose to emphasize "Death". This falls in the domain of reader's license, I suppose, but one should acknowledge that one is doing so in contradiction to the meter.

On March 15, 2009 at 10:03 pm Annie Finch wrote:

Patrick, I have finally gotten back to your post about the oral tradition of poetry. I think you are right about the importance of literacy to the rise of free verse. Paul Lake has a good essay

specifically about the effect of the typewriter on the development of free verse, “The Verse That Print Bred,” in AFTER NEW FORMALISM. I agree that the particular tradition of poetry that is the subject of this post is an oral- and aural- based one. My point was not that readers have lost the ability to respond aurally to poetry–I agree they have not–but simply that the habit of reading “aloud” when confronted with a poem on the page has been lost. It is documented that readers in the middle ages–and perhaps even into the Renaissance–used to actually read aloud under their breaths while reading to themselves. Then people began to read aloud silently inside their heads. Now another stage may have been reached where there is nothing “aloud” even about the silent reading process… I have edited this part of the post a bit since it wasn’t as polished as the rest, and appreciate your pointing it out.

I’m very happy you’ll review a book; the one I would recommend is CALENDARS. And do please post the URL of your blog.

Michael, I know what you mean about the energy of a poem taking its own life. Your distinction between the poet and the poem talking reminds me of some lessons I took recently in a rather arcane tradition of performing poetry taught at Waldorf schools, which involves physically visualizing each word before you speak it. One thing I learned was, when saying the word “I,” to envision another self about halfway between you and the audience and to make the “I” come from that self.

Annie

On March 15, 2009 at 11:08 pm michael robbins wrote:

A bit weird that we’re this far into the comments & no one’s pointed out that this post is based on popular mythology regarding lateral brain function, which is certainly not reducible to generalizations about how we “process” music or poetry with one or the other “side of the brain.” In fact, the division of the brain into two hemispheres has been ridiculously oversimplified in pop psychology, & does not at all lend itself to such judgments. Jaynes was shown up as a quack almost as soon as his book was published; it might be more interesting than Carlos Castenada but has exactly as much scientific credibility.

On March 15, 2009 at 11:12 pm Colin Ward wrote:

Patrick:

I agree that “called” was two syllables and that this is key to the scansion.

> You can, if you wish (even in correctly pronouncing “called”) choose to emphasize “Death”. This falls in the domain of reader’s license, I suppose, but one should acknowledge that one is doing so in contradiction to the meter. Patrick:

I agree that “called” was two syllables and that this is key to the scansion.

> You can, if you wish (even in correctly pronouncing “called”) choose to emphasize “Death”. This falls in the domain of reader’s license, I suppose, but one should acknowledge that one is doing so in contradiction to the meter. <

Death BE/not PROUD/though SOME/have CALL/ed THEE.

DEATH BE/not PROUD/though SOME/have CALL/ed THEE.

I don’t agree that a simple trochaic substitution is “in contradiction to the meter”. Annie’s stress on the subject of the sentence seems natural even if “BE” is emphasized as an imperative.

-o-

On March 16, 2009 at 5:08 am Annie Finch wrote:

Dear Patrick,

Thank you Immensely for pointing this out!! Of course you are right, and you have just increased my prosodic relief and my appreciation for the poem immensely. For Chaucer I would have known it was two syllables, but I hadn't realized this was true of the past tense "ed" into the Elizabethan period. And of course, as you say, the whole rest of my reading of the line goes away with it. I am very grateful to you for clarifying this! I can't think of another line of the period that I would have scanned this way—or been tempted to—which makes me wonder about other lines in Elizabethan literature that use two-syllable words ending in "ed." There must be many of them, in Shakespeare and elsewhere, but I can't recall any. Do you have any examples you could share?
Forevermore in your debt,
Annie

On March 16, 2009 at 6:16 am michael white wrote:

Dear Annie,
there's no one I would rather read on matters like this than you, and much of what you say makes deep, intuitive sense to me. However, I guess if I were to argue, I would have to argue against the dichotomies you seem inclined to bring up: right/left, music/prose, physical/logical, etc. Very little of that works for me, even though in the big picture, I know you are right. The thing is that I don't make these distinctions when I read, I don't have separate modes of processing when I read. I know this, because when I read Woolf, or any other great prose stylist I am aware of feeling musical weight and density in a Wordsworthian way, and this is so much of my love for them. Woolf's sentences are, for me, totally "right brain," as you might say. I would have to reject the right/left brain split as overly simplistic, on the level of male/mars/women/venus type thinking: a type of rigid classification that has little in common with the deep musical resonance of any of these artists. Of course there are readers and writers who for some reason do not participate in the dance as much as others, but for me the right/left split is not the way to begin to understand their difference. Also, just as a personal thing, I would say that although I write lots of poetry in meter–some would say too much–it has never been for me a quality divorced from reason or discursive intent but, on the contrary, an aid to it, a way of figuring thing out, and I think that's more in keeping with the whole Wordsworth/Frost/Heaney etc. legacy.
And I would also argue against arguing over parsing metrical stress, by Milton or Donne or whomever, and just get down with latent variables and tensions in how we hear it, which is part of the appeal, and something about which Frost had some genuinely wise and down-homey things to say.
love,
michael white

On March 16, 2009 at 8:05 am Annie Finch wrote:

Patrick,
In Shakespeare's "Let me not to the marrige of true minds," I believe I usually see an accent mark over
"fixed" showing it should be pronounced with two syllables, and no elision marks over proved and loved in the final couplet. This seems to indicate that the one-syllable pronounciation was standard. Would that accent over "fixed" be a more recent editorial addition, not a mark of Shakespeare's?

On March 16, 2009 at 9:05 am Mary Meriam wrote:

What a fascinating discussion of the line from Donne! Scanning Shakespeare's sonnets, I've definitely found what Patrick said to be true: "In poems from this period, if you can read them as Iambic, then you probably should." Frankly, your scansion, Annie, was rather frightening, all tied up in knots, and I'm so glad you've now got "prosodic relief"!!!!!

On March 16, 2009 at 10:30 am Don Share wrote:

What text(s) are you guys using for the Shakespeare?? Be careful trying to scan "modernized" texts, that is, ones which change the spelling and punctuation to modern practice. And even if you're using non-modernized versions, punctuation and orthography didn't work back then in quite the way it works now. I know you know all this!

On March 16, 2009 at 10:42 am Robin Kemp wrote:

The jarring influence of iambic pentameter creeping into otherwise free-verse poems fascinates me. Over and over, I see it in the first 1-2 lines of a poem. I call this the "curtain rod" phenomenon: the poet apparently wants to say something "poetic," starts off in i.p., then hangs an unmetered poem from that first impulse. Check out almost any literary journal and you'll find at least one such poem.

It's easy (and an unnecessarily cheap shot) to claim in workshop that such poets probably weren't able to sustain the i.p.–what's more relevant is that so many of them do it, seemingly unconsciously, which indicates they have absorbed the i.p. line subconsciously as a means of organizing a poem.

In various workshops I've been a part of, poets who are not up on scansion/forms are astounded when I point out this phenomenon in their work. Surely they have absorbed the i.p. line in the standard high school/undergrad reading list and deploy it because they associate it with "poetry" in general.

Now, what any given poet chooses to do with said information is his or her choice, of course. Some may use the "curtain rod" as a springboard for a form that uses i.p. (a sonnet, for example). For poets who want practice writing in meter, this can be a great bridge–sonnets don't require the poet to sustain the i.p. and endrhymes for very long; many variations are possible; and the rhetorical nature of the sonnet may be a familiar friend. If the sonnet is stillborn even after many revisions, it's a simple matter to go on to another. After writing 30 bad sonnets, a poet might revise two or three worth keeping. It's a good daily exercise–one that Kay Murphy assigned me at UNO, and which resulted in several strong pieces.

Other poets may squeal and recoil at the notion that their poem contains any such dreaded pre-Postmodern artifact. If the meter does not serve the poet's vision, let him or her relineate and revise. There are no rules for poetry–only for individual poems–and if the poet wants to break the "curtain rod" over his or her knee, fine. I just get annoyed by poets who badmouth "form" as if it were inherently evil, the source for every historical incident of extrapoetic fascist wrongdoing, and not simply another tool in the toolbox. Imagine painters going to war periodically over the merits of filbert vs. line brushes. Silly.'

At any rate, having spotted many such "curtain-rod poems" in the wild, I'm convinced that the influence can be duly noted without any accompanying anxiety. I'd love to know whether others have noticed this tendency and what you think about it.

On March 16, 2009 at 12:33 pm Annie Finch wrote:

Michael Robbins, actually, though it may be hard to find among all these comments, the

comment you made has already been made, and addressed, twice before in this thread…
Michael White, my feeling about the dichotomy issue is that while distinctions/ dichotomies can open up space for discussion and conversation, they can become counterproductive when they start to close discussion down instead of opening it up. Hopefully the distinction made in the original post was, at least for a while, of the first variety.
However, we may disagree on this point: while I might agree that there is nothing more boring than “arguing” scansion (since winning is not really the point), to DISCUSS how to scan lines (if this is what you mean by “parsing”) is one of best ways I know to get deeper into the heart of a poem’s rhythmic variables, since it makes one pay much closer and more accurate attention to what is really happening within a poem, and helps different people get to the heart of a shared aural experience through a common language. The Donne discussion is a case in point. I don’t think I’ve ever felt that a sincere and informed discussion of scansion got in the way of the experience of a poem–instead it has invariably opened up, for me, new depths and surprises.
Robin, I love the “curtain rod” metaphor!

On March 16, 2009 at 1:42 pm thomas brady wrote:

Great thread, Annie!
Really good stuff about LISTENING.
Perhaps ‘poetry’ is simply an invention TO GET PEOPLE TO LISTEN.
I would like to point out that using pop psychology left/right brain divisions, FREE verse (and painting) is “RIGHT brain,” while VERSE (and music) is actually “LEFT brain.”
We enjoy verse and music in a sequential, time-oriented manner—which corresponds to “LEFT brain” activity, (the LESS artistic side) even according to the most popular definitions.
But, as people never tire of pointing out, even “free” verse has rhythm, thus making FREE verse “LEFT brain,” as well. What some poor brain makes of a rhythm that is not really rhythmic, I am not prepared to say. This might be called ‘right-right-left-left-left-right brain’ activity.
As people have been warning, if we take left brain/right brain pop psychology too much to heart, we’ll find ourselves indignantly defending art in a completely foolish manner.
Annie, you rock, but your scansion– (//(x) DEATH/ be not/ PROUD, THOUGH/some HAVE/called THEE (the line is a headless or acephalous iambic pentameter)– is a bit too prog rock for me; the Donne is simply iambic with some trochaic substitutions in the first foot of the first two lines (/DEATH be/ & /MIGHT-y/).
The iambic beat is kept intact in the early ambiguous going of the Donne poem by the strong iambic rhythm of the SECOND foot in the first two lines (‘not PROUD’, ‘and DREAD’).
Yes, English is a stressed language, but quantity comes into play also; it takes longer to enunciate ‘death’ and ‘proud’ and ‘dread’ and great versifiers like Donne naturally take this into account.
Patrick G., I do feel “DEATH,” not “BE” gets the emphasis (first, Donne IS addressing Death in his poem, and second, I don’t think a versifier as expert as Donne would struggle uphill by making a word like ‘death’ a short syllable). I agree with everything else you say, and I especially like this, which cuts right to the chase: “Aurally, however, there is frequently ZERO *practical* difference between a free verse poem and a paragraph from any given novel.”
Yes, members of the modernist school (sometimes called the ‘no brain’ school) DID put up the curtain rod; they attempted verse, they failed, and they hoped no one would notice in the din of modernist ‘revolutionary’ pronouncements. In the modernist wake, we have what Annie Finch points out: the common practice of unconscious, partially-realized versification, which tends to be far less annoying than the covered-up failure of so-called ‘revolutionaries.’

Thomas

On March 16, 2009 at 4:06 pm michael robbins wrote:

Indeed, Don, I was about to make the same point.
Thomas, if I'd read yr ridiculous dismissal of the modernists before now, I would've known never to bother responding to anything you say. To suggest that Eliot & Pound, for example, did not succeed in creating verse — to mention only two modernists who knew infinitely more than you about verse & meter — is mind-bogglingly silly.

On March 16, 2009 at 4:14 pm Aaron Fagan wrote:

Ernst Pöppel and Frederick Turner published an essay called "The Neural Lyre: Poetic Meter, the Brain, and Time" in Poetry back in the 1980s that argued we a hardwired for meter which accounts for the popularity of its use. One could argue that the puzzle-maker in us is drawn to richly textured meter and free verse for the fact that, beyond arguments of subject and content, it doesn't easily satisfy what we quite literally already know about how we know as a matter of form.

On March 16, 2009 at 4:22 pm Don Share wrote:

Here's a bootleg link to the essay Aaron mentions, "The Neural Lyre."

On March 16, 2009 at 6:59 pm Robin Kemp wrote:

@Thomas Brady: I love your idea:
Perhaps 'poetry' is simply an invention TO GET PEOPLE TO LISTEN.
Indeed.
Even in the process of composition, one must listen intently–to the lines in one's head; to the lines as they play out on the page. It's like fine-tuning a radio dial through the static of the rest of the world.
Robin

On March 16, 2009 at 7:03 pm Patrick Gillespie wrote:

OK. Wow. There are a lot of comments to respond to.
Annie: //Paul Lake has a good essay specifically about the effect of the typewriter on the development of free verse, "The Verse That Print Bred," in AFTER NEW FORMALISM//
Yes, thankyou for the recommendation. I read the book several years ago, still have it sitting around on my shelf. I should look at it again.
Annie: //It is documented that readers in the middle ages–and perhaps even into the Renaissance–used to actually read aloud under their breaths while reading to themselves. Then people began to read aloud silently inside their heads.//
In fact, I have read that Alexander the Great was the first to "read in his head". If I remember correctly, he read a letter (silently) in front of his troops causing considerable surprise – historians commented on it apparently. I don't remember where I read this. Maybe one of my science journals?
//And do please post the URL of your blog.//
I think if you click on my name below, you will reach my blog. But here it is:
http://poemshape.wordpress.com/
Colin: //I don't agree that a simple trochaic substitution is "in contradiction to the meter". Annie's stress on the subject of the sentence seems natural even if "BE" is emphasized as an imperative…//

Any trochaic foot will contradict an Iambic Pattern.

