Poetic Numbers: Measurement and the Formation of Literary Criticism in Enlightenment England

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the importance of the concept of measurement to poets and literary critics in eighteenth-century England. It documents attempts to measure aspects of literary form, especially prosodic phenomena such as meter and rhythm, and it explores how these empirical and pseudo-empirical experiments influenced the writing and reading of poetry. During the Enlightenment, it argues, poets and critics were particularly drawn to prosody's apparent objectivity: through the parsing of lines and counting of syllables, prosody seemed to allow one to isolate and quite literally measure the beauty and significance of verse. Inquiries into the social and historical functions of literature routinely relied on this discourse, exploring questions of style, politics, and philosophy with the help of prosodic measurement. By drawing on works and artifacts ranging from dictionaries and grammars to mnemonic schemes and notional verse-making machines, and through close readings of poet-critics such as John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, and Samuel Johnson, "Poetic Numbers" contends that the eighteenth century's fascination with prosody represents a foundational moment in the history of literary criticism: a moment whose acute self-consciousness about literary critical methods, as well as about whether and how these methods can aspire to count and account for aspects of literary experience, anticipates many of the methodological questions that mark our own time.

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Introduction

> [H]owever minute the employment may appear, of analysing lines into syllables, and whatever ridicule may be incurred by a solemn deliberation upon accents and pauses, it is certain that without this petty knowledge no man can be a poet.
>
> – Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* 88 (1751)[1]

When Alexander Pope's edition of *The Works of Shakespear* appeared in the spring of 1725, it marked the culmination of years of meticulous labor bestowed on the analysis and correction of Shakespeare's meter – a species of editorial labor that has largely baffled modern readers. As his biographer notes, Pope "concentrated immense effort on metrical regularization and on the relineation into verse of passages he thought mistakenly printed as prose."[2] "Prose from verse they did not know," lamented Pope of Shakespeare's earliest printers, as he sought to unearth the metrical order supposedly hidden beneath years of error and disarray.[3] Scholars of later centuries, however, would condemn these editorial liberties as folly – as an attempt merely to reduce Shakespeare "to the measured monotony of eighteenth century versification" and to present him "berouged, periwigged, and attired generally according to the fashionable literary mode" of the time.[4] In this view, Pope's careful attention to meter is all but illegible as a form of critical labor. ("[W]hile it can be justly said that Pope devoted much time and labor to the work he had assumed, it is equally just to say that it was largely time wasted and labor misemployed."[5]) In this view, the eighteenth century's pronounced preoccupation with matters prosodic is but a function of its peculiar literary fashions, a stylistic obsession elicited by an *ignis fatuus* that has vanished into the depths of history, nevermore to be pursued.

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[1] Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, vols. 3-5 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, 23 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1958-present), *Rambler* 88; 4:99.

[2] Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1985), 425.

[3] *The Works of Shakespear... Collated and Corrected... By Mr. Pope*, 6 vols. (London: Jacob Tonson, 1725), 1:xix.

[4] Thomas R. Lounsbury, *The Text of Shakespeare* (New York: Scribner, 1906), 108, 110.

This dissertation makes the case that the eighteenth century's fascination with poetic measure, far from being merely a minor episode in the history of literary taste, played a constitutive role in the formation of literary criticism as an intellectual and cultural enterprise in Enlightenment England; at the same time, it suggests that the eighteenth-century history of poetic measurement continues to exert a profound, if often unremarked, influence over modern literary scholarship. Habits of measurement have come to play an increasingly vital part in contemporary literary study. Innovative scholarly methods – including the statistical analysis of digital corpora of texts and the cognitive study of readers' brains through magnetic resonance imaging – strive to open up new categories of critical analysis by the application of measurement to the realm of the written word. For many, measurement is now routinely thought of as a peculiarly modern "challenge" to traditional forms of reading; for Franco Moretti, measurement does not simply "refine" our "already-existing knowledge" about literature but offers "an altogether new set of categories" through which to understand it.[6] Yet as novel and illuminating as the findings generated by these lines of inquiry may be, this rhetoric of novelty and disruption conceals the long history of measurement as a tool of literary criticism and as an influence on literary theory. "Poetic Numbers" argues that measurement has, in fact, always been a part of literary theory – that, in particular during the eighteenth century, critical habits of and preoccupations with measurement shaped the burgeoning discipline that we now call literary criticism. By reconsidering the formation of this discipline and its associated practices amid the concurrent rise of empiricist modes of investigation during the period 1650 to 1800, this dissertation asks when and how we began to conceive of literature as "measurable" in this modern sense – as a phenomenon that can be quantified in order to disclose facts about its effect on readers, its social function, or its history – and suggests that the critical urge to measure is coeval with the formation of modern literary criticism itself. In this sense, far from being a radical departure, literary criticism's current fascination with the perils and possibilities of computational methods could be fruitfully understood as revivifying this overlooked Enlightenment history.

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[5] Lounsbury, *The Text of Shakespeare*, 110.

[6] Franco Moretti, "'Operationalizing': or, the Function of Measurement in Modern Literary Theory," *Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet 6* (Stanford Lit. Lab, Dec. 2013), 9. http://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet6.pdf.

Between the mid-seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century there arose in England a lively discourse concerned with questions of literary measurement. This discourse explored – albeit in its own terms and with its own tools – lines of inquiry that would be familiar to digital humanists today: for instance, whether and how aspects of literature might be classified and quantified, and whether and how these sorts of tabulations might be interpreted to reveal something meaningful about the aesthetic, moral, or historical implications of literary form. This discourse was overwhelmingly preoccupied with poetry for the simple reason that poetry, of all literary genres, was understood to be inherently and uniquely measurable. The counting and sequencing of syllables, the numbering of lines: these acts of measurement are the enabling conditions of poetry, distinguishing it radically from prose and inviting the critic to respond to, and evaluate, poetry on metrical terms. When Alexander Pope wryly remarks that "most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's Song," he names a topic that would consistently preoccupy and, at times, bedevil eighteenth-century writers, readers, and critics: *poetic numbers* or *poetic measure*.[7] Today, we would refer to this as *prosody*, or the study of rhythm and meter in verse.

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[7] Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A Reduced Version of the Twickenham Text*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963), 154; l. 337.