I'm not making a value judgment. Also, I didn't mean to imply that DEATH should receive *no* stress or minimal stress. I'm going to post an analysis of the poem shortly (tonight). I have scanned it, essentially, as a spondaic foot with BE, nevertheless, receiving the stronger stress – essentially in accordance with what you and Annie have written.

That said, my own philosophy, and perhaps you disagree, is that the best metrical poets should be given the benefit of the doubt. They didn't just *write* meter, they *used* meter. Donne *could* have written, "Be not | proud Death", thus putting the emphasis on Death. In this case, the first foot could be read as trochaic or possibly iambic. Meter is a signpost like time signatures in music.

Annie: //but I hadn't realized this was true of the past tense "ed" into the Elizabethan period.//

Annie, I'm so glad my comments were helpful. As to the pronunciation of -ed, it was in flux during the Elizabethan period. By the eighteenth century, it had become a poetic convention even as it faded from common parlance. That said, you might recognize this poetry:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be callèd Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

If you listen to it (it's from the Messiah), you will notice that when Handel put
"called" to music, he treated it as a two syllable word. So, even a hundred years later, this convention was alive and well. That said, this pronunciation still survives in our day.

"Our Father which art in Heaven, Hallowèd be thy name."

Donne was nothing if not a church man.

Annie: //which makes me wonder about other lines in Elizabethan literature that use two-syllable words ending in "ed." There must be many of them, in Shakespeare and elsewhere, but I can't recall any. Do you have any examples you could share?//

Sonnet 116 ever-fixèd mark
Sonnet 92 assurèd mine
Sonnet 81 entombèd in men's eyes
Sonnet 66 disablèd

Or implied by its absence:

Powre instead of Power
flowre instead of flower
alter'd instead of altered
conquerd instead of conquered
purposd instead of purposed

The reason for showing these latter examples is because it indicates that Shakespeare felt it necessary to indicate, by spelling or eclipsis, that the -ed endings of these words *shouldn't* be pronounced.

Michael: //I would also argue against arguing over parsing metrical stress, by Milton or Donne or whomever, and just get down with latent variables and tensions in how we hear it//

Parsing meter isn't for everybody, Michael.

Some of us enjoy it though. Destiny has assigned that sad fate to me. Understanding meter can sometimes profoundly change the tone and meaning of a poem. Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 is a prime example. Read my post on it if you're curious. But if the thought of me recommending my own post is just too obnoxious, then I recommend Helen Vendler's analysis of the same poem in her overview of Shakespeare's Sonnets. 

Annie: //In Shakespeare's "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," I believe I usually see an

accent mark over “fixed” showing it should be pronounced with two syllables, and no elision marks over proved and loved in the final couplet. This seems to indicate that the one-syllable pronounciation was standard. Would that accent over “fixed” be a more recent editorial addition, not a mark of Shakespeare’s?//

Yes. This is a later editorial mark. If you look at a facsimile edition, you will see that “fixed” is not accented (Vendler’s edition or the Norton Edition). It’s also not elided – which is a signal, in this instance, that it should be pronounced. They didn’t use accent marks. This is all a modern contrivance for the aid of readers unused to reading metrical poetry.

The thing to remember is that, in Shakespeare’s day, Londoners

all spoke the same language in pretty much the same way. For many words, pronunciation was taken for granted. They didn’t feel the need to elide “loved” because no one (if they ever did) pronounced the word as a two syllable word. For other words, because spelling hadn’t been standardized, they commonly used spelling to visually indicate metrical pronunciation – my examples above.

So, when an editor sits down to modernize and standardize Shakespeare’s text, he thinks about several things. How are the words spelled. How are the words pronounced now. How was the word used in other contexts. For example, let’s say we didn’t know whether “loved” was one or two syllables. What we would do is to see how “loved” was pronounced midline in other passages. In Shakespeare, “loved” is *always* a monosyllabic word when used midline. Therefore, we can safely assume that these are not feminine endings and that loved was a one syllable word in common parlance.

What Don Share wrote about modern texts is right on. That’s why I like to read Shakespeare in the original after I’ve read the modernized version.

Thomas: //Patrick G., I do feel “DEATH,” not “BE” gets the emphasis (first, Donne IS addressing Death in his poem, and second, I don’t think a versifier as expert as Donne would struggle uphill by making a word like ‘death’ a short syllable).//

If you personally prefer to emphasize DEATH as an interpretive matter, there’s nothing wrong in that. I disagree; but, in terms of interpretation, there’s probably no wrong or right. I would say that Donne is *not* actually addressing DEATH, but DEATH’S “Pride”. *Be* not *Proud*. But that’s just my interpretation.

As to Donne “struggling uphill”… that may be how *you* perceive it. I don’t. As to Donne, the only indication we have as to **his** intentions are his use of meter. Donne chooses to put the verb BE in the stressed position. He didn’t have to (as with my example above). One can choose to ignore the placement of the word as an interpretive matter, but one can’t ignore the fact that Donne placed it there. (If you know what I mean…)

On March 16, 2009 at 9:04 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Donne is certainly addressing Death in this sonnet, not death’s “pride”. That doesn’t make sense.

It’s a challenge, almost an exclamation. The speaker is calling Death to attention. This argues for “Death” getting the emphasis. But then, if you de-emphasize “be” too much, it starts to sound like a description rather than an address {Death be not proud = Death is not proud]. & this goes against the dramatic logic of someone actually addressing Death in persona so to speak. So I would say, if I have to choose, that “be” gets the greater emphasis. So “Death be” is a very heightened iambic foot. (As in 2 guys in a bar – “George, cut the crap”…)

On March 16, 2009 at 10:00 pm Patrick Gillespie wrote:

//Donne is certainly addressing Death in this sonnet, not death's "pride". That doesn't make sense.//
Yes, you're right Henry. I should have phrased that more carefully. Donne *was* addressing Death. What I was *trying* to say was that though Donne was "addressing" Death, he was *examining* Death's Pride. The verb *BE* addresses DEATH's disposition – his pride. I hope that makes more sense.

On March 16, 2009 at 10:55 pm Patrick Gillespie wrote:

Ha!
I *finally* found a site that gets it right!!!
Here it is:
http://www.listeningarts.com/music/art_song/oxy116/Music/britten___Death__Be_Not_Proud_Bostridge.mp3
Leave it to Benjamin Britten. I'll be adding this to my post which, unfortunately, I'm not going to finish tonight, It's almost midnight.

On March 17, 2009 at 2:57 am Annie Finch wrote:

Now that called is two syllables, I would agree with Patrick and Henry and scan "Death be" as a spondee with a slightly greater stress on the "be." (NB: it must be an address, rather than a description, because Death is addressed as "thee" later in the same sentence.) Some prosodists maintain that a spondee is impossible in English because the second syllable of a two-syllable foot (except presumably in a trochaic poem) always gets the stress through expectation. I think it was the linguist Paul Kiparsky who solved, to my mind, this particular prosodic feud by saying, "it depends on whether you think of a spondee as a foot with two stresses, or a foot with two equal stresses."
Thanks for the Alexander the Greet anecdote. What a crux moment. Someone should write a poem about this.

On March 17, 2009 at 6:48 am glenn morazzini wrote:

Annie there are some big fundamental nistakes in your right-left brain argument.
It takes both hemispheres of the brain to respond to poetry. The right is the locus of the making of images and where the emotional controls are located and is associated with the unconscious.. The left carries the ability to make conscious and is what is considered the rationally cognitive functioning part of the brain. It takes both, either in terms of meter or free. Music harmonizes or integrates both spheres of the brain, it is neither one nor the other. Neuroscientists and reesearcher Allan Schore would be a good reference, if a hard read. Therefore, to say free verse is left brain is false: it is both. To say meter is right is also misleading. It could be argued that meter with its obssesive counting of stresses and syllables is more the rational left brain and has fallen out of favor because of its domination of the right brain's world of emotion and metaphor which is the older part of the brain and a link to a more 'natural' sense of self. I agree the issue is one of music and poetry lapsing into prose-like sounds but I also tired of people misusing information to justify one form or the other. Good poems are written free verse and meter and neuroscience is not about to resurrect the righteous tyranny of any one form.

On March 17, 2009 at 9:33 am James Hoch wrote:

Hi Annie,
Lucia's comment regarding bicameral mind seems in line with current thinking,
but in a way goes back to a fairly old notion that Hume put forward.

The current thinking suggests a modular versus houses approach to understanding brain function. That certaind areas of the brain have distinct functions, but it is in their interchange with other areas that their function comes into being. At once distinct and interdependent, it seems that the Mind is greater than the sum of its parts.
However, the bicameral can be a useful tool. A metaphor in a way to account for a clutch of activitities. In this way, Hume speaks of the Self. The mind can be seen in the same way.
Usually, this type of treatment of the Mind/Self/Soul is considered degrading or reductionist.
But, I don't think so. Even if the mind is all a handy metaphor, the metaphor, the ghost, is to be loved or laughed at like any other dsiturbing invisible force.
May the road rise to meet you.
James

On March 17, 2009 at 10:41 am Annie Finch wrote:

Glenn, nice to see you here! I wrote a long response to your comment, then the phone rang and the wireless jammed and it was lost in the ether before I could post it.
The gist was: thanks for the great Schores reference; most definitely I agree that poems are read with both the emotions and the intellect; i am not quite sure where the idea of tyranny came from; i am glad you agree that there good poems written in meter and in free verse; not only are there many types of meter and many types of free verse, but there are wild and passionate as well as objective and intellectual poems in all those modes. My own experience is that writing meter is more like musical composition than it is like making logical statements (but then my poems don't make a lot of sense sometimes), and that reading meter is similarly more of a physcal than a mental experience. But I'm sure others have different experiences of it and I won't discount yours if you find meter dry and rational.
James, thank you for your many insights. "That certain areas of the brain have distinct functions, but it is in their interchange with other areas that their function comes into being. At once distinct and interdependent, it seems that the Mind is greater than the sum of its parts." I have been reading a very fine book called The Web of Life by Fritjof Capra, which talks about many aspects of the world in similar terms.
I closed by saying that I have learned a lot from this thread, and I want to thank everyone for their passionate engagement with the conversation here. I'll be posting a poem soon on a new thread that achieves what I will now call by the nonscientific term "the zone" and does not do so by any means I can currently figure out. Hope to see some of you there.

On March 17, 2009 at 3:14 pm gmorazzini wrote:

Hey Annie, thanks for your response, however I never wrote, check it, that my experience of meter is "dry and rational". That could apply to free verse or meter if not well-crafted. I admire and enjoy both when done well, such as your poems reflect. The main point was your view of the hemispheres of the brain did not serve your argument well.

On March 17, 2009 at 7:35 pm Henry Gould wrote:

I would be very curious & pleased to know what some of you metrical enthusiasts & experts make of a versification like this…
http://lanthanumblog.blogspot.com/2009/03/19-whatever-it-is-that-sustains-this.html
Thanks in advance -

On March 17, 2009 at 11:34 pm Mary Meriam wrote:

Henry, my feeling is that "…meter must involve measuring or counting something that is

inherent in the language, and must allow the hearer or reader to recognize the pattern."
http://www.arsversificandi.net/backissues/vol1/reviews/mahoney.html
I don't hear a metrical pattern in your poem.
On the other hand, what you said here is very astute: So "Death be" is a very heightened iambic foot. (As in 2 guys in a bar – "George, cut the crap"…)
Sometimes I think esoteric metrical analysis just confuses metrical readers and poets. If you start with the mother of all meters (in English), iambic pentameter, and learn it so well that it's like second nature, then … then…. oh, it's a long story. I wonder if anyone else feels this way – that meter is much simpler than the experts suggest, with their various systems.
The past couple of days, I've been repeating the "Death be" line in my mind – listening to the feelings in it, which are so much more subtle and alive than any metrical system, such as Steele's, can describe. The point is that IP is a meter of infinite variations of feeling and sound. I believe it's best to work UP from the ground, from the IP line, instead of roughly imposing a million substitutions DOWN on a line. Again, an infinite variety of feeling and thought rises out of lines in strict IP, and the Elizabethan poets knew it.

On March 18, 2009 at 7:12 am Patrick Gillespie wrote:

//I would be very curious & pleased to know what some of you metrical enthusiasts & experts make of a versification like this…//
Henry,
I glanced at it this morning but I have to rush to work.
My first impression is that, in places, it feels like there might be an underlying metrical pattern, but that it's never stable enough to be established. The poem has more the feeling of accentual free verse. That's just a first impression though.

On March 18, 2009 at 2:19 pm thomas brady wrote:

Henry,
The verse you linked (lanthanum) features a mixture of pentameter and alexandrine meter (5 beats & 6 beats per line) with a predominantly iambic rhythm–stretched occasionally into anapest. Pretty straightforward, and nicely done.
Thomas

On March 18, 2009 at 2:35 pm thomas brady wrote:

Mary Meriam,
"Sometimes I think esoteric metrical analysis just confuses metrical readers and poets."
Your instinct is quite correct.
It does more than confuse, however.
It often errs.
See Edgar Poe's "The Rationale of Verse" which powerfully addresses your complaint. Poe simplifies the whole issue wonderfully over the course of an in-depth investigation. I really shouldn't be sharing my secret; eventually I'll lose the material advantage I revel in; yet, in the long run, sharing is good…
Thomas

On March 18, 2009 at 4:52 pm thomas brady wrote:

Michael Robbins,
To my assertion that Modernism was guilty of 'curtain-rodding' (Robin Kemp's wonderful phrase) you responded:

“Thomas, if I’d read yr ridiculous dismissal of the modernists before now, I would’ve known never to bother responding to anything you say. To suggest that Eliot & Pound, for example, did not succeed in creating verse — to mention only two modernists who knew infinitely more than you about verse & meter — is mind-bogglingly silly.”

One can ‘curtain rod’ and still ‘create verse.’ Eliot and Pound were hyper-aware of the problem, but why do want to put the issue is such stark, either/or terms?

It is quite obvious to me, and I can cite examples if you wish, that the young Modernists, before they were famous, were, quite naturally, eager to make their names as poets in the Tradition. Remember that Tennyson was still alive when Eliot was born. Using 20/20 hindsight, we assume that modernist ‘masters’ were eager to subvert the Tradition as babes, but common sense should tell us that all of them, Pound, Eliot, Williams, et al. first strove to sound like masters in the Tradition, failed, got caught up in the ‘revolutionary’ fervor of the times, and calmly allowed the world to believe that ‘like a patient etherized upon a table’ was always what the Muse had in mind.

Before you accuse me of heresy–modernist results occasionally had value; I am merely taking a more sober and realistic look at the process involved.

Thomas

On March 18, 2009 at 7:37 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Mary, Patrick, Thomas -

- grateful for your readings. Not being a master of formal versification, I find the comments very helpful & interesting. Thank you.

“Form” has long been a Gordian knot for American poetry (see Emerson on the “meter-making argument”). I’m sure Tom Brady will have something to say to that, out of Poe. Eliot, too, was kind of quirky in that regard.

My own solution (or mistake) has been to grasp with a leech-like grip (by happenstance, mostly) my own prosody. It involves a free-verse ABBA quatrain on a blank verse (iambic pentameter) base, within some other structural elements. & now I’m stuck inside there. It soothes my savage American breast.

On March 18, 2009 at 7:43 pm michael robbins wrote:

Thomas, it’s the inane notion that they started writing differently because they “failed” that I took issue with. You ought to have a look at alternative explanations for aesthetic revolutions. That you believe I think of these matters in terms inherited from religious belief is an indication of the distance between us. I’m simply interested, here & regarding versification, in the historical record.

On March 19, 2009 at 7:34 am Patrick Gillespie wrote:

//- grateful for your readings. Not being a master of formal versification, I find the comments very helpful & interesting. Thank you.//

Hi Henry,

I,m still game to talk more about your poem. My DSL modem failed yesterday due to a firmware glitch. So, I’m setting in a my car, outside the local library, doing E-Mail and checking this and that. Who knows whether I will be connected before the week-end? Rather than make unhelpful and useless comments (now that my connection to the 21rst century just fizzled out) is there anything in particular you were wondering about as concerns your poem? Was there a metrical effect you were wondering about?

Patrick

On March 19, 2009 at 8:24 am Michael Martin wrote:

I wish I hadn't been working on a screenplay so I could have responded to the discussion. Seems some of the stuff we talked about on March 14th/15th are still making moves on the 18th.

I woulda loved to add my two cents to the parts of my position which were being debated.

I will say this: "Since free verse already excludes rhyme and meter [...]"

Patrick sir… never! never I say! :-p

I thought free verse meant verse free of restraints?

Whatever, it doesn't matter. All that matters is I have a headache and must eat food, food, food!

Ahh, the passion of poets and poetry readers.

On March 19, 2009 at 8:54 am thomas brady wrote:

Henry

Should a jury be swayed by the pleasant and sweet personality of someone on trial for murder? What constitutes an "argument?" How are we convinced, and how do we know which arguments are trustworthy? How do we know what we know? How can we trust our feelings and our conclusions?

Poe believed in the dual soul, the layered soul, or, if you will, the dual argument, or the layered argument.

To put it simply, Emerson says a poem is a 'meter-making argument,' and Poe's simple response is that 'my poems don't argue; I leave that to my prose.'

Poems can 'argue,' and argue more effectively when they do NOT argue the way prose argues, and this is the whole key to the division, if we are to take that division at all seriously. I think Poe took the division seriously; Emerson, and his protégé Whitman did not, and from Emerson/Whitman springs the modern poetic temperament, with all its confusions and failings; here is the whole matter in a nutshell: the division between poetry and prose, not Emerson's facile insistence that a poem is a 'meter-making argument.'

Emerson, as people may or may not know, wrote 'The Poet' as a rebuke of Poe, though Emerson does not mention Poe, or anyone by name, in that article, since Emerson, unlike Poe, was not a journalist; Emerson traveled in his own thoughts, not in debates with other real beings. In 'The Poet,' Poe is on trial–as a thought in Emerson's mind, not as the actual Poe in the actual world. When a superior mind becomes heated, it will contain a great many points of view within itself, and entertain the fancy that it is a master of both prose and poetry at once; but such a thing is impossible, and is simply the product of an overheated brain.

Thomas

On March 19, 2009 at 9:45 am thomas brady wrote:

Michael,

It is not a radical notion to assert that failure stimulates invention; the failure to get from New York to London quickly by boat is why we fly there; impatience with the old drives formation of the new, and what is impatience but a visceral feeling of being impeded, a visceral experience of failure?

I suppose your objection is: if Eliot and Pound are flying to London, how is that not a triumph, rather than a failure?

The error here is the assumption that the verse of Eliot and Pound is 'flying,' that it improved the

Tradition materially. It did not. Eliot and Pound are noteworthy not as points of progress, but as pieces of wreckage.

It is a truism to say that the failure to preserve Tradition as a living organism haunted Eliot, as both foot-noting museum curator and poet. A museum keeps Tradition alive, but an artist comprises that very Tradition in himself, and once the poet becomes museum curator, a certain something is lost, and Eliot the poet's melancholy tone vibrates precisely with that loss. Eliot's failure was his success, and his success was his failure.

Impatience with lengthy epics in iambic pentameter can bear many types of fruit; 'The Waste Land' succeeds because it is manages to be an epic marked by brevity—a colossal material advantage.

Impatience reacts to error, but can lead to error, which can lead to a broader impatience among the public, which is always the final filter of triumph or failure. If 'the new' is driven by a ferocious impatience with 'the old,' the ferocity belonging to the poet may not belong to the more passive public, and eventually the public may become victims of that ferocity which represents a whole host of virtues: insight, a desire for progress and truth, ingenuity, and so forth, and so change becomes a fait accompli, not based on what the public needs, but on what the poet sees; unfortunately, these often do not coincide.

Thomas

On March 19, 2009 at 4:17 pm Patrick Gillespie wrote:

Well Annie, I ordered your book, Calendars – hardcover edition.

I look forward to it and any poets you might recommend who play in meter and rhyme. Also, I posted my analysis of Donne's Death Be Not Proud…

http://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/03/18/john-donne-the-meter-of-death-be-not-proud/

Look at it if you're curious…

Micheal writes: //I thought free verse meant verse free of restraints?//

"O, Jesus!" he said, fighting, with every fiber of his being, the urge to walk through that open door.

Regaining composure…

I guess it depends on which Free Verse poets you ask. Some free verse poets will say that free verse, by definition, excludes those things. Others are less partisan & ideological about it, Some of the best modernist poems, to me, are a mix of the two forms. Some of the modernist were, or became, ambivalent toward free verse. To judge by their poetry, that was a good thing,

On March 19, 2009 at 6:06 pm michael robbins wrote:

No, free verse has never meant verse free of (I think you mean) constraints. Whatever do folks read these days? An acquaintance with poetics used to be fairly regarded as necessary to the practice of poetry! The most cursory examination of the subject reveals: first of all, "vers libre" does not signify one thing. Whitman's free lines are different from those of La Fontaine. Hölderlin's free verse is nothing like Smart's. Etc. What unites them all is what the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics nicely calls "the lack of a structuring grid based on counting of linguistic units &/or position of linguistic features." Hence f.v.'s reliance on, for instance, grammatical breaks, lack of regular endrhyme (which is not to say that free verse can't rhyme! see Plath). I don't know what verse free of all constraints would look like anyway, do you? Constraint one: it must use words. No, you say, what about P. Inman? Well, it must use graphemes! And so on. But leaving aside extreme instances of avant-garde puritanism, obviously free verse is subject to any number of constraints (syntax, equivalence), & often relies

on some base measure in order to establish a less strict regularity but a kind of regularity nevertheless. Williams & Plath, Whitman & Ashbery, all retain rhythm in their lines. The rhythm is simply not strictly regular.

On March 19, 2009 at 7:06 pm jane wrote:

Thomas writes: “It is not a radical notion to assert that failure stimulates invention; the failure to get from New York to London quickly by boat is why we fly there…”
Well that’s not true at all. There are a complex of reasons “why we fly there,” but two quite substantial ones are the development of the technology of flight so as to conduct military affairs early in the century, and the increasing spatial dimension of the international market as it shifted centers from a naval empire adjacent to the European industrial core to a continental empire at considerable distance.
This incapacity to think historically is ascendant around here, but it doesn’t have to be. Changes in transport aren’t events on a timeline of transportation technologies, staying or swerving from the course of tradition. They are driven quite as much or more by changes in broader conditions. Similarly poetry: Thomas’s idea that if folks only *could* reproduce the tradition capably, the art would more or less continue on an unswerving course, is a conception alien to historical process. Poetry develops language adequate to its situation (which changes at the speed of the world), or it doesn’t — the *latter* is the moment of failure, not the former.

On March 19, 2009 at 7:28 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Hi Patrrick – hope you’re back again with us, here in the 23rd century -
As far as my public question about the poem Lanthanum -
I was just curious to learn, from people who are far more attuned to metrical form than I am, what you would make of this sort of hybrid style. I guess for a purist it’s simply non-metrical. But it seems to me a prosody doesn’t necessarily HAVE to scan with perfect consistency, in order to work. Maybe I’m wrong.
I write this with a pattern, but I bend it extremely. There is an underlying iambic pentameter, yet it’s very loose. There is rhyme & stanza, but they are not strictly maintained. & I’m doing this in part because style & subject-matter are scaled to the whole poem – which in this case will (if finished) will amount to 288 poem-sections. It’s extended, repetitive – beyond the frame of the individual section. I mean, the poem has a momentum which includes irregularities, I guess.
I’m not really asking people to tell me whether they think this is working or workable (that would only confuse & upset me!). I’m just curious to see 1) what specialists in metrics make of the particular metrics of this poem (& you’ve already offered some great answers to that), and 2) to see what people think of informal formalism, or a style which doesn’t quite fit either the free or the formal camps.
Best,

On March 19, 2009 at 11:13 pm john wrote:

Poets don’t need to “develop” language at the “speed of the world” (a nice image); and if they did, few would remain relevant after their first few books, for few poets “develop” in every book. W. H. Davies remained a terrific poet, even if old-fashioned. And! His writing got him out of the impoverished class into the lower middle class. But then, despite my objection to the necessity of “development,” I’m pretty sure that Davies coined the word “supertramp” (probably as a parody of the then-contemporary, since-discredited, translation of Nietzsche’s coinage “Ubermann”), which, of course, later became the name of a best-selling popular music group.

On March 20, 2009 at 12:17 am jane wrote:

John, what the individual poet does is…well, that may be the unit of measure you prefer, which is neither here nor there. I didn't say anything about the individual. Anyone can be an antiquarian and it's no crime. And you are of course free to find it "terrific" as you see fit; no arguing with taste.

And yet *poetry* as a collective social activity located in places and times does change as places and times change, hence your very ability to use the concept "old-fashioned." Styles appear within actual conditions, and not all of them thrive or survive — but the ones that do, do so in general because they are able to engage with the particulars of place and time. And when those particulars are gone to rust, we call that way of writing old-fashioned. You've really just made my point.

On March 20, 2009 at 7:02 am Patrick Gillespie wrote:

Henry,

Great question. And if I had a #$%&% connection, I would answer. But… maybe tonight or this week-end.

Patrick

On March 20, 2009 at 12:32 pm john wrote:

Yes, Jane, styles do indeed change. But rust and failure — your words — do not necessarily accompany a decision not to change with the world or keep up with fashion; nor does style equate with worldly engagement in any sense outside of the art historical, which is of severely limited scope in any practical or ethical or political or historical sense.

It's a cold aesthetic that restricts its applause to the Darwinian victors.

On March 20, 2009 at 1:03 pm michael robbins wrote:

John, yr ahistorical view of poetry confuses Joshua's point: the "decision" you speak of is not a decision. When the world changes, we change with it, are changed by it: a world that we are capable of "deciding" to withdraw from is not a "world" in any meaningful sense. Of course one may "decide" to affect resistance to this change, which can be manifest as a consciously "old-fashioned" style. But the very fact that you can call it "old-fashioned" (this is Joshua's point) indicates that you too have changed with the world. Social determination is very taboo around here (I hardly need to point out the ironies), & of course no one — not Marx, not Althusser, not Bourdieu — is claiming that there is a simplistic relationship between aesthetic change & larger social determinants. But there is a direct, complex relationship, which is why it doesn't make sense to ask why Language poetry didn't crop up during the Renaissance.

On March 20, 2009 at 1:45 pm john wrote:

Michael, I was objecting to Joshua's insulting of old-fashioned styles ("failure"; later, "rust"), and pointing out that by his standard, few poets (do any?) keep up with their times, as defined by style, over the course of a life. Who said anything about "withdrawal"? My point is: dedicatedly following fashion — or even attempting to lead it — often accompanies disengagement from the larger world outside of the profession of one's art. The modernist quest is interesting and stimulating, but it's not the only way; measuring aesthetic efficacy by its conformity to contemporary style is really old-fashioned now, but, like I said, nothing wrong with being old-fashioned.