Prosody, of course, had been a part of the humanist curriculum and had merited critical scrutiny since the days of the Alexandrian Library; but a set of developments in mid-seventeenth-century England lent this venerable academic field new meaning and cultural reach. At this time, the traditional *prosodia* associated with the classical curriculum began to be complemented by the appearance of vernacular prosody: pamphlets, treatises, prefaces, and digressions in learned (and not so learned) works that variously sought to define, evaluate, and defend vernacular prosodic phenomena such as rhyme, accent, and particular cadences.[8] This shift to the vernacular, in turn, gave prosody a cultural breadth that it had not before possessed, one that routinely transcended disciplinary and class lines. During the eighteenth century, not only would the topic arise in formal treatises on prosody and in works of literary criticism, as one might expect, but also amid magazine articles and book reviews; schoolbooks, grammars, and dictionaries; works of ethnography and travel literature; reading aids for popular editions of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton; as well as seminal works of conjectural history, epistemology, and jurisprudence. During this period, writers as disparate as antiquaries, divines, plantation owners, customs officers, Thomas Jefferson, and the King of Holland found time and felt compelled to write about prosody and its critical and cultural significance.

This breadth sets eighteenth-century prosody apart not only from what preceded it but from what followed. When considering the history of metrical theory, one must distinguish between what I have termed the *discourse of prosody* (c. 1650 to 1800) and the *discipline of prosody* (c. 1800 onwards); for it is not until the early part of the nineteenth century that prosody begins to resemble a self-sufficient science of language, or a theoretically codified, carefully delimited, and increasingly academic domain.[9] To the emergence of this field, prosody still largely owes its reputation as a realm of classical jargon best left to literary technocrats. Yet it must be recalled that prosody, as it existed during the long eighteenth century, differed markedly from this. Undisciplined, it was less a field than a parlance: a way to talk and think about literature, a way that seemed entirely new to the eighteenth century. In 1775, Thomas Sheridan could insist that while English poets had always written in measure, they had not begun to theorize measure until the Restoration: "our best poets were ignorant of the theory of numbers…. [S]carce any of them, except Milton and Dryden, ever took the trouble to dive into that mystery."[10]

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[8] On the "massive explosion of prosodic criticism" at this time, see Richard Bradford, *Augustan Measures: Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Writings on Prosody and Metre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 5.

"Poetic Numbers" makes the case that this theorization, which took place across a range of media and discursive spheres, played a crucial role in the development of literary criticism insofar as it prompted eighteenth-century critics to negotiate their discipline's relationship toward the protocols of empiricism. During the Enlightenment, poets and critics were drawn to prosody's apparent objectivity: through the parsing of lines and counting of syllables, prosody seemed to allow one, quite literally, to "measure" literary phenomena and to judge of a poem's correctness and value by analyzing its "numbers." The central term in this discourse, "measure," may at first glance seem a poor object of sustained critical inquiry. Unlike "meter" or "rhythm" – concepts closely bound to the world of poetics – "measure" is a capacious term invoked by poets, tailors, and political economists alike. Scholars of historical poetics, who tend to focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, have relied on the prevalence of the terms "meter" and "rhythm" during these periods to help delimit and organize their investigations.[11] Such a strategy, however, is ill suited to the world of eighteenth-century letters. A glance at some of the titles mentioned in this study – Edward Manwaring's *Stichology: or, a Recovery of the Latin, Greek and Hebrew Numbers* (1737), John Foster's *An Essay on the Different Nature of Accent and Quantity* (1762), William Mitford's *An Essay upon the Harmony of Language* (1774), Joshua Steele's *Prosodia Rationalis: An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech* (1779) – reveals that the term "meter" had yet to attain primacy and that the basic terms of prosodic discourse were still in flux. "Rhythm" provides even less help as a category of analysis. The ascendance of "rhythm" as a central object of prosodic inquiry at the beginning of the nineteenth century (as instantiated poetically in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge and critically in Edwin Guest's *History of English Rhythms* [1838]) has obscured the fact that this concept is largely absent from prosodic discourse before the close of the eighteenth century. (Notably, the word "rhythm" does not appear at all in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* [1755].) If scholars have largely ignored the existence in the eighteenth century of a discourse preoccupied with measuring literature, this is due in no small part to the fact that this discourse's contributors largely failed to codify their terms and concepts; merely to name this discourse and characterize its activities presents a challenge in its own right.

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[9] Yopie Prins, "Victorian Meters," *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 106.

[10] See Thomas Sheridan, *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, 2 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1775), 2:41.

By choosing to describe this as a discourse concerned with "measure" – a term with a range of connotations beyond the merely prosodic – I aim to embrace this discourse's ambiguities, its unremitting messiness, and to acknowledge its conceptual capaciousness as one of its most characteristic features. Throughout the eighteenth century, the word "measure," as employed by literary critics, is notoriously vague. Depending on the writer and his or her mood, it can variously denote the number of syllables in a line, the structure of a stanza, classical poetic feet such as iambs or trochees, or the mere impression of a cadence or rhythm, even in prose. Often, the mere semblance of a pattern – indeed, any sort of ordering influence – is enough to warrant application of the term. When Paul de Man rather unhelpfully defined "measure" as "any principle of linguistic organization," or "as any principle of signification" whatsoever, he could well have been describing the latitude with which eighteenth-century writers used this term.[12]

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[11] For example, see Jason David Hall, ed., *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2011); Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012); and Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008).

Rather than attempt to rein in such latitude, this study construes it as a necessary condition for the development of literary criticism as a recognizably modern discipline during the period 1650-1800. I argue that measure's capaciousness made room for, and helped to adumbrate, a range of competing critical methods or modes of reading that we would now view as radically distinct from one another, but which only began to attain such distinction as a result of eighteenth-century attempts to interpret literature in metrical terms. Two brief examples of the period's penchant for literary measurement will sketch the range I have in mind. First, Samuel Say's scansion and interpretation of a couplet from Pope's translation of the *Iliad* (1715-20):

> The brittle Steel, Unfaithful to his Hand,
> Brōke shōrt – thĕ Frāgmĕnts glíttĕr'd ŏn thĕ Sānd.
>
> And you hear it *break*, and see the Fragments *glitter*; while the *Evanescent* Sound of the *Pyrrichius*, in a proper Place, fixes the Imagination on the *Fragments*, the *Glittering*, and the *Sand*; and subserves the main Intention of the Poët.[13]

This rather impressionistic mode of response to prosodic phenomena becomes habitual and unremarkable during the eighteenth century. Ascribing intention and aesthetic effect to the manipulation of metrical quantities, it treats prosodic form as an icon or exponent of semantic content. This is, in other words, a wholly figurative kind of measurement. Nothing is properly being *measured* here; instead, one encounters something akin to what Mary Poovey terms "gestural mathematics," or the invocation amid critical speculation of mathematical tropes (here, the diacritical marks of prosody), a habit that allowed eighteenth-century writers such as David Hume to depict evaluation and taste "as being *like* counting in involving an estimation of quantity but *unlike* counting in reaching conclusions through some method other than arithmetic."[14] Say's scansion, parceling out Pope's lines into countable units, offers up a visual rhetoric of measurement. It suggests, by its very presence on the page, that this impressionistic response is, in fact, supported by a logic of quantification.