On March 20, 2009 at 2:25 pm john wrote:

Well, I made a mistake, but, in light of being accused of being a-historical, a funny one — because I made a historical error, which our self-appointed historians failed to catch.
W. H. Davies wasn't old-fashioned when he emerged: He fit right into the Georgian style that got named a few years after his first books came out. The Georgian style, our historians will recall, represented an attempt by poets (or, if you prefer, by poetry) to re-engage with the world in a simpler, more direct style after the florid manners of Swinburne and the aesthetes. Davies's contemporaries recognized his up-to-date-ness. Bernard Shaw wrote the preface to his memoir, "The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp" (Davies had lost a leg when hopping a train); and the astute modernist critic (and terrific poet) Edward Thomas praised Davies's poetry. Of course, the Georgian style was superseded by other modernisms almost before it emerged itself, but it was engaged and popular for a while, and as Davies kept writing in the style for years after Georgianism ceased being a "force," his style did become old-fashioned.

On March 20, 2009 at 3:07 pm thomas brady wrote:

Jane,
You jumped inside my metaphor and flew away. Come back!
Are you saying Eliot was wrong when he said our ancestors ARE what we know?
One can be for progress, and still be entirely sensible about it, can't one?
All change is not good, is it?
Thomas

On March 20, 2009 at 3:21 pm michael robbins wrote:

Eliot's comment is hardly incompatible with Joshua's sensible remarks, although I certainly don't believe that Eliot understood all the ways in which his words are both right & wrong. We don't have unmediated access to "our ancestors," & transmission & reception, not to speak of more conventionally conceived economic markers, certainly affect "what we know." More important, the issue is hardly whether change is "good." Standing on the history train yelling "stop" will just make you hoarse. Trying to wrench the controls away is more helpful, but very difficult.

On March 20, 2009 at 3:39 pm thomas brady wrote:

Michael,
No one can stop the 'history train;' but no one can make said train go down the track faster simply by glibly invoking change and progress, either. Arguing for the past is always more nuanced and complex than arguing against it. The superficial tend to be those who WANT the train to go really, really fast, and dullards tend to be those who think it IS.
Thomas

On March 20, 2009 at 3:52 pm michael robbins wrote:

If anyone here has GLIBLY invoked change & progress I've missed it.

On March 20, 2009 at 9:05 pm jane wrote:

John, it will continue to be the case that no single example will speak to the question of whether what turn out to be the dominant (in Raymond Williams' sense) modes of writing in a period are responsive to the human situation of that period, rather than being reducible to a moment on a timeline of aesthetic choices that proceeds largely independent of historical change. And I get that you don't want to think this, or can't.
But I'm curious: do you think that Valery, Moretti, Shaw himself, Benjamin, Kristeva, Williams, Hugh Kenner, Jameson, Virginia Woolf, De Man, Baudelaire, Charles Olson, Rimbaud, Adorno,

Kristin Ross, Susan Stewart, Chris Nealon and Mutlu Konuk Blasing (to pick a tiny fraction) are just wrong about this?

On March 21, 2009 at 12:58 am Annie Finch wrote:

Patrick, I'm so glad you ordered CALENDARS. You of all people might appreciate the downloadable readers guide that comes with it, since it includes scansions of many of the poems. I will think of other poets to recommend.

Jane, your post is so compressed that I am still trying to get my head around some of your ideas re art and history. I hope you will return and develop them at greater length.

Henry, your poem is mostly iambic pentameter with some anapestic variation. The first six lines, for example, are nicely done in iambic pentameter, with mostly basic anapestic substitutions; line seven is not ip since it has adds an extra stress with "thanks.". If you wanted to make the poem regular iambic pentameter it would be quite easy. It loses the meter more near the end. I've marked the lines below and occasionally noted one of the more unusual substitutions, for example the four-syllable foot with a stress on last syllable (called a fourth paean) which you use a couple of times, first in your second line: "er into NAR"

Whatever it is that sustains this constant stream ip (anapests in 2nd and 3rd feet)
of Blackstone River into Narragansett Bay, ip,(fourth paean in third foot, "er into NAR")
it must be near, and hidden, and silver-grey, ip (anapest in 4th ft)
muttered Hobo to himself. Some dove-trireme, ip (anapest in 1st ft)
some Argo-baton, with whirring, rowing wings. ip (anapest in 2nd ft)
And the river flowed between steep limestone banks ip (anapest in 1st ft)
golden by day and ghostly-gray by night (thanks (would be ip with trochee in 2nd ft, but there's an extra stressed syllable "thanks" at end of line)
to triangulating light-rays, sped through rings ip (anapest in 1st ft) (this line very reminiscnent of Hart Crane!)
of floating cloud-armadas); rippled around ip (anapest in 5th ft)
the spiny ridge of Providence, below ip (perfectly regular)
that six-sided, gold-acorned, yet sweetly- 5-beat accentual (not iambic)
modest Temple Emanu-el (trombone profound) (maybe a headless ip–but maybe too long for an ip)
lit to bright chrome by every morning ray. ip (trochee in first ft, spondee in 2nd ft)
Must be a kind of invisible milk, a Milky Way, (ip with a four-syllable foot (fourth paean) in first foot)
the old collapsed Franciscan murmured; say, ip (regular)
God's breast – we're nursing it secretly all day ip (spondee in 1st ft, anapest in 3rd ft)
(White Russians, maybe)… so he hobbled a-hum ip (anapest in 5th ft)
down hardscrabble streets, by the piloting palm (not ip–anapestic tetrameter–needs another stress to be ip)
From now on it loses the ip beat more often–
of rugged Roger, at his fo'c'sle. In the sky-realm hexameter, mostly iambic
overhead, angelic Maximus, of old Byzantium, hexameter
aboard an emerald Argo, gazed upon Hobo hexameter
like an icon carved in silver-blue mosaic – ip
with beams of kindliness. For this one's sake ip
the King of kings indeed made himself Hobo hexameter (because you can't pronounce himself as HIMself; if you could it would be ip with an extra-syllable ending)

of hobos, he declared. And Hobo, glancing up iambic hexameter
saw two rose-emerald islands, almond-shaped, ip (regular)
meld in one catamaran : each held the other ip (with extra-syllable ending)
cupped in clouds, swaying – like a gyroscope… ip (trochee in first ft)

On March 21, 2009 at 1:34 am john wrote:

Jane, I get that you just want to sling insults and not have anybody object. And I get that you don't want to admit this, or can't.

Any aesthetic choice or event reflects its historical moment. John Berger objected to Abstract Expressionism; and it is true that the U.S. government, or agents acting in its interest, deployed Abstract Expressionism in its propaganda war against the Soviet Union: The American ideals of advancement, progress, and individualism shine through those canvasses. I do know that my love for Pollock and Kline doesn't obviate my love for John Berger (whose essay against Pollock, alas, I neither have at hand nor remember well).

One aspect of our human situation is that we have these well-funded institutions — like universities — that spread wealth to aesthetic workers that they deem to be aesthetically successful, and one of the criteria of success is how something fits on the procession of styles. Poets like the LANGUAGE-ers are extremely conscious of their place in the history of the art of poetry — this consciousness reflects our historical moment.

Furthermore, the weakness of the urge to manifesto, for which some people have criticized the FLARF-ers, also reflects our historical moment. The LANGUAGE-ers may have been the end of the Manifesto-ist line of our western modernism, precisely because they emerged at the beginning of the decline of the west's economic dominance. Manifesto-ism has usually been politically oppositional, but in its very manifesto-ist insistence, it has reflected imperial values and worldview.

Aesthetic history is endlessly fascinating. A lot of the dominant (in the sense of "most influential") poets of the early 20th century failed spectacularly in their engagement with their times and situations. Pound comes to mind — hugely influential, but horrific politics that often spilled into terrible poetry. I can honor his influence, and understand, and still prefer the poetry of W. H. Davies, whom few people read now, and whose influence, if it existed at all, didn't dominate.

As you say, we are all free to prefer whatever poetry we prefer. Aesthetic experience is individual. Art history is interesting, and it has a complex relationship with the experience of an individual aesthetic work/event, but, for me anyway, it's not primary.

To answer your question, I haven't read Raymond Williams, so I'm not sure what his sense of "dominant" is.

p.s. I'm reading a history of music criticism right now, written by a Viennese musician who was also in Freud's circle. The first war of a critic against a musician was that of . . . someone who's name is escaping me and whom nobody would know anyway — against Bach, because Bach was old-fashioned! And it's true — Bach was. Glenn Gould says so himself; Bach was the end of his line, and out-of-date long before he died; furthermore, his composing had next to no impact on his contemporaries, his own (more worldly successful) sons called him "the old periwig" behind his back, and he didn't pursue publication. Mozart studied him privately and brought counterpoint back to music; Mendelssohn sparked his public reputation 70 years after his death. An even more interesting case is Vivaldi, whom Bach respected a great deal, and whose music wasn't heard after his death until Ezra Pound and Olga Rudge revived it — but of course you know this, because you've read Kenner.

On March 21, 2009 at 9:42 am john wrote:

p.p.s. Jane, your opening remark, that “Poetry develops language adequate to its situation,” gets my attention — in a good and bad way. Poetry always develops a language adequate to “its” situation; whether it’s adequate to “our” situation is the much more interesting question, and I’m curious to imagine what such a language could be. (I also like the image of poetry “writing” itself; the element of idealistic religious faith there is sweet, silly, endearing, if politically/ethically destructive. Human decision is all we have to go on — or, if “decision” feels too willful, call it what what O’Hara called it — “nerve.” If we really are socially determined through and through, the statement, “This incapacity to think historically is ascendant around here, but it doesn’t have to be,” is false on its face. If we’re socially determined, if human decision has no efficacy, the incapacity to think historically has to be ascendant around here. But it doesn’t have to be — because humans have choice.)

On March 21, 2009 at 10:56 am jane wrote:

John, I deeply have no interest in insulting you. I like you. I do admit I’m perplexed by your response, which goes rather far out if its way to avoid answering my rather straightforward question — and continues to use individual cases to address non-individual matters. Moreover, it’s not obvious what it means to say Art History isn’t “primary” to you; Early Modern European History isn’t primary to me, but that has little to do with the fact that the United Provinces dominated the economic and political scene on the continent and beyond in the Seventeenth century. What’s odd is that the “Golden Age of Dutch Painting” happened just then. I’m not sure how this relationship would be affected by one’s personal feelings about Art History. I’m also not sure what the cognitive yield of excluding this knowledge from further thought would be.
Anyhow, if your position is that yes, poetry (not some individual poet but the *poetry* of a place and time) changes in large part so as to be adequate to changed history and you *don’t care,* groovy, our mini-debate is over. If you think this is not the case, then I merely re-ask my question above, and hope to learn from your answer.
ps: I honestly think, without a dram of snark, that you would like the Williams: it’s just a brief chapter called “Structures of Feeling.”

On March 21, 2009 at 4:33 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Fascinating, Annie. I suppose a real composer would know these things, but I’m just a guitar-player. Thanks for taking the time to do that.

On March 21, 2009 at 7:37 pm john wrote:

Jane, just for the record, I didn’t feel personally insulted; as I tried to say, I was objecting to “failed” and “rust” as rhetorically heavy-handed (or “insulting”) ways to name old-fashioned styles.
To attempt to clarify: We aren’t that far apart here, I don’t think. The word “adequate” implies a social-Darwinian adaptation of poetry to circumstances; I don’t think it’s that clear-cut, but Yes, I agree that times change, and art changes too, parallel with the times in fascinating ways. Knowledge that the Golden Age of Dutch Painting coincided with the ascendancy of that nation’s economic/political power is interesting; I have no interest in excluding this knowledge from further thought or investigation (for example, the geopolitical implications/echoes of the maps in Vermeer’s paintings); but neither the history of the objects in Vermeer’s interiors, nor the relationships between Rembrandt’s use of light and darkness to Caravaggio’s, are of primary concern in my experience of the paintings; maybe because I didn’t know any of that

stuff when I first looked at (reproductions of) the pictures. I'm describing my own experience here, not prescribing anything, not advocating — not at all! — the shutting down of contextual knowledge in the experiencing of an art work/event.
I'll look for R. Williams — thanks.

On March 21, 2009 at 8:19 pm john wrote:

To try to answer more clearly: Yes, the poetry of a time and place changes in large part so as to be adequate to changed history or circumstances; and it's not that I don't care, it's just that, I don't always think that the dominant poetry of a particular time is the best poetry of its time; nor do I always think that the most adequately responsive poetry to a particular time is the best poetry of its time; nor does it seem that the most adequately responsive poetry of a time is necessarily the dominant poetry, unless adequacy means primarily social/professional adequacy for that particular time.
To talk poetry and not individual poets: Slam poetry was the most adequately responsive poetry in the '80s and '90s, but I'm not at all sure that it was the dominant poetry, nor that it will be seen to be; nor was it personally my favorite poetry of the time. (I'm fascinated by Slam's anti-intellectualism, wonder whether it has precedent and find it to be much more avant-garde in historical terms than any other contemporary poetry; and the selection of judges by random lottery is beautifully pop-Dada.)

On March 23, 2009 at 3:51 pm thomas brady wrote:

But to note that no progress has been made is a positive assertion and it actually takes more knowledge of history to assert that the times are NOT different than to assert that they are, for those eager to assert what is new can do so in perfect ignorance, while those who champion the old must know the old that is merely being copied—and is not new at all. I suspect the indignant defense of progress here might owe in some measure to the playing out in a defensive posture of what I have described above.

On March 23, 2009 at 6:26 pm john wrote:

Change is not equal to progress.

On March 23, 2009 at 9:12 pm john wrote:

Example of non-progress: The influence of Descartes on 17th century English poetry. Everybody agrees that Abraham Cowley and his cohorts were responding to changing times, and that their poetry wasn't like that of the Elizabethans and Jacobeans, but I don't know of any readers who prefer the later poetry.
(If anybody prefers the late Metaphysicals — or Milton, for that matter — to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, that's great! Minority opinions can be valuable; enthusiasm can teach everybody else.)

On March 24, 2009 at 11:39 am jane wrote:

John, who here *did* say that change was progress? Or perhaps more relevantly, who said that progress was an inherent and absolute good? I'm not sure anyone thinks that the world gained from moving from the arquebus to the rifle.
That said, your analytic is a curious one, regarding poetry. It essentially makes the following claim: generation n+1 was not as good as generation n, and they were "responding to changing times," so change isn't progress. But "progress" is not a term that has any meaning in the arts: the *world* progresses, for better or worse, and the arts change in relation to this, or they don't.

Rivers become freeways, arquebuses become Remingtons, the equity share becomes the mezzanine tranche; poetry moves in step with reality, or it doesn't.

So to imagine that a later poet not being as good as Shakespeare is a fact about progress in poetry is sort of nonsensical. The best we could say is that Shakespeare did a better job of moving in step with his reality than did Cowley or Taylor or Milton (!). But by the same token, had Shakespeare written his sonnets in 1959, we should not have had a hard time believing William Carlos Williams a better poet, and Shakespeare an academician preserving an antiquated style that he handled well (or perhaps a Kenny G, up to something). Someone would have written a funny scholarly essay about the allegory of the dark lady in a time of "Howl," trying to justify Shakepeare's comical belatedness.

To use a crude but suggestive analogy: the plague arises, and perhaps the doctors find a cure or preventative or a hygiene regime. Good doctors. A generation later, dysentery sweeps the land. If the doctors at that moment yield forth a cure for chicken pox, we do not think they are good doctors — not because a cure for chicken pox is good or bad, but because it wasn't adequate to its moment. There is no rule that change or invention is intrinsically good, nor that it is part of progress, nor that progress is good. And we might certainly prefer the plague doctors to these failed dysentery doctors.

However, if the doctors in this new situation simply continue to treat for the plague, and think they can address dysentery by burning the rats and ignoring the water supply, well, the case for "the tradition" or even the greatness of the plague doctors starts to look pretty limited. *That greatness is an artifact of its relation to a given situation, not an intrinsic value.* That's how we measure doctors.

More lives are saved by garbage collectors than doctors. Their methods have changed too.

On March 24, 2009 at 1:07 pm john wrote:

Jane, I was responding to Thomas, not to you, with that comment. Thomas seemed to think that you or I were saying that change is progress; I didn't think you were. Nor am I saying that change in poetry is bad. The late metaphysical style (of which Milton is not an exemplar) is an *example* of poetry responding to changing times and becoming less effective or powerful as earlier poetry. Plenty of examples of new styles wielding more aesthetic power than previous ones: people generally agree (and me too) that the Romantics were more powerful and comprehensive writers than the 18th century "poets of sensibility"; the Elizabethans more powerful and comprehensive than the early 16th century poets.

On March 25, 2009 at 9:10 am Annie Finch wrote:

But the Romantics "changed" into the Victorians too . . . seems like it is simply a matter of where you start and stop the clock.

People generally agree (and me too) that the Romantics were more powerful and comprehensive writers than the 18th century "poets of sensibility"; the Elizabethans more powerful and comprehensive than the early 16th century poets.

On March 25, 2009 at 11:50 am thomas brady wrote:

Jane,

You are guilty of being definite where you should be indefinite and indefinite where you should be definite.

A doctor who is good at cause and effect will be a good doctor in any age. One that is not, not.

You assume that William Carlos Williams is a definite rival to 'a Shakespeare writing in 1959,'

which is a definite example in your mind; this is a definite speculation on your part which produces a definite result: Williams in 1959 is, in your example, “a better poet” than Shakespeare in 1959.
Really? But you said it was silly to measure “progress” in time or poetry. So you cannot say—even in your supposition—that Williams is “better” than Shakespeare.
If there is “no progress,” than Shakespeare writing in 1959 is no better than Shakespeare writing in 1602 and William Carlos Williams writing in 1850 is no better than William Carlos Williams writing in 1900.
When you leave out intrinsic worth, and champion change as an absolute (which you assume is easy to detect, since you know Williams 1959 is “better” than Shakespeare 1959) …well, do you see what happens?
Thomas

On March 25, 2009 at 7:15 pm john wrote:

“Romantics” generally meant the early guys, I thought; it’s how I meant it, anyway.
Victorians, of course, have their own name, and not as terrific a general reputation, though I love a lot of their stuff too.

On March 25, 2009 at 7:33 pm michael robbins wrote:

Thomas, yr comments don’t even skim off the surface of Joshua’s argument. It is self-evident that Shakespeare in 1959 would not be Shakespeare & that a poem has no “intrinsic” worth, as if a poem written by the last person in the universe seconds before he expired could be said to have some intrinsic property that makes it valuable even though no one will ever read it. It’s also self-evident that valuation is different from progress. They’re different things, Thomas. Williams is a better poet in 1959 than Shakespeare would be in 1959, since Shakespeare in 1959 would be writing unintentional parodies of Elizabethan verse that no one would find any “intrinsic worth” in (lucky it’s intrinsic!). Shakespeare in 1600 happens to be a better poet than Williams in 1959–or, rather, a different poet. As Don reminds us, T. S. Eliot said that “”It’s no more use trying to be traditional than it is trying to be original. Nobody invents very much, but there is one thing to be said for contemporary poetry that can’t be said in favour of any other, and that is that it is written by our contemporaries.” Apparently there are poets contributing to this thread who don’t believe that contemporaries have to be contemporary! But you & John are talking about individual responses to poetry, which is not what the historicist impulse is interested in. If you don’t care about how & why aesthetic activity develops, fine, but let’s not pretend that the poet is mystically able to remove himself from his sociohistorical context.

On March 26, 2009 at 3:15 am john wrote:

Michael,
Joshua, with his rhetorically charged words like “failure” and “rust,” was expressing his individual response to poetry as well. His individual response is what inspired me to talk about mine on this thread.
Just to set the historical record straight!

On March 26, 2009 at 10:58 am thomas brady wrote:

Michael,
Joshua? Do you mean Jane?
Better? Apt? Appropriate? Fitting? Parody? It’s all the same. You are implying judgment, and thus, better/worse, and thus progress and intrinsic worth all the way down the line.

Memo for you: Williams is a parody of Shakespeare. Shakespeare parodying himself would be better than Williams.
You and Jane are stuck in a paradox from which you cannot escape when you attempt to say Williams in 1959 is better than Shakespeare in 1959.
Sorry.
Thomas

On March 26, 2009 at 11:59 am thomas brady wrote:

Wit climbs through the years better than Time can.
Here's why we read poetry.
Here's why Shakespeare is better than Williams.
If thou survive my well-contented day,
When that churl Death my bones with dust shall cover,
And shalt by fortune once more re-survey
These poor rude lines of thy deceased lover,
Compare them with the bettering of the time,
And though they be outstripp'd by every pen,
Reserve them for my love, not for their rhyme,
Exceeded by the height of happier men.
O then vouchsafe me but this loving thought:
"Had my friend's Muse grown with this growing age
A dearer birth than this his love had brought,
To march in ranks of better equipage:
But since he died and poets better prove,
Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love."

On March 26, 2009 at 12:00 pm michael robbins wrote:

Actually, I meant Lydia, & what she means by "better" is not what you mean by it. Rather, it is a marker of adequation to the times, which implies what we think of as formal mastery, not the other way round. Yr memos & apologies are unnecessary, since they need to be redirected.

On March 26, 2009 at 12:52 pm john wrote:

Joshua/Jane/Lydia was talking about "adequacy," which is not a synonym for "adequation"; in either case, "formal mastery" is not all there is to it. In poetic history, it has to do with keeping up with — or leading — intellectual and aesthetic fashion, of which formal concerns make up only a part.

On March 26, 2009 at 1:16 pm thomas brady wrote:

Michael,
"Rather, it is a marker of adequation to the times, which implies what we think of as formal mastery, not the other way round."
But that's a qualitative judgment! Adequate! You're simply trying to fudge this. Try as you will, you can't escape the paradox. I'll let you walk away from "better" and think of some other term, but you still can't escape.
I'll put it another way. Any sort of manner in which you attempt to find 'adequate' a certain poet responding to a certain time period will never trump uniqueness, per se, and we can never say that a poet is more unique in 2009 than he is in 1600, or that Williams is unique because he is Williams writing in 1959. 'The unique' is what you are, in fact, defending, for 'a reflection of the

times' carries with it predicates which may not be 'adequate.' We may be gulled into thinking a poet has a "contemporary" value, per se, but they never do.
Thomas

On March 26, 2009 at 4:05 pm michael robbins wrote:

John, if you don't think "commensurate to" is close enough to "adequate to," then fine, I'll grant that teensy point.
Thomas, you're thinking so ahistorically here that I can't even follow you, since everything you write seems exactly backwards to me. No one is discussing individual decisions or responses! — & John, yr reduction of the question to the decision to follow or not follow "fashion" is utterly beside the point. I am saying that the conditions of & for poetry are formed in advance of individual poets, & one measure of their success is the degree to which those conditions are fulfilled in their poems. I'm not denying that writing can effect new formations, but the sociohistorical conditions in which such formations occur structure the field of possible formations. As I noted earlier, Language writing did not arise in the 17th century — not because art hadn't "evolved" to such a stage but because it wouldn't have made sense as poetry at that time, wouldn't have been conceivable as an adequate response to the forms of social being & consciousness then available. Which is to say it was a historical impossibility, just as Shakespeare would be in 1959. You can decide not to follow the fashion all you want to, you can believe "uniqueness" is an aspirational value, it doesn't change the fact that yr practice as a poet is circumscribed in advance of yr decision to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. You don't even need to be a Marxist to believe this, just someone who's thinking clearly.

On March 26, 2009 at 7:14 pm Robin Kemp wrote:

Re: Elizabethan scansion and proNOUN-ced syllables–don't forget friend Spenser, of Faerie Queene and Shepaerdes Calendar fame.
Sidelight: Can we please dispense with the personal attacks/trolling in this forum? The Web is loaded with such. Certainly folks are big enough to disagree without insulting each other or condescending or one-upping. This behavior among poets is, to me, why I generally despise workshops and Po-Bizzery. It's tiresome–particularly at Harriet, which generally rises several cuts above such foolishness.

On March 26, 2009 at 7:34 pm john wrote:

Oh dear Michael, when have I ever denied that we are circumscribed by circumstances? Show me where, please. The way you describe it, though, is way too deterministic for my taste — or, if you prefer, my beliefs.
According to you, "the conditions of & for poetry are formed in advance of individual poets," so the hugely influential innovations of Pound, to name a poet I don't personally like but whose influence I recognize, were formed before he made his innovations, and "one measure of [his] success is the degree to which those conditions are fulfilled in [his] poems"; my belief is that the only reason we knew what the conditions of and for poetry were for his time is because he and others revealed them in their work. Because Pound wrote what he did, what he wrote became part of "the conditions of & for poetry" for the people who followed him. His style, in fact, became aesthetically fashionable.
If you have a Platonic view of the interaction between history and art, well, that's really weird, but go for it! History determines the Conditions of Art; the Artist's job is to Fulfill them; and the Reader's job is to Judge whose Work Best Fulfilled those Conditions. The Readers, evidently,

know what the Platonic Conditions Are, or Were — somehow! How? Who knows? Evidently . . . the self-appointed clear-thinkers, whether Marxist or not, do. How? Don't ask! They (you) won't tell!

Sorry to be derogatory about it, but that's, to me, a mind-bogglingly foreign way of looking at things.

On March 27, 2009 at 12:09 am michael robbins wrote:

I agree that way of looking at things is pretty weird — whose is it? It's not even close to what I said, which is par for the course. So never mind. If you truly can't tell the difference between Platonism & a materialist conception of history (hint: they're diametrically opposed), then anything I might say will only confuse you further. You seem like a smart guy, so I can only assume that yr continued refusal to understand that this is not about individual responses to poems serves a purpose for you. Not my problem, though.

On March 27, 2009 at 3:24 am john wrote:

Michael and Joshua,

Would one or both of you please define "adequacy"? I made a stab at understanding what I thought Joshua was talking about, and I acceded to his wish that I not talk about individual poets or poems, when I wrote, "To talk poetry and not individual poets: Slam poetry was the most adequately responsive poetry in the '80s and '90s, but I'm not at all sure that it was the dominant poetry, nor that it will be seen to be; nor was it personally my favorite poetry of the time."

There are at least two ways to look at adequacy, and I've gone back and forth between them on this thread.

1. Socially/professionally: The most remunerative poetry of its time fulfills the conditions of poetry most adequately. Examples: best-selling poetry, or poetry that gets poets good teaching gigs. In this view, Emily Dickinson was a miserable failure — so I'm guessing this isn't what you all are talking about.

2. Cognitively/experientially: The poetry that reflects the tensions and realities, and the poetic and lingual possibilities, of its historical moment most . . . [some individually responsive word needs to go here -- vividly, compellingly, persuasively, thoroughly, complexly, wide-rangingly . . .]. In which view, by most measures, Dickinson is a 19th century titan, so I'm guessing that this is the view that you are preferring.

"Fashion" may sound like a trivializing way to characterize the rise and fall of styles and reputations, but it's part of our historical moment, for sure — a big part. I'm glad that fashion caught up with Dickinson, and I'm glad that she wrote all of those hundreds of poems for no-reader-other-than-herself; and I'm glad that her heirs and editors did not burn her manuscripts — otherwise our sense of the possible in 19th century poetry would be severely diminished.

On March 27, 2009 at 9:19 am john wrote:

Michael,

speaking of par for the course — you've mis-characterized a lot of what I've said as well.

And you're right, "Platonic" is probably wrong, since in Plato the abstract possibilities which your reader understands outside-of-and-as-something-separate-from-his-individual-responses-to-poems, and by which he judges the poems of an era, would not change over time, as they do in your (and my) view. What connects your view to Plato is the abstraction of the conception: that the poet's job is to fulfill the conditions of poetry (fulfilling the conditions of poetry are your

words), which the reader knows as something separate from actual poems. How does the reader know the conditions of poetry, and how does he measure the success of poems, without making individual responses? So far, you and Joshua have shrouded this knowledge in mystery and mystification — in socially fashionable and successful professional jargon.