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[12] See Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 113-14.

[13] Samuel Say, *Poems on Several Occasions: and Two Critical Essays…* (London: John Hughs, 1745), 160.

Not all attempts at poetic measurement, however, were purely figurative. In his *Prosodia Rationalis* (1779), Joshua Steele sought to develop a notational system capable of representing accurately the "melody and measure of speech." (See figures 0.1 and 0.2.)

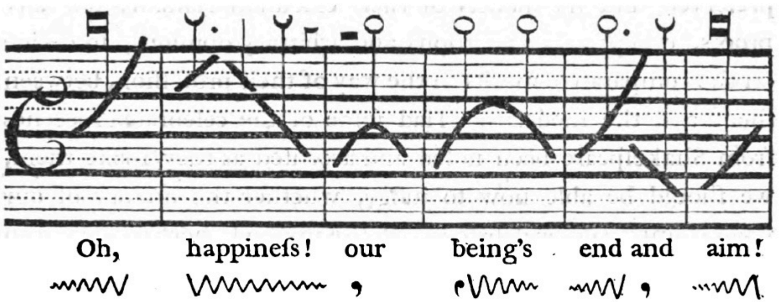

Figure 0.1. Joshua Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis: or, An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols* (London: J. Nichols, 1779), 13.

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[14] Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), 172.

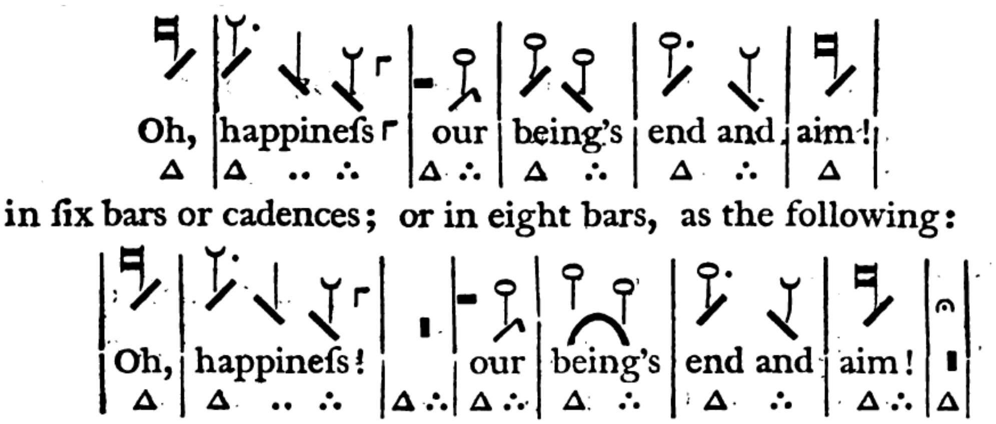
Oh, happineſs our being's end and aim!
in ſix bars or cadences; or in eight bars, as the following:
Oh, happineſs! our being's end and aim!

Figure 0.2. Joshua Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis: or, An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols* (London: J. Nichols, 1779), 26.

In his preface, Steele would deplore the "vague assertions and arbitrary opinions" that pass for critical accounts of poetry's structure and effect on readers.[15] His notational system, by contrast, aimed to reform literary criticism by grounding its judgments in the realm of verifiability. In particular, Steele hoped to make possible the comparison of poets and actors across historical periods. "Had some of the celebrated speeches from Shakespeare been noted and accented as they spoke them," he laments, "we should be able now to judge, whether the oratory of our stage is improved or debased."[16] Although Steele's motivations are belletristic, his critical system is wholly empirical: it aims to measure poetry in the strictest sense of the term and thereby abstract and preserve its essence from the contingencies of history.

I sketch this range of critical responses in order to suggest that measure is no monolith, as far as the eighteenth century is concerned, but instead a source of perpetual, if often implicit, dispute about the very grounds of literary criticism. The category of measure, I argue, delimits a vibrant set of debates about literary theory – a series of attempts, in a variety of discursive domains, to define the object of literary criticism, to establish the degree to which it is subject to measurement, to formalize the methods by which these measures are to be interpreted, and to ascertain how these measures can be read as philosophically or historically or culturally significant. The eighteenth century's fascination with poetic numbers not only fathers the controversial notion that literature might be measureable, but it also compels critics from Dryden to Johnson to reflect on the epistemological foundations of literary critical judgment. In this respect, the discourse of measure gives rise to an acutely self-reflexive sort of literary criticism – not merely the tidy list of neoclassical doctrines often ascribed to Dryden, Pope, and others, but instead a critical conversation preoccupied with establishing what John Unsworth terms our "scholarly primitives," or the basic axioms and functions on which the entire superstructure of literary interpretation depends.[17]

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[15] Joshua Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis: or, An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols* (London: J. Nichols, 1779), 14.

[16] Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis,* 14.

"Poetic Numbers" also makes the case that eighteenth-century discussions of measure are not merely of literary historical importance but also of cultural importance, insofar as they stage and contribute to broader Enlightenment debates about the grounds of perception and knowledge. This connection arises from the fact that it is all but impossible to disentangle talk of prosody from assumptions about human cognition. For instance, the belief, memorably espoused by T. S. Eliot, that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood"[18] was held true in the eighteenth century largely on prosodic grounds: poetic numbers were considered an elemental object of perception, a vector of intuition prior to understanding. For Pope, the beauty of Homer's numbers can be felt even by those who are unable to comprehend the verse: "This is so great a Truth, that whoever will but consult the Tune of his Verses even without understanding them… will find more Sweetness, Variety, and Majesty of Sound, than in any other Language or Poetry."[19] This view may sound a bit rosy, but it expresses a belief fundamental to the Lockean theory of mind. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke devotes special attention to the role played by "number" in human cognition:

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[17] John Unsworth, "Scholarly Primitives: What Methods Do Humanities Researchers Have in Common, and How Might Our Tools Reflect This?" Symposium on "Humanities Computing: Formal Methods, Experimental Practice." King's College, London. 13 May 2000.

[18] T. S. Eliot, "Dante," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 206.