I congratulate you and Joshua on your social success, but — you're right — I don't understand what you're talking about. Which, as Baudrillard has pointed out, speaking of his own work, is one of the functions of jargon — to create a barrier against the uninitiated. Which is indeed a materialist strategy, and a successful one, in our social conditions.

On March 27, 2009 at 10:55 am michael robbins wrote:

Well, I'm not trying to be obfuscatory. I think Joshua has pointed out elsewhere on Harriet "jargon's" derivation from the Old French for birdsong. Raymond Williams is right that "the use of a new term or the new definition of a concept is often the necessary form of a challenge to other ways of thinking or of indication of new & alternative ways. Every known general position, in matters of art & belief, has its defining terms, & the difference between these & the terms identified as jargon is often no more than one of relative date & familiarity To run together the senses of jargon as specialized, unfamiliar, belonging to a hostile position, & unintelligible chatter is then at times indeed a jargon: a confident local habit which merely assumes its own intelligibility & generality."

In the *Grundrisse* Marx writes that "It is well known that some golden ages of art are quite disproportionate to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation." Not no relation, but not a strictly deterministic one of the sort Plekhanov espoused: "The art of any people has always, in my opinion, an intimate causal connection with their economy." This connection, though, can be quite indirect, mediated through all the complexities of class division. I would never deny, as I said, the capacity for writing to effect new formations, & my point has never been that poets are merely the mouthpieces of economic forces. Adequacy to the historical conditions takes many forms, & is not a question of readers' responses to the work. I'm not talking about readers' deciding that a work does or does not fulfill its conditions of contemporaniety.

Somehow we got off the original point, though, which was not so much about determinism, although it entailed a question about it. The much simpler point that Joshua made was that poetry changes as the world changes, develops a responsiveness to shifting historical conditions (or it fails to do so — "failure" here as neutrally descriptive as can be, as in "he failed to reach the summit"). The adequacy can be argued about, but the question is usually settled by history, not individual responses.

On March 27, 2009 at 12:24 pm john wrote:

Michael, quickly:

1. You're using a term in a new way. If you don't have a clearer answer to my good-faith question than, "Adequacy to the historical conditions takes many forms," I'll have to assume that you aren't thinking clearly, and that the new use of the word has not (yet?) attained any social usefulness other than as a professional barrier-to-entry.
2. We got off Joshua's point because you kept fantasizing that I denied that poetry exists in history, that poets live in history, and that poets (and poetry) respond to historical conditions. I don't, and didn't, deny it.
3. Who is this "history" that settles these questions? It smells fishily like a(nother) dematerialized abstraction.

4. As for your charge that I'm running together the senses of jargon to mean, "specialized, unfamiliar, belonging to a hostile position, & unintelligible chatter" all at once — well, that doesn't make sense. Unintelligible chatter can't be characterized as a hostile "position" — to the degree that I understand Joshua's position, I basically agree with it, though I pity his and your hesitancy to take the theory out for a test drive, to apply it to an actual case, lest it be sullied with an "individual response" — a theory that can't be applied is by definition useless — except, again, in the narrow professional sense of "use" as "useful to one's professional status." I was using "jargon" to mean "specialized" and "unintelligible," or, not (yet?) intelligible to me — though I am trying! (Sometimes *very* trying, as my friends could tell you.)

On March 27, 2009 at 12:39 pm thomas brady wrote:

Michael,

John is correct.

You are rudely forcing together Hercalitus and Plato, attempting to reconcile 'never step into the same river twice' with an ideal stream.

Look at the history of the sonnet. Through the ages they still sound like sonnets.

You might argue, well, sonnets are not really poetry…

But then, where would you be?

Thomas

P.S. Apologies, I posted this in the wrong thread initially.

On March 27, 2009 at 1:02 pm thomas brady wrote:

It is crucial that we get this.

To say one poet reflects 'the times' better than another is to make a judgment as absolute in nature as saying this poet is intinsically better than that poet–and less useful.

The life issues which effect a certain poet in their receptivity to this or that aspect of 'the times' cannot be ignored. I don't like Pound either, but in as much as I would concede his influence I agree with John that such influence cannot be pinned down to Pound more "adequately" reflecting his era, because that "era," if Pound has any influence, comes from Pound, not 'the era,' per se.

Also, a shadow-Pound could come along any time in the future and re-define this era, and thus all preceding eras of poetry–if such history even has legitimacy in the first place–and so historical validity is trickier than we might suppose, for counter-poets or shadow poets show up on the radar all the time, even if all of us don't see them at the same time.

I was also quite serious when I said Williams is a parody of Shakespeare. We must wrestle with this, as well.

If we are going to travel with Heraclitus, we must weep with him.

On March 27, 2009 at 1:23 pm michael robbins wrote:

But the theory has been applied, John; a theory of social production is necessarily not *about* individual poets: to gain a sense of how individual artists can elucidate the theory, though, please see T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*–especially his elucidating application of this (not new) conception of artistic production to David & Marat as well as to modernism in general. Heraclitus rudely forced together with Plato is a description of Hegel, not Marx, not me. And it is, of course, Marx who got the ball rolling, though there's nothing orthodoxically Marxist about saying so. I think part of the problem we're having is that these simply *aren't* new ideas, so I'm a bit befuddled about what's so confusing. Brady is just wrong to assert that "Pound could come

along any time in the future" — if it's the future, it's not Pound, & I don't mean in the obvious sense that Pound already lived, but that anyone writing in the future necessarily *writes after Pound, writes in a world in which Pound's forms responded to the ways in which the world had changed.* Let's just forget the chicken-egg portion of the question & ask it this way: would a Pound have been possible at any other time in history besides the time in which he arose? And the answer is no; poets don't just write whatever they want to; they write what it is possible to write at the time; the *Cantos* were not possible before they were written, & now that they've been written they are no longer possible.

On March 27, 2009 at 1:25 pm michael robbins wrote:

I meant, of course, David's *Marat* — the chapter on Malevich is even better, actually.

On March 27, 2009 at 1:31 pm michael robbins wrote:

Also, I don't know who "life issues" are when they're at home, but I'm glad to know they're utterly separate from "the times." Whew! I'll let my banker know.

On March 27, 2009 at 1:53 pm Ann Michael wrote:

Annie, I commented briefly on this column personally to you when it first went up, but have returned to this post because I think it is so thought-provoking and relevant. A colleague and I recently discussed the difficulties we encounter "teaching meter" to college sophomores. We agree that most of these young people cannot seem to distinguish metricality aurally, and are lost when confronting a metrical poem on the page.

Therefore, I am afraid I must suggest that many (younger) contemporary readers HAVE lost the oral/aural basis for poetry "in their heads" or elsewhere. I love your phrase "the ghost of meter," but I am not sure the ghost isn't disintegrating into a general hazy fog as the 21st century progresses.

An example: in a recent class, I used "Hickory Dickory Dock" to listen for dactyls, and most of the students had never heard of the nursery rhyme. Then, I brought in a pile of my daughter's old Beanie Babies, and we read the doggerel verses on the tags for examples of poor use of stresses, etc. Students had a hard time recognizing the stresses or being able to explain or state what these might be (or assess whether the meter was 'accurate' or not). Nursery rhymes are better teachers than Beanie Baby tags, but a generation with no exposure to nursery rhymes or traditional "teaching songs" may be unable to hear meter in poetry. These readers–granted, I do not teach at a particularly elite college–do not hear the music of language in their heads. They see it on screens, flashing past rapidly. Repetitive forms, for them, are ad campaign slogans and popular music.

This sad fact has little to do with whether or not metrical poetry is a left/right/dual-brained activity and much more to do with Lake's premise or position in the essay mentioned earlier… similar in many ways to John Stilgoe's observations in such books as _Outside Lies Magic_ (that print and photography have dimmed human sensitivity to colors, etc.)

Reading ALOUD, then, becomes useful for the 21st century poetry classroom–as your experience with the women's group attests. Maybe we need to learn to get poetry into our brains by speaking it out through our bodies.

And your point about teaching metrical strategies, learning and applying scansion, is a good one. The practice DOES teach the student to look at a poem more deeply, to analyze it as a work of art, "an imaginary work, living in time, indicated in language" (Muriel Rukeyser). Frankly, I don't care if a student gets the scansion wrong–I am working with novices who'll go on to

dental school or accounting firms. I just want them to think.

On March 27, 2009 at 3:17 pm thomas brady wrote:

Michael,
But Pound did happen before Pound. We can see them in the writings of Carlyle, Coleridge's conversation, French symbolists, English translations from the Italian, the Chinese, Greek, Latin, any number of thousands of aborted literary projects, sonnet sequences, notebooks, scholarly footnotes, fragments and character studies, billions upon billions of pages before Pound. You say 'The Cantos' as if this means anything more than 'The Funny-Looking Sonnets.'
The problem here is that you are making specific aesthetic judgments and not even realizing that you are doing so; you are not taking ownership of what you are really saying.
Thomas

On March 27, 2009 at 4:20 pm michael robbins wrote:

Thomas, you're confusing the issue again, this time in yr weird insistence that I am making the sorts of judgments I never disavowed. Of course I am making aesthetic judgments. We do so all the time. What, though, do you think aesthetic judgments are? As Bourdieu says, "To deny evaluative dichotomies is to pass a morality off for a politics. To denounce hierarchy does not get us anywhere." What I took exception to above was yr imputing an evaluation where there was none, not the notion of evaluation itself. This is tired & obvious, Thomas — this can't be the first time you've encountered these ideas?
As for yr contention that Pound happened in his influences, it hardly needs me to point out that that particular combination of influences did not occur before Pound. "The Cantos" does indeed mean a great deal more than "the funny-looking sonnets." Read them, sometime.
Enough of this. It's not getting us anywhere.

On March 27, 2009 at 7:56 pm john wrote:

I just reserved T.J. Clark's book from the library. I had to Google R. Williams and the chapter Joshua recommended to learn which book it's in — "Marxism and Literature" — which our library doesn't have, alas. If you have another Williams recommendation — or better yet, a few — I'll get something from the library (which has 6 books by him).
I'll be interested to see how Clark applies the theory of social production of art while withholding individual responses to the art. You seem to be making a distinction between "judgments" and "responses," Michael, which is too subtle for me — that you never disavowed "judgments," while you and Joshua have repeatedly criticized me for bringing my "responses" to bear on artworks in order to engage with Joshua's and your ideas. But since you haven't cared to address my other questions, I won't expect a clarification here either.
Anyway, thanks for the book recommendation — it sounds interesting.

On March 28, 2009 at 5:45 am Annie Finch wrote:

Anne,
Thanks so much for responding. I know exactly what you mean–yet it seems that the capacity to hear metrical accents on the part of English speakers can't be totally lost, if only because we need to hear accent to speak English, to tell one word from another.
One way I often start reawakening this sense is to ask students to scan their full names including middle names (an easy way to teach the cups and wands, as I call u and /, and if necessary the half-stress \, and the footbreak |). Then I ask them to write very short poems

using the exact syllable and stress pattern of their own names for each line.
So first they mark the pattern, and then they write the pattern down and follow it to come up with something like, Hannah Ruth Forman/ loves to eat icecream,/reads in the morning,/notices flowers–actually they come up with much better ones than that. (the half-stress is useful for a syllable like “Ruth” in this example–it’s easier for them to follow a pattern that falls into patterns of feet with a stress every two or three syllables (like /uu/u here) than something with two stresses in a row.
I did this a few weeks ago with high school students, and they had a lot of fun with it. They always do, and everybody can do it. After doing this, they are happy to learn the names of the four basic feet; if they know their name scans as dactyl-trochee, those become easy to remember.
This may be one case where writing helps them learn to read, because this kind of attention to accent helps them to notice meter when they encounter it afterwards.

On March 28, 2009 at 5:57 am Annie Finch wrote:

John–Romantics, of course, were earlier than Victorians–which was my point–that change does not always lead towards what we would now consider the superior style–in other words, art is not “progress” in the sense that science supposedly is, though in this century we seem to have gotten in the habit of using the progress model for it. btw those “guys” of course included many female poets as Stuart Curran’s excellent work makes clear:
http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nap/Stuart_Curran_Anna.htm
Henry–I have been mulling over whether and how to respond to your charmingly self-deprecating self-characterization–you are clearly a virtuosic writer in a great range of poetic styles, from those near-perfect iambic pentameters I scanned to the free-verse parodies on Travis’ Dickman thread–I don’t think that qualifies you as a guitar player, though having tried many times to learn to play the guitar I would consider that in a different sense than you seem to have meant it.

On March 28, 2009 at 6:39 am Annie Finch wrote:

Jane, your position seems indisputably true and common sensical: “Greatness is an artifact of its relation to a given situation, not an intrinsic value.”
John, even if the comment above is true, that in no way dicates the WAY in which a particular work of art relates to its historical time (and btw, having published, in good faith, a manifesto myself, I can’t believe that manifestoes are over or that they necessarily have an imperialist stance.) I love what you say about poets struggling with their times–and the Bach anecdote–all rich and fascinating stuff—however, does the fact that Bach was the last of his line and misunderstood by his own time necessarily mean that he wasn’t relating to his given situation? Sometimes the ways of relating are subterranean and convoluted and private and not at all obvious to most of one’s contemporaries, but it’s hard for me to imagine a great artist who is not in some way passionately engaged with their own time.
Robin Kemp’s example of Spenser is a perfect case in point. His style was antique at the time he wrote, but consciously so, and for good reason, and so it was of its time in spite of, or even because of, keeping in step with the fashion of an earlier time. As I always tell my students, you can do anything as part of a good poem, as long as you do it consciously.
Here’s a hypothesis: a poet needs to rub up against various specific, historical things that offer resistance, in order to incite, to spark, the the timeless, ahistorical spark of greatness that Thomas rightly recognizes in Shakespeare. One of the things that we rub up against is our

particular historical circumstances. So it's not the engagement with history itself that causes the greatness—it's just the friction of dealing with constraint– the constraint of either aesthetic or political or personal circumstance, whatever offers us the most fruitful resistance.