> [E]very object our senses are employed about; every idea in our understandings; every thought of our minds, brings this idea along with it. And therefore it is the most intimate to our thoughts, as well as it is, in its agreement to all other things, the most universal idea we have. For number applies itself to men, angels, actions, thoughts; everything that either doth exist, or can be imagined.[20]

Although Locke is famous for rejecting the existence of "innate" ideas, he is compelled in this moment to admit the existence of a rather similar construct: an idea so "intimate to our thoughts" that one cannot help but deem it "universal." Number, for Locke, mediates everything: it is the bedrock of sensation and imagination. Subtending one's interactions with the physical and spiritual world, prior even to one's perception of language and thought, is the sensation of number, about which our faculties are perpetually employed. The notion that one is always, often unbeknownst to oneself, *measuring* things – be they men, angels, actions, thoughts, or verses – is axiomatic to Locke, for whom "*Habits*, especially such as are begun very early, come, at last, to *produce actions in us, which often escape our observation*."[21]

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[19] Alexander Pope, *The* Iliad *of Homer: Translated by Alexander Pope*, ed. Steven Shankman (London: Penguin, 1996), 10.

[20] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 205; 2.16.1.

[21] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* 147; 2.9.10. (Locke's italics.)

These habits of measurement drew together poets and philosophers during the eighteenth century – as, for instance, amid the reception of James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry. Ostensibly translated out of an ancient form of Erse or Gaelic meter, Macpherson prints these fragments as prose:

> Here was the din of arms; and here the groans of the dying. Mournful are the wars of Fingal! O Connal! it was here thou didst fall. Thine arm was like a storm; thy sword, a beam of the sky; thy height, a rock on the plain; thine eyes, a furnace of fire. Louder than a storm was thy voice, when thou confoundedst the field. Warriors fell by thy sword, as the thistle by the staff of a boy.[22]

As if led by instinct, though, Macpherson's most interested readers began to seek a metrical signal amidst the noise. In a letter to David Dalyrymple, David Hume would opine that

> [t]here appeared to me many verses in his prose, and all of them in the same measure with Mr Shenstone's famous ballad:
>
> Ye shepherds so careless and free,
> Whose flocks never carelessly roam, &c.
>
> Pray ask Mr Gray, whether he made the same remark, and whether he thinks it a blemish?[23]

Thomas Gray, deeply smitten with the figure of Ossian, did not even need to remark on it – in a letter citing one of Macpherson's fragments, the poet would simply transverse these notional units into lines without comment.[24] Such was the tendency to perceive poetry as number that Macpherson's prose fragments seemed effortlessly to offer up a hidden metrical pattern to the reader. In this instance, number is no mere ornament to a certain species of literariness but a key condition of its possibility and perception.

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[22] James Macpherson, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (Edinburgh: G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760), 24.

[23] David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J. Y. T. Grieg (Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 1:331.

[24] Thomas Gray, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 3 vols., ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, rev. H. W. Starr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Letter 315; 29 June 1760.

Yet the perception of number, despite its presumed primacy, is by no means taken for granted. Discussing ancient Welsh poetry in his commonplace book, Gray would write that even if one is "entirely unacquainted with the Language… one may perceive ^ *something* of the Measure."[25] Gray echoes Pope's remark about the beauty of Homer, but only up to a point. The poet's interlineal addition of "something" is pregnant: its hesitancy and second-guessing demonstrate the degree to which these questions of measure converge with, and dramatize, Enlightenment debates about the basis of perception and understanding that we tend to associate with names such as Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. As Simon Jarvis remarks, "it is hardly possible to take more than a couple of steps within prosody before running into the most fundamental issues in the philosophy of mind."[26] This is especially true for eighteenth-century poets and critics, for whom to treat seriously of poetic measure is necessarily to question the basis of one's own perceptions and judgments, as when Johnson warns that "[i]t is scarcely to be doubted, that on many occasions we make the musick which we imagine ourselves to hear; that we modulate the poem by our own disposition, and ascribe to the numbers the effects of the sense."[27] To theorize poetic measure in the eighteenth century is necessarily to theorize understanding; it is a discourse steeped in epistemological questions and, in this sense, a discourse of Enlightenment.

Along these lines, this study proposes a new account of the relationship between eighteenth-century poetry and Enlightenment thought. Often, scholars choose to regard these categories as adversarial on the grounds that Enlightenment philosophers are notoriously suspicious of poetry – Locke, for instance, curtly dismisses verse in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), where he calls on parents to have their child's poetic inclinations "stifled, and suppressed, as much as may be."[28] At the heart of these suspicions is the conviction that poetic figuration undermines the ability to use language as a tool of logic, as when Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* (1651), categorizes all "metaphors and tropes of speech" as an "abuse" of language that "can never be true grounds of any ratiocination."[29] This presumed opposition between poetry and Enlightenment thought is axiomatic both for those who view the Enlightenment's dogged pursuit of ratiocination as its greatest achievement and equally for those who view this pursuit of ratiocination as an instrumentalization of true reason. Alluding to Locke's assertion that number fundamentally mediates human understanding, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer charge, instead, that such a presumption forecloses the full range of intellectual activity: "For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry."[30] Tellingly, Adorno and Horkheimer conceive number and poetry to be mutually exclusive: whatever can be measured is not poetry, and whatever is poetical cannot be measured. Poetry, in this line of thought, has come to seem a bulwark, a means of resisting what Alain Badiou characterizes as "the current empire of number," or the positivistic imperatives that make up what he elsewhere terms "the matheme."[31]

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[25] Thomas Gray, Commonplace Book, 3 vols., Library of Pembroke College, Cambridge, 2:799. Reproduced as reel one of *Poetic Commonplace Books and Manuscripts of Thomas Gray, 1716-1771* (Reading, UK: Adam Matthew Publications, 1991). Pagination of the Commonplace Book is continuous across the three volumes.

[26] Simon Jarvis, "Prosody as Tradition," *The Dalhousie Review* 79, no. 2 (1999), 162.

[27] Johnson, *Rambler* 94, *Works*, 4:136.

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[28] John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 230; section 174.

[29] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, with Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), 21-2; 1.4.

[30] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 5.

[31] See Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 1; and Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 18.