And speaking of constraint, perhaps the reason this entire topic of timeliness has gathered such energy on the "listening to poetry" thread is the elephant that often seems to lurk in the room, unspoken, when meter is a topic of discussion: the sense that meter is an anachronism nowadays, that it is belated and we have progressed beyond it.

I addressed this issue in an essay online, written, holy cow, how can I be getting this old, twenty years ago!– which I'll take the liberty to link to here:

http://home.earthlink.net/~arthur505/finch01.html

On March 28, 2009 at 5:30 pm michael robbins wrote:

John, I'd definitely look into *Keywords* & *The Country & the City* as well; & *Marxism & Lit*'s not hard to find used copies of. Most would recommend *Culture & Society* but I haven't read it. I'm sure it's valuable; it's hard to go wrong with Williams.

On March 28, 2009 at 5:40 pm john wrote:

Oh my goodness, Annie, so much good stuff here!

When you say, "does the fact that Bach was the last of his line and misunderstood by his own time necessarily mean that he wasn't relating to his given situation?" — yes, that was my point. I was struggling to understand whether "adequacy" referred to "contemporary social adequacy" or some other meaning, which, Michael confirmed, at least for him, and I think for Joshua/Jane too, that, no, "contemporary social adequacy" was *not* what they were talking about — ALTHOUGH, I would contend, the way "contemporary social adequacy" works in any given situation is a key factor in what they were calling "the social production of poetry" — not the *only* factor, probably not the most important factor, but that it would be silly to ignore. Bach's production reflected the social conditions of his time: tons of church music (his main *job*), and lots of exercises for students (also part of his *job* — what he got paid to do), and his income did allow him to raise 10 kids, only two or three of whom (I don't remember W. F.'s exact status) became more famous than he had been. (He had 20 kids, but 10 died in infancy.)

In discussing reciting aloud, and history and longevity, it's interesting to note that we have *no clue* how poets as recent as Dickinson pronounced their poems. So — any reading is an adaptation. Not to say we shouldn't read aloud — we should; I love it.

Great stuff on teaching scansion through names.

Yes, as I said, most people agree that the riches of the poetry of the early Romantics exceeds that of the Victorians. I brought up the Victorians because . . . well, it'll take a moment to unwind. Thomas thought that Joshua and/or I had been touting a "progressive-ist" understanding of art history, and I replied, no, not necessarily; most people prefer the Elizabethans to the late Metaphysicals (and I do too); and then Joshua said, hey, don't go touting a degenerative view of art history; and I replied, I wasn't, that was an example against the idea of progress, and here's an example from history where most people (me too) agree that the later poetry yields greater riches than the earlier — the Romantics following the late 18th century "poets of sensibility." I think we're all in agreement here — at least, I hope so! Not that I hate disagreement, just that I haven't seen any on this topic in this thread — only repeated, contradictory misunderstandings! Which is amusing.

Regarding the imperialism of manifestos — maybe yours is different, but, historically, manifestos have tended to say, "this is the only right way to do things." Very missionary.

Spenser — aagghhh! The inventor of “elevated diction” — the *bane* of poetry. Just my opinion — and I love some of his sonnets; — but . . . well, I’m curious to know what his good reasons for writing in an invented pseudo-archaic style were! (“Elevated diction” is the death of rhetoric; maybe that’s the problem; Shakespeare could be elevated too, when the occasion warranted it; it’s my sense that Spenser introduced the idea that poetry should ALWAYS be elevated, based on very hazy intuition [a/k/a *very* incomplete knowledge] here — would be curious to know how others view it; in any case — universal elevation — bah. There, that’s my manifesto!)
(And I could be totally wrong about Spenser always being “elevated.”)

On March 28, 2009 at 6:14 pm michael robbins wrote:

“In English poetry, so tradition held, archaism found its deepest source in Spenser’s *Fairie Queene*, in which ‘strange inkhorn terms’ seem to be used for the sake of their association with the chivalry & romances of the past. But modern scholarship contradicts the received view: Strang for example says that Spenser’s archaisms ‘are superficial & limited; the essential character of his poetic language is its modernity.’ Archaisms are less common in Spenser than was often thought: in fact there are only about a hundred archaic words in all of the *FQ*, & half of these are used but once. But Spenser salts his diction regularly: two-thirds of the 55 stanzas of Book I, Canto I, contain at least one archaic locution. Further, the *effect* of archaism may be achieved by a number of lexical strategies besides resuscitating words found in an older author, as Spenser did with Chaucer…. Too, many words that today may seem archaic might not in fact have been so, or seemed only slightly so, to Spenser’s own contemporaries: it requires great erudition to assess with any accuracy exactly how much–and how–a text from the past evoked, from its audience, its own past. What is essential for the critic is the recognition that the desired effect on the audience is that the archaic words seem ‘strange but not obscure.’”
–PEPP
Many threads on Harriet would be rendered moot if all participants owned & consulted this book. But then gentle knights like me would have fewer plains to prick on.

On March 28, 2009 at 8:35 pm Henry Gould wrote:

This is a wonderful long-lived sequoia-like thread.
“Poetry is avant-garde because it doesn’t change much.”
- from The Aphorisms of Henry Gould
As it happens I was reading the later Cantos of Ezra Pound today. Oddly enough they reminded me very strongly of the (Biblical) Proverbs, which I read carefully about 35 yrs ago. The upright, skinny, hard-knocks father, exhorting his wayward, prodigal son to stick to the straight & narrow (Also some fairly topical stuff in there about Banks, Greed… & Febrile Frivolity, Blind Polemics, Empty Verbiage…)
Pound’s father worked at the US Mint. Pound = the British currency. Very curious EMBODIMENT of a certain sort of Scottish penny-counting sense of Righteousness. As the basis of Freedom. Which is not, actually, so far-fetched (as opposed to Socialist idealism – the idea that you have to be prudent, show self-restraint, with regard to your own personal life, as it impinges on your family’s future…).
“You shall not let go, til you have paid the last penny.” (quoted from memory, somewhere in the Gospels)
Much of Pound is malevolently screwy. In fact I WORRY about his concrete, phony, ideological impact on certain cultures under authoritarian regimes in the future.
But there is also this hard-won, hard as nails, Old Man’s simplicity….

No one else could have written Canto 99.

On March 28, 2009 at 8:46 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Thomas, you're very kind, thank you. It's probably all the time I've spent guitar-playing which has kept me from learning metrical science.
Actually, that's just a bad excuse.
Did you know that i applied for a job with the Rolling Stones in 1975? & met with Keith Richards & the band in Richmond, outside London?
That's a funny story.
Some of my very amateur guitar-playing, & harmonica, & piano (I never learned them either) is here :
http://golittlesparrow.blogspot.com
(check out "Another Old Tune")

On March 29, 2009 at 10:54 am thomas brady wrote:

The key which seems to be emerging from the major debate which took over this thread is: Judgment v. response, and Intrinsic v. historical worth. I guess I would say that we are ALWAYS making judgments of intrinsic worth and to hide behind other stuff is a coyness that does no one any good. That doesn't mean we can't have honest differences re: judgment, but let's at least acknowledge what is going on.

On March 29, 2009 at 11:06 am thomas brady wrote:

Henry,
Thanks for your music links. Very nice.
I'm a prolific amateur songwriter and became one after I was a poet; what surprised me was that writing songs, I found the music came first and I had trouble with the lyrics. It's always enlightening how a nice tune begs for words that fit–not good words, words that fit. Perhaps I was so self-conscious about the words that it blocked me; the tunes came very easily.
Were you going to replace Mick Taylor?
You don't happen to know anything about that 1972 election eve party at Jerry Rubin's in NYC, when Lennon did a woman in the bedroom where everyone's coats were? I'm writing a musical from the point of view of Beatles' women, just a comedy, really. The 1972 party will be an important 'end of the 60s' scene.
There's so many musicians with a great sense of rhythm in this country. But it seems there's so few poets who can really write meter well. You, for instance, are actually kind of a rarity. You'd think lots of (pro or amateur) musicians could bring their sense of rhythm to verse, but maybe it takes that combination, words/music, and that is rare. I know Keith Richards used classical music to inspire his songwriting; I wonder why more poets don't use love of music to inspire their verse on a gut-level.
Thomas

On March 29, 2009 at 1:16 pm michael robbins wrote:

There is no such thing as intrinsic worth. You & I have nothing more to say to each other.

On March 29, 2009 at 2:28 pm michael robbins wrote:

I mean, here's the thing (for anyone else who cares; Thomas clearly doesn't listen to what others say): it is exactly *not* a question of "judgment v. response" or "intrinsic v. historical worth." This continues to frame the question as if it were about what readers think of poems. It's not. To

mischaracterize it this way betrays a lack of even passing acquaintance with some of the most important critical work in poetics over the last several hundred years: Vico, Hegel, Coleridge, Lukacs, Adorno, Eliot, Benjamin, Auerbach, Althusser, Bourdieu, Williams — swept away as if they didn't matter.

Literature is not merely an epiphenomenon of social formations & relations. But neither is it independent of these, a matter of personal choices being made under the tutelage of genius. And the changes that are wrought by & within it are not reducible to a set of propositions that we can accept or reject according to our "response" or "judgment." It is not a question of individual readers sitting around deciding whether a given work has "intrinsic worth." Those readers are also formed within & by social formations & relations — believe it or not, so are their aesthetic criteria. These criteria change over time, all the time, so there is no value inhering in the work itself that guides responses to it. To think otherwise is to believe art is static — in fact, it is to believe that human beings & their modes of consciousness are static, that an Elizabethan differs in no significant respects from yr pediatrician. People, & art, are very much more complex than this.

On March 29, 2009 at 2:33 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Thomas, yes, that's right, I was out for Mick Taylor's spot. I met with him in London before going to see Keith Richards. Both of them very up-front & unpretentious musicians. Keith & I talked about the Bible & William Blake, but fortunately for the world I didn't land the job. Stones' loss, though.

Can't help you with the Rubin party, sorry! Use your 'magination.

On March 29, 2009 at 7:08 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Speaking of popular music, my daughter Phoebe let me borrow her copy of the Scorsese film "No Direction Home", about Bob Dylan. Dylan is a little older than me. I've been through Hibbing many a time, having also grown up in MN (Hopkins). I'm the anti-Dylan : poet/musician rather than musician/poet. Same deal, maybe : except I'm old old middle class Minneapolis WASP old Yankee farmer old old early MN, old old whatever Pilgrims Quakers & so on. Bob is young young old old working class middle class Jewish musician small-town & so on. Hibbing. It's up there in the Iron Range. Northern Minnesota. I'm from southern Minnesota. Bob still has a bit of that French-Canadian Duluth accent, wonderful to hear on the film.

Just another Henry ego trip….

On March 29, 2009 at 8:46 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Although in 1964, I did win 3rd place in the state-wide classical piano performance competition, at McPhail Auditorium, St. Paul (I was 12. The piece was "Malaguena"). I coulda been a contendah. But I gave up piano & classical music (my mistake). I started listening to Sonny Boy Williamson & Tony ("Little Sun") Glover. I joined a band & played high school proms (not far from Hibbing… Hinckley, to be exact).

On March 29, 2009 at 8:53 pm thomas brady wrote:

"There is no such thing as intrinsic worth. You & I have nothing more to say to each other."

So you are making a judgment that I have no intrinsic worth.

OK, I can accept that.

Even though you do not 'believe' there is intrinsic worth, you behave all the time as if there were.

You can name-drop all you want, but when you throw out things like, "there is no value inhering

in the work itself that guides responses to it" you are making a fantasically huge assumption based on a rigid, fatalistic idea.

You actually think that no writer, a Shakespeare, for instance, has the ability to create a work in such a manner that the work itself (without Shakespeare's help, or 'historical' help) is able to guide human response in a certain way? And, that this ability of the work to guide response, in itself, has nothing to do with intrinsic worth? And further, that humans were so different then, that even if Shakespeare were able to bring such a thing about, it would be completely beyond us?

You are seriously saying this, and yet at the same time making absolute judgments of my views? I am your contemporary, I am stuck in the exact same time-line as you! How can we possibly have nothing to say to each other? You are really confusing me. Is it that we are not allowed to disagree because we are contemporaries? Is this what has you so perplexed? You believe in 'change' and a pluralism formed by complex social relations, and constantly changing criteria, and a floating value-system, and yet, according to you, you are quite certain that we have nothing to say to each other!

Art is social, yes, and that is why Shakespeare is not really past, but present, and can be judged in the same way that we judge WC Williams! Not only can I find intrinsic worth in Shakespeare, but Shakespeare finds intrinsic worth in you. Shakespeare is more alive for me than you are, even though you are my contemporary, for the simple reason that Shakespeare has more intrinsic social worth for me than you do.

You not only owe me an apology, you owe Shakespeare an apology.

I'll be waiting, I know, a fairly long time.

Shakespeare, not so much.

Thomas

On March 29, 2009 at 9:16 pm thomas brady wrote:

Henry,

Did you have an audition with the whole band, or just with Keith? Ron Woods was perfect for them, though. What sort of Stones-cred did you have? Did you just answer an ad? Was Keith trying to get clean at that point? Was he still with Brian's old girlfriend, or had he moved on to someone else? I was always curious whether Mick wrote all the lyrics and Keith wrote all the music, or was it more mixed up?

Speaking of Dylan, I heard that "Sympathy for the Devil" was a Dylan-type folk song that Mick brought in, and then they rocked it up. Dylan and Brian hung out together sometimes, and Donovan raised Brian's kid. Small world, that world, innit?

Any anecdote you want to send my way, please do, you poet-rocker, you!

Thomas

On March 29, 2009 at 10:09 pm Annie Finch wrote:

Perhaps what Thomas means by intrinsic worth is something that Michael would acknowledge as valid by another name. So often, ongoing debates like this seem to come down to terminology. Thomas, perhaps you would define what you mean by the term? I know there are cross-cultural studies of things like beauty and symmetry, and there are defiinitions of things like relationship-of-part-to-the-whole in the Fritjof Capra book I mentioned earlier, The Web of Life, that seem to me to come close to a useful definition.

Henry, as I said earlier, you are virtuosic in more than one area, and now that includes being a Minnesotan I love the Scorsese film. To digress a moment from poetry (or maybe not—BD was

one of my big early poetic influences, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that), have you seen the only biographical film of BD that he himself apparently likes, I'm Not There, in which he is played by six actors including Heath Ledger and Cate Blanchett? I sadly found it unwatchable.

John, I happen to be a big fan of Spenser –known as the poet's poet for good reason imho. Funny, I don't think of him at all in terms of elevated diction. So many passages of his are very concrete and real, even humorous–for example, the description of Error's den:

But full of fire and greedy hardiment,
The youthfull knight could not for ought be staide,
But forth vnto the darksome hole he went,
And looked in: his glistring armor made
A litle glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the vgly monster plaine,
Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,
But th'other halfe did womans shape retaine,
Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.
And as she lay vpon the durtie ground,
Her huge long taile her den all ouerspred,
Yet was in knots and many boughtes vpwound,
Pointed with mortall sting. Of her there bred
A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed,
Sucking vpon her poisonous dugs, each one
Of sundry shapes, yet all ill fauored:
Soone as that vncouth light vpon them shone,
Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.
Their dam vpstart, out of her den effraide,
And rushed forth, hurling her hideous taile
About her cursed head, whose folds displaid
Were stretcht now forth at length without entraile.
She lookt about, and seeing one in mayle
Armed to point, sought backe to turne againe;
For light she hated as the deadly bale,
Ay wont in desert darknesse to remaine,
Where plaine none might her see, nor she see any plaine.
Which when the valiant Elfe perceiu'd, he lept
As Lyon fierce vpon the flying pray,
And with his trenchand blade her boldly kept
From turning backe, and forced her to stay:
Therewith enrag'd she loudly gan to bray,
And turning fierce, her speckled taile aduaunst,
Threatning her angry sting, him to dismay:
Who nought aghast, his mightie hand enhaunst:
The stroke down fro[m]; her head vnto her shoulder glaunst.
Much daunted with that dint, her sence was dazd,
Yet kindling rage, her selfe she gathered round,
And all attonce her beastly body raizd
With doubled forces high aboue the ground:

Tho wrapping vp her wrethed sterne arownd,
Lept fierce vpon his shield, and her huge traine
All suddenly about his body wound,
That hand or foot to stirre he stroue in vaine:
God helpe the man so wrapt in Errours endlesse traine.

On March 29, 2009 at 10:56 pm john wrote:

Michael's right that historical consensus-judgment (which, as near as I can tell, is what he's talking about) doesn't accrete via individual responses; it develops through institutional power — published responses and university pedagogy. Of course, the people through whom the power of these institutions flows — publishing and universities — are individuals, who, assuming they are working in good faith, are deploying judgments that they agree with or otherwise believe are valuable or true.

What's been consistent in his comments on this thread has been an irritation with anybody who values their own individual response, or judgment, over that of the institutional historical consensus — his intense adherence to what Barthes called the doxa. It's a profoundly conservative — even reactionary — view, but there's nothing wrong with that, and given his own institutional position, it's understandable. The doxa is not necessarily a monolith; Pound, again, is a good test case: The doxa holds that he was a deeply influential and original poet (even a critic like Harold Bloom, who dislikes Pound, says this), but there is no consensus regarding whether his poetry itself is very good.

The doxa — and how it changes over time — is as interesting as any sociological phenomenon, and as a reader of poems, I'm interested in what the historical consensus-judgment about any of them may be, but the idea of deferring to the doxa is alien, and heterodox arguments can often have more to teach us — they can even become orthodox. When Eliot raised the cry of "Donne!," it was heterodox; it's now become orthodox. When Yvor Winters raised a cry for Barnabe Googe, it was heterodox, and it remains so. (I haven't actually read Winters on Googe; I'm relying on Rexroth's report.)

On March 29, 2009 at 11:42 pm john wrote:

But of course Michael wants to mystify "history"! As a Marxist could tell you, that's how bourgeois ideology works — it hides power relations behind mystifying, abstract language that passes itself off as common sense or received wisdom. When Michael says "history," he means, "institutional power," and the institution that he speaks for and from is his own — the university, the main social function of which is, of course, the reproduction of the bourgeoisie.

On March 30, 2009 at 7:34 am Henry Gould wrote:

Thomas…. the Stones interview (it was not a real audition – I never got the guitar out of the case) was a fluke. It was…. stranger than fiction. I think I've told this story on my blog somewhere, so I don't want to bore people. Will keep it brief.

I went to London with my guitar & about $10. to my name in 1975. I got a job the day I arrived (under the table) with a bunch of young aristos who ran a hobby business watering office plants (I told them I had worked on farms, which was true).

I had gone to London because I saw that the Stones were looking for a guitarist, & I was planning to join the band & convert them to Christianity in the process. In the meantime I started playing with a bunch of Irish musicians in various little gigs around Earl's Court & elsewhere. Eventually I called Mick Taylor on the phone (having somehow found his number), & he met

with me & told me where the Stones were staying (Richmond, a suburb west of London). I took the tube out there & asked a street cop for directions. He kindly pointed the way to a large mansion, surrounded by a high wall, with a cute little gate which had an intercom system. I rang the bell. A woman's voice asked, "who is it?" I said : "Johnny B. Goode". The gate opened.
I was let into a kitchen where a very good-looking young black woman was making tea, and guitarist Carl Perkins (who was also applying for the job) was lounging on a couch. Carl & I talked about UFOs (he & his brother had seen one in Arizona). Then Keith came bounding down the stairs. He looked extremely pale, & kept bouncing on the balls of his feet, but he was cordial & friendly. We talked for quite a while about literature, religion, poetry…
If I had been more worldly-wise I would have just hung around & maybe actually auditioned for the job. I was the right age, & not a bad guitarist. I had gotten my foot in the door (literally). Instead I brought up religious faith. (That was the era of the "Jesus freak" movement – I was on a sort of crusade of one.) Keith said I should read more William Blake (which, of course, I had). Finally, he regretfully said they were about to go on a picnic (a huge limo had pulled up in the drive), so I made my farewells.
End of my Stones encounter. I spent 11 months in London, playing music, scrounging around, daydreaming. Met some wonderful people.

On March 30, 2009 at 1:43 pm michael robbins wrote:

Btw the discussion has become very confused indeed: as a Marxist could tell you, ideology is actually not a matter of "hiding" anything. And the idea that because I am associated with the academy I support its role in the reproduction of existing social relations is too ludicrous to bother refuting.

On March 30, 2009 at 2:04 pm john wrote:

Really, Michael? I thought I was using the Marxist definition of the term; perhaps "hiding" is too . . . juvenile a metaphor for your taste, but it's not far off. Here's Terry Eagleton, from "Ideology: An Introduction," and it's a fair description of how you defend the university's power to regulate poetic history and discourse, without admitting that that's what you're doing:
"A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such `mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions."
This is not to say that you consciously decide to defend the university. As a Marxist could tell you, such "decisions" are circumscribed by historical circumstance.
You got this ball rolling by stating that "history" settles questions regarding the historical adequacy of any poetic artifact or style, and then declining to answer a good-faith question about just who this "history" is. If you have an answer other than, "the university," it would be helpful to know what it is.

On March 30, 2009 at 2:13 pm michael robbins wrote:

But as Terry Eagleton could tell you, it's not a matter of simply identifying some ideology & pointing out what it masks, & Eagleton's definition there is rather too simplistic. According to Marx, there are always both an inverted consciousness & an inverted reality: it is because

reality itself is distorted that distorted ideas of it arise; ideology describes what we are doing without knowing it. It is therefore impossible to identify the ideologies within which we ourselves operate. As Bottomore's dictionary has it, "The relationship between ideological & non-ideological ideas cannot be interpreted as the general relationship between error & truth. Ideological distortions cannot be overcome by criticism, they can disappear only when the contradictions which give rise to them are practically resolved."

As for yr other question, you seem to assume a need for agency in all this. Things occur without agency all the time; social processes are rather more like biological ones in this: in real ways, human beings are irrelevant to their functioning (indeed Luhmann has proposed exactly this). We don't ask who this "evolution" is in biology (well, some of us do, alas).

On March 30, 2009 at 3:01 pm john wrote:

Michael, thanks for providing a good example of what Eagleton's talking about.

Michael: "Things occur without agency all the time; social processes are rather more like biological ones."

Eagleton: "naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable . . . "

I'm not necessarily asking for agency, by the way. You ascribed the power to settle questions to "history"; I'm merely asking what in the heck you mean by that, how that might work, how that has historically worked — something, anything, to take it out of the realm of Platonic, naturalized abstraction! And please note that when I said ascribed that power to "the university," I left the question of the individual agency of the actors within the university unsettled!

Of course I agree that working for a university does not imply "support" for its social function (as if your emotional or ideational "support" were relevant!); likewise, my having voted for Obama does not imply "support" for all of his policies. Of course, other Marxist academics I've had the pleasure of arguing with say otherwise — that my actions indict me, but his/her actions do not indict him/her. Very neat and nice distinctions; don't know whether you agree with the Marxist academic to whom I refer without naming; just interesting, that's all.

Good luck to us all with resolving the contradictions that have given rise to our particular historical predicament, and thanks for the R. Williams recommendations. The library doesn't have any of the titles you named, but I made another reservation.

On March 30, 2009 at 3:46 pm michael robbins wrote:

Well, there's nothing in what I said that provides an example of what Eagleton's talking about, unless you take the analogy too literally — an unfortunate analogy, probably, because of the misuse of Darwinism in social theory, but anyway what I obviously meant was that the one is like the other *in this limited respect*, that it is not a matter of individual agency. So much for universalizing, & if I thought the processes involved were self-evident I wouldn't have spent so much time trying to explain them in this forum.

Clearly there is a sense in which by participating in the university I am culpable in its reproduction of social relations; just as there is a sense in which you are culpable for Obama's enormous gifts to the private sector. What I said was that I do not support such a function, & work when I can to undermine it.

My point was that "the university" is not much less nebulous than "history." Of course the circulation of cultural capital is one of the primary functions of higher education & it plays a large role in the circumscription of the canon. But that's a different question than what we began with, which was art's adequacy to social conditions; the academy can & often does serve to mystify

this adequacy & its determinations.
It often seems to me that history is both blind & perfectly determined at the same time. The problem is that there are two different sense of “history” at work here, & that though they form a whole they are distinguishable: the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*‘s entry on Adorno clears away some of the brush: “Adorno regards authentic works of (modern) art as social monads. The unavoidable tensions within them express unavoidable conflicts within the larger sociohistorical process from which they arise and to which they belong. These tensions enter the artwork through the artist’s struggle with sociohistorically laden materials, and they call forth conflicting interpretations, many of which misread either the work-internal tensions or their connection to conflicts in society as a whole. Adorno sees all of these tensions and conflicts as ‘contradictions’ to be worked through and eventually to be resolved. Their complete resolution, however, would require a transformation in society as a whole, which, given his social theory, does not seem imminent.”

On March 31, 2009 at 10:56 am thomas brady wrote:

Annie,
I don’t know if this thread is “Errours endlesse traine,” but thanks for starting it!
I try to like Spencer, but I can’t get past the bald analogy, the chugging verse.
Debates tend to have three components: Essential, terminology, and manners, (or morale.)
I’m trying to coax Michael from the Manners level on to Terminology, where perhaps we can see eye to eye at last in the Essential.
Poets tend to dwell in morale, profs in terminology, and philosophers in the essential. I strive for the latter.
I am using “intrinsic” in its dictionary meaning.
Thomas

On March 31, 2009 at 10:58 am thomas brady wrote:

Henry,
If you had recommended satan to Keith instead of Jesus, you’d be on the cover of ‘Some Girls.’ I’m sure of it.
“Knock and the door shall be opened.” That’s what you did, man! Good for you.
Thomas

On March 31, 2009 at 2:32 pm john wrote:

Yes, Annie, thanks for the thread! And the Spenser — I’ll give him more of a try, but . . . I’m not confident. I’m glad you and others love him, though; I’ll try to learn to. (I do love some of the sonnets.)
Michael, I have encyclopedia envy. Clearly, the judgments of history will be collated not only in and by the academy, but also by the encyclopedists. Still and all, the quote regarding Adorno only brings more brush to the thicket, I’m afraid, unless it’s to say, Undecidability Forever! Which, I can decide, is a position I’m congenial with. It’s practically the point with which I started.
I only brought up the university as a possible setting where history may settle questions.
Thanks.

On April 1, 2009 at 2:03 pm Annie Finch wrote:

John et al,
Much of the joy of reading The Faerie Queene comes from the thrust of the final hexameter line

against the stanza break.
Unfortunately for Spenser's reputation, I accidentally posted the above without stanza breaks– so if you or anyone does give him another try, be sure to ignore the excerpt here.

On April 1, 2009 at 2:35 pm Henry Gould wrote:

Thomas,
I just got a call from Keith Richards. He's given it a lot of thought over the last 35 years, & has reconsidered. I'm going to be in the band, after all. They're also changing their name – to the Rolling SCONES. I'll be playing bagpipes.
Happy 4th of July!

On April 1, 2009 at 4:02 pm thomas brady wrote:

Henry,
If you're playing bagpipes, you could also be the Rolling Drones.
I always liked the Brian Jones-era Stones. It's an honor to know Jones' almost-replacement!
Thomas

On April 2, 2009 at 8:14 am Henry Gould wrote:

The pleasure is mine, Thomas -
Henry McHenry, Stoned Droner

Posted in Group Blog, Uncategorized on Saturday, March 14th, 2009 by Annie Finch.

« Herrera and Kleinzahler Share 2008 NBCC Poetry Prize
Home Town Poets »