This opposition between number and poetry, although a vital force within romantic and post-romantic poetics, possesses limited explanatory force when it comes to eighteenth-century verse. To the extent that this opposition relies, as noted, on the tacit equation of poetry with figuration, it presumes a definition of poetry that many writers prior to the nineteenth century would have found strange. As de Man rightfully reminds us, studies that "take the metaphor as their starting point for an investigation of literature in general," and of eighteenth-century literature in particular, pursue "an approach that would have been inconceivable for Boileau, for Pope, and even still for Diderot."[32] For writers such as these, the characteristic feature of poetry is not metaphor but measure; it is "by the musick of metre," Johnson writes, "that poetry has been discriminated in all languages."[33] In this respect, far from being a distortion of the mind's ratiocinative activities, poetry could be seen to exemplify the mind's fundamentally mensurative disposition: inherent in the media of poetry (if not its semantic content) was to be found an emblem of the mind's workings, sortings, and measurings. This belief, which prompted many eighteenth-century scholars to regard poetic measure as a privileged index of cognition, lent the study of metrics a philosophical significance that has largely been overlooked in accounts of the development of Enlightenment thought.

I have chosen to approach this constellation of poetic, literary critical, and philosophical concerns in a chronological fashion. The first chapter, "Dryden's Riddle and the Discourse of Numbers," lays the theoretical and historical groundwork for the chapters to follow by relating how poets and critics of the period 1650-1800 came to regard prosody as a privileged site of literary meaning. This chapter narrates the rise of a distinct Enlightenment discourse directed at the thorny issue of measure: a discourse caught between the traditional art of classical metrics and modern empiricist measurement. Taking as its starting point a riddle John Dryden poses in his preface to *The Works of Virgil* (1697) about the prosodic source of poetic beauty, and tracing literary and philosophical responses to this riddle over the course of the century, this chapter demonstrates how eighteenth-century treatments of poetic measure, far from signifying a narrow, technical preoccupation, experiment creatively with a wide array of empirical and humanistic reading practices. In this respect, the chapter makes the case that the category of measure and its attendant discourse of numbers played a pivotal role in the formation of literary criticism as a robust field of inquiry.

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[32] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 2.

[33] Samuel Johnson, "Milton," *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, 4 vols., ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 1:294.

My second chapter, "Pope's Mechanic Art; or, a Brief History of Machine Reading," investigates how prosody comes to be understood by critics as a mechanism of meaning at work beneath the limits of human perception, thereby requiring the development of new forms of critical observation in addition to "mere" reading. It focuses, in particular, on the critical controversy that initially greeted Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733-4), many of whose readers suspected that Pope's verse concealed imperceptible heterodoxies not only from readers and critics, but perhaps also from Pope himself. By uncovering overlooked connections between this controversy and an Enlightenment history of verse-making machines and poetic automata, this chapter contends that Pope's poem and the responses it elicited helped to inaugurate critical habits of measurement that often anticipated and may continue to shed light on current experiments with quantitative formalism and the digital humanities.

My third chapter, "Gray's Uncouth Rhymes: Measure, Memory, and Literary History," explores the close and unexpected relationship between metrics, historiography, and theory of mind in eighteenth-century England. It focuses on Thomas Gray's unfinished *History of English*

Poetry, to which the poet devoted nearly a decade of research, as well as his final odes, a set of imitations of ancient verse forms that was to have played an important role in this scholarly project. The *History* is often dismissed as a mere taxonomy of metrical forms: it catalogs particular rhythms and measures, but it does not seem to offer a coherent narrative of English literary history. Yet by reconsidering this work and Gray's final odes in the context of eighteenth-century verse mnemonics, which held a controversial place in Enlightenment historiography, I argue that Gray's writings offer a critique of narrative as a paradigm through which to conceive of both history and cognition. As both a poet and an historian, Gray understands metrical phenomena not simply as stylistic markers of the literary past but as figures for the process and challenge of fashioning historical knowledge.

My final chapter, "Rugged Science, Empty Sound: Johnson and the Language of Literary Measurement," investigates the interrelationship between literary criticism and Enlightenment attempts to study poetry and language as embodied phenomena. It focuses, in particular, on how Samuel Johnson's use of prosody as a critical tool in *The Rambler*, *The Idler*, and the *Lives of the Poets* is shaped by, and responds to, a school of "physiologist" grammarians committed to understanding poetry through its rhythmic effects on readers' bodies. By resituating Johnson's critical labors within the ambit of this discourse, this chapter argues for prosody's status as a privileged site of dialogue and dispute between the worlds of eighteenth-century art and science. Not only do Johnson's writings anticipate many of the epistemological problems that attend modern attempts to understand literature in cognitive terms, but they also illuminate and interrogate the habits of language – notably, the use of poetic tropes and figures – that continue to sustain these experiments with literary measurement.

Ultimately, this dissertation considers the eighteenth century's distinct fascination with prosody as a foundational moment in the history of literary criticism: a moment whose acute self-consciousness and misgiving about literary critical methods, as well as about whether and how these methods can aspire to count and account for aspects of literary experience, anticipate many of the methodological questions that mark our own time. In this respect, "Poetic Numbers" takes the history of prosodic scholarship as an opportunity to re-assess literary criticism's relationship with its quantitative past and present, and to argue that critical practices born of the eighteenth century continue to inform contemporary beliefs about the tools with which we might measure literature as well as the very premise that measurement ought to be the critic's aim.

Chapter 1:

Dryden's Riddle and the Discourse of Numbers

> Prefaces to poems, nothing special about verse-structure, speaks of "numbers" without explaining.
>
> – Entry for "John Dryden" in T. S. Omond's *English Metrists* (1903)[1]

In his Dedication of *The Aeneis* (1697) to the Earl of Mulgrave, Dryden poses a theorem in want of a proof:

> I have long had by me the materials of an English *prosodia* containing all the mechanical rules of versification, wherein I have treated, with some exactness, of the feet, the quantities, and the pauses. The French and Italians know nothing of the two first; at least their best poets have not practised them. As for the pauses, Malherbe first brought them into France within this last century; and we see how they adorn their alexandrines. But, as Virgil propounds a riddle [in his third Eclogue] which he leaves unsolved –
>
> *dic, quibus in terris, inscripti nomina regum*
> *nascantur flores, et Phyllida solus habeto.*
>
> so I will give your Lordship another, and leave the exposition of it to your acute judgment. I am sure there are few who make verses, have observed the sweetness of these two lines in [John Denham's] *Cooper's Hill*:
>
> Though deep, yet clear; though gentle, yet not dull;
> Strong without rage; without o'erflowing, full.
>
> And there are yet fewer who can find the reason of that sweetness. I have given it to some of my friends in conversation, and they have allowed the criticism to be just. But since the evil of false quantities is difficult to be cured in any modern language; since the French and the Italians, as well as we, are yet ignorant what feet are to be used in heroic poetry; since I have not strictly observed those rules myself, which I can teach to others; since I pretend to no dictatorship among my fellow-poets; since, if I should instruct some of them to make well-running verses, they want genius to give them strength as well as sweetness; and, above all, since your Lordship has advised me not to publish that little which I know, I look on your counsel as your command which I shall observe inviolably till you shall please to revoke it, and leave me at liberty to make my thoughts public.[2]

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[1] T. S. Omond, *English Metrists* (Tunbridge Wells: R. Pelton, 1903), 66.

[2] John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy, and Other Critical Essay*, 2 vols., ed. George Watson (New York: Dutton, 1962), 2:236-37.

Although Dryden presents his riddle as if it were similar to Virgil's – both, at a glance, seem merely to be couplets on the page – the two puzzles are fundamentally distinct. Virgil's riddle is precisely that: an enigmatic question posed by one shepherd to another in competition for a woman's hand. ("Tell me in what lands grow flowers inscribed with royal names – and have Phyllis for yourself."[3]) By contrast, the couplet that seems to constitute Dryden's riddle is neither Dryden's nor a riddle *per se*. The passage is drawn from John Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1655), and it would become arguably the most famous couplet in eighteenth-century England – as a commonplace imitated by poets, a model reproduced in anthologies, and an aesthetic object parsed by critics – thanks all but entirely to Dryden's presentation of it here. Unlike Virgil's riddle, the couplet poses no question in need of solution. It is grammatically unintelligible as it stands, an appositive phrase that originally formed part of Denham's address to the Thames:

> O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
> My great example, as it is my theme!
> Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,
> Strong without rage, without ore-flowing full.[4]

But the couplet's intelligibility as grammar does not interest Dryden. For while Virgil's riddle seeks a response that is continuous with the grammatical world of the poem (the likely answer: *in the lands of Sparta and Troy*), Dryden's riddle challenges one to perceive and account for something of an altogether different order: a subterranean structure of "sweetness," a phenomenon prior to or unmoored from the couplet's status as sentential discourse. The essential difference is that Dryden's riddle isn't *on* the page: any answer to it will need to be spoken in a language that the poem itself does not provide.

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[3] Virgil, *Eclogues*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge; London: Harvard UP, 1999), 3.106-07.

[4] Brendan O Hehir, *Expans'd Hieroglyphicks: A Critical Edition of Sir John Denham's Coopers Hill* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 150-51; ll. 189-92.

Further complicating the riddle is the peculiarity of its placement and rhetoric. Amidst the preface's otherwise exhaustive discussion of Virgil's artistry – his handling of plot, character, allusion, and expression – this passage is conspicuously coy. It claims, only then to withhold, the sort of technical knowledge that Dryden is usually eager to parse. His style pointedly heightens this effect. In lieu of his characteristically terse prose, Dryden indulges here in a rather Ciceronian construction: a network of closely imbricated qualifiers ("But since…") that incrementally amplify the significance of the very knowledge he will withhold. The distance between the reader and the secret, and the supposed un-intuitiveness of the riddle's answer, are reiterated at every turn. Not only is the solution hidden behind a veil of aristocratic elitism (such that one finds oneself eavesdropping on Dryden's conversation with the Earl of Mulgrave), but it is couched in something approaching a disciplinary elitism. For if there are "few who make verses" who have even "observed the sweetness," and yet fewer still "who can find the reason," then the solution to the riddle would seem to rest not with the average reader, nor even the poet, but instead with the critic who, like a disciple of Pythagoras, may perhaps share his arcana with a few learned friends but is at no liberty to make his thoughts public.

This posture of literary critical coyness cannot be disentangled from Dryden's more mundane and seemingly discordant remark that "I have long had by me the materials of an English *prosodia* containing all the mechanical rules of versification." I term this comment "discordant" because it would seem to offer to share the very sort of prosodic knowledge that Dryden's riddle withholds. Scholars have sometimes taken Dryden at his word here and – supposing him to have indeed composed a lost treatise on versification – attempt to recuperate such a theory from his "scattered critical statements" as well as his own poetic practice.[5] To do so, however, is to ignore both the status of the *prosodia* as well as this claim's embeddedness in the peculiar rhetoric of this passage. In 1697, the term *prosodia* would have connoted something drily grammatical: a set of prescriptive and technical rules for versification, rather than a "critical statement" of any imagination. It was not, in other words, a species of scholarship with which the serious poet was expected to involve himself. Only with some bafflement could Samuel Johnson, in his life of "Milton" (1779), admit mention of Milton's *Accedence Commenc't Grammar* (1669), "a little book which has nothing remarkable, but that its author, who had been lately defending the supreme powers of his country and was then writing *Paradise Lost*, could descend from his elevation to rescue children from the perplexity of grammatical confusion."[6] That Dryden would assign himself a task routinely fulfilled by provincial schoolmasters ought to take the reader by surprise. The suggestion that he has laid up a draft of a *prosodia* is as if T. S. Eliot had mentioned his plans for a rhyming dictionary: one is perhaps less interested in the work itself than in the fact of finding it done at all.

I stress the oddity of Dryden's supposedly missing treatise because its notional existence serves to heighten the challenge posed by the riddle. It is not simply that, here again, Dryden "speaks of 'numbers' without explaining." For if the poet's talk of Denham coyly withholds a particular critical explanation, then the mention of the missing *prosodia* withholds a more general one: a set of rules and principles concerning the topic of poetic numbers in the abstract, and thus a formal system for parsing all such beauties. If the riddle pointedly questions the reader's acuity (*why are these lines sweet?*), then the specter of the missing *prosodia* generalizes this challenge (*by what method can we account for verse's sweetness?*). One can perhaps sympathize with Omond's frustration: Dryden seems to go out of his way to obscure both his practice and his theory with respect to this topic.

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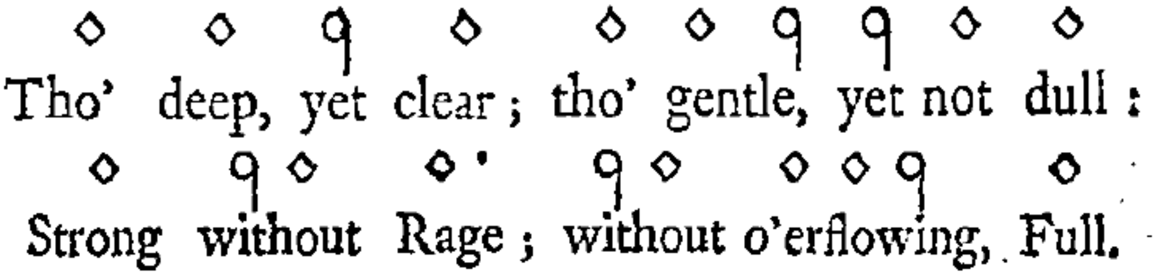
[5] R. D. Jameson, "Notes on Dryden's Lost Prosodia," *Modern Philology* 20, no. 3 (1923): 241.

[6] Johnson, "Milton," *Lives*, 1:264.

I belabor Dryden's riddle not only because it would attract a series of solutions from some of the eighteenth century's most notable poets and critics (e.g. Pope, Bentley, Dennis, and Johnson, to name but a few), but also because it exemplifies the peculiarly eighteenth-century belief that the mystique and the mechanics of poetry are so closely bound as to be indissoluble. To inquire after the source of poetic beauty in periods of literary history other than the eighteenth century is to invite consideration of such weighty ideas as Truth, Imagination, and Human Nature. By contrast, it is a striking characteristic of eighteenth-century criticism that, although it certainly gives these ideas their due, it also routinely approaches the question of poetic beauty as if it were a theorem to be proven through careful deliberation on accent, quantity, meter, and rhythm. The very fact that the riddle would become something of an inkblot test for eighteenth-century critics (see figures 1.1 and 1.2) – a touchstone with which to demonstrate one's critical acumen – reveals something of the period's pronounced preoccupation with matters prosodic.



Tho' deep, yet clear; tho' gentle, yet not dull:
Strong without Rage; without o'erflowing, Full.

Figure 1.1. Diagrammatic solution to Dryden's riddle. Samuel Say. *Poems on Several Occasions: and Two Critical Essays…* (London: John Hughs, 1745). 152-3.

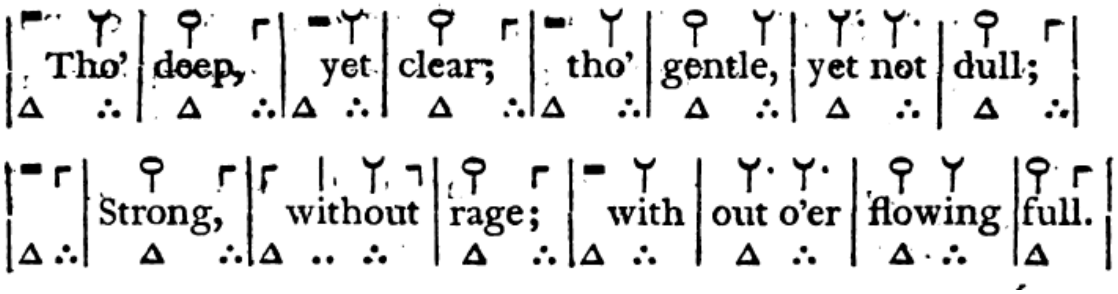

Tho' deep, yet clear; tho' gentle, yet not dull;
Strong, without rage; with out o'er flowing full.

Figure 1.2. Diagrammatic solution to Dryden's riddle. Joshua Steele. *Prosodia Rationalis: or, An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech*. (London: J. Nichols, 1779). 31.

To consider Dryden's riddle and the responses it invites over the course of the eighteenth century is to recover the artistic and intellectual importance of "poetic numbers," a category central both to poetry and to the emergence of literary criticism during this period. The Enlightenment inherited from Classical tradition the view that number (or quantity) is an immutable property of language; it likewise inherited the corollary that poetry, insofar as it measures language, offers the clearest glimpse of language's numerical essence. The first section of this chapter explores the emergence of a distinct critical and philosophical discourse of number during the eighteenth century. I term this discourse "distinct" because its participants imagined a radical break (rooted in method) between their theory of number and that of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century forebears: whereas early modern scholars had couched their talk of number in the diaphanous language of the *musica speculativa*, eighteenth-century scholars would rigorously measure poetry and thereby fashion (they imagined) an empirical science of numbers. Yet far from corroborating this convenient progress narrative, I argue that their attempts enact and shed light on a "strange empiricism" within the republic of letters – a species of criticism whose measurements do not resolve but tend rather to *proliferate* questions about the basis of literary critical knowledge.

The subsequent section of this chapter makes the case that this "strange empiricism" far from being an outlier within eighteenth-century literary history, bodies forth a set of responses presumed to be implicit in the reading of verse. I focus in this section on Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* (1697), whose notorious metrical complexity critics routinely sought to analyze with the help of diagrams. Rather than interpret such diagramming as an aberration from reading, I instead argue that eighteenth-century readers praised the poem for its ability to elicit precisely these sorts of experimental responses. To the extent that both the narrative and the form of Dryden's ode necessarily invite readers to theorize poetic number (whether implicitly or explicitly), they conceive the experience of the poem to be continuous with its empirical parsing.

The chapter's final section elaborates on this continuity between poetry and criticism through an exploration of eighteenth-century solutions to Dryden's riddle. Disarticulating Denham's verse in search of its elusive "sweetness," these solutions gained in complexity and abstraction throughout the period. Increasingly, they conceived of the couplet's beauty as an effect absent from, or concealed by, the language of the verse itself: a properly non-linguistic phenomenon that one could glimpse only by recourse to diagram. Yet at the same time that these experiments seem to dissolve poetry in measurement, they enact, I argue, their own peculiar form of poesis. Returning to the very sort of creation they would abstract themselves from, these experiments fashion through diagram new objects of wonder that do not so much resolve Dryden's riddle as project this paradox into new, often creative forms.

When Dryden warned in *Sylvae* (1685) that "many a fair precept in poetry is like a seeming demonstration in the mathematics: very specious in the diagram, but failing in the mechanic operation,"[7] he hinted at a tension between theory and practice, and between poetry and its systematic analysis, that eighteenth-century readers would regard not as an injunction to keep these realms of intellectual activity distinct from one another, but rather as an invitation – much like his riddle – to explore the ways in which poetry and theory inform one another and shape the experience of reading.

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[7] Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, 2:19.

§ Numbers and Numerosity

> I once heard a learned man say that the motions of the sun, moon, and stars constituted time; and I did not agree. For why should not the motions of all bodies constitute time? What if the lights of heaven should cease, and a potter's wheel still turn round: would there be no time by which we might measure those rotations and say either that it turned at equal intervals, or, if it moved now more slowly and now more quickly, that some rotations were longer and others shorter? And while we were saying this, would we not also be speaking in time? Or would there not be in our words some syllables that were long and others short, because the first took a longer time to sound, and the others a shorter time? O God, grant men to see in a small thing the notions that are common to all things, both great and small.
>
> – Augustine, *Confessions*[8]

Whether meter is "the very Essence of Poetry, properly so called" has long been an open question.[9] For every Scaliger who insists that a poet derives his title not "from the fact that [he] employs the fictitious, but from the fact that he makes verse,"[10] there has been a Sidney to counter that "verse [is] but an ornament and no cause to poetry."[11] While acknowledging this dispute, however, one must be careful not to confuse claims of sufficiency with those of necessity. When Dryden's patron the Earl of Mulgrave remarks that "Number, and Rhime, and that harmonious Sound, / Which never does the Ear with *Harshness* wound, / Are *necessary*, yet but *vulgar* Arts,"[12] he disputes meter's aesthetic merits at the same time that he reiterates its objective necessity. Throughout the early modern period, and notwithstanding one's particular view of meter's importance or ornamentality, writers took for granted the existence of a phenomenon presumed to subtend not only verse but all language: what the English would come to refer to as "numbers."

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[8] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and ed. Albert Cook Outler (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2002), 230-31; 11.23.

[9] Joseph Trapp, *Lectures on Poetry* (London: C. Hitch and C. Davis, 1742), 19. These are a translation of his *Praelectiones poeticae*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Bernard Lintott, 1711-19).

[10] J. C. Scaliger, *Select Translations from Scaliger's* Poetics, trans. Frederick Morgan Padelford (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1905), 8; I.2.

[11] Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966), 27.

In early English literary criticism, the fact of numerosity is prior to questions of literary taste and tradition. In an essay on prosody included in John Greenwood's *Essay Towards a Practical English Grammar* (1722), the critic John Dennis defines verse as, at base, a "numerous Discourse, or a Discourse that is writ in *Numbers*." Although one might be inclined to ask Dennis what these "*Numbers*" actually consist of, the issue of consistence is what the category of numerosity tends to elude. "A numerous Discourse," explains Dennis, is one "whose Parts are measured by such a Number of Feet or of Syllables: *Numbers* are necessary to all Sorts of *Poetry*, both *Gothique* and *Antique*."[13] Whether the numbered object is a foot or a syllable is less germane, for Dennis, than the process of enumeration itself. Prosodies, languages, and traditions that would otherwise seem to be fundamentally distinct (e.g. the "*Gothique* and *Antique*") are perceived as continuous by recourse to the abstract concept of numerosity. This elusive notion likewise allows Dennis to bracket questions of taste. That "*Numbers*… are *made* musical and delightful to the Ear" ("*made*" is my emphasis) implies that they are not essentially so.[14] Before it is meaning or music, poetry consists of numbers – howsoever elusively defined.

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[12] John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave [1st Duke of Buckingham and Normanby], *An Essay on Poetry*, 2nd ed. (London, 1691), 5.

[13] John Dennis, "Of Prosody," in John Greenwood, *An Essay Towards a Practical English Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London: John Clark, 1722), 266.

The abstract priority accorded to numerosity allowed it to transcend debates about the formal basis of English verse (e.g. whether it is accentual or quantitative) and to persist as a category of analysis in spite of seemingly contradictory theories of meter.[15] On the one hand, the notion of numerosity, by dint of its derivation from the Latin *numerus*, prompted critics such as Richard Bentley to insist that English verse ultimately derives from classical quantity – that, for instance, the pentameter of Shakespeare and Milton is merely an abbreviated Latin trimeter "regulated by both arsis… and quantity."[16] On these grounds critics could arrogate to vernacular numbers the same immutability accorded to classical ones for well over a millennium: just as Augustine could find in the syllable an elemental unit of temporal experience, so too could the authors of the *Encyclopedie*, in their entry on "Quantité" (1765), maintain that "syllables are not measured with respect to the accidental slowness or rapidity of their pronunciation, but with respect to the immutable proportions that render them long or short."[17] But while numerosity partook of quantity, it was not limited to it. The shift after mid-century toward an accentualist view of English verse did not spell the end of numerosity's immutability, since those who argued on behalf of accent abandoned the language of quantity without surrendering the idea of numbers. For instance, when Thomas Jefferson, in his "Thoughts on English Prosody" (1786), argues that accent is "the basis of English verse," he nonetheless maintains than "in any rhythmical composition the ear is pleased to find at certain regular intervals a pause where it may rest, by which it may divide the composition into parts, as a piece of music is divided into bars."[18] The logic is fundamentally numerical, and the science – even if it is supposed to be ruled by accent – is still one that Jefferson can unquestioningly refer to as "poetical numbers."[19]

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[14] Dennis, "Of Prosody," 266.

[15] On these debates, see Paul Fussell, *Theory of Prosody in Eighteenth-Century England* (New London, Conn.: Connecticut College, 1954).

[16] See Richard Bentley, *Publii Terentii Afri Comoediae…* (Cambridge: Cornelius Crownfield, 1726), x-xi; and Kristine Louise Haugen, *Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard UP, 2011), 181.

[17] "On mesure les syllabes… non pas relativement à la lenteur ou à la vîtesse accidentelle de la prononciation, mais relativement aux proportions immuables qui les rendent ou longues ou breves." *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, 28 vols. (Paris: Chez Briasson, 1751-1772), s.v. "Quantité." This entry is by Nicolas Beauzée, but the remark cited is attributed to Pierre-Joseph Thoulier Olivet, *Traité de la prosodie françoise* (Paris: Gandouin, 1736).

As Jefferson's mention of the ear attests, numerosity was considered not only an immutable property of language but also a fundamental category of perception and thought. In 1703, Leibniz posited a distinct faculty of mind – what he suggestively termed an "occult arithmetic" – that intuits the numerical order latent in harmony:

> [T]he confused perception of the pleasure or pleasures that are found in consonances or dissonances consists in an occult arithmetic. The soul counts the beating of the body in vibration, and when these beats recur regularly in short intervals, it finds pleasure. In this way, it makes its tabulations without knowing it. That's how it engages, moreover, in an infinitude of other small, very apt operations that, as they are neither voluntary nor known but by the notable effect to which they finally lead, produce in us a clear sentiment but also a confused one, because its sources are not perceived.[20]

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[18] Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 598; 614.

[19] Jefferson, *Writings*, 593.

[20] "[L]a perception confuse de l'agrement ou des agremens qui se trouve dans les consonances ou dissonances consiste dans un Arithmetique occulte. L'âme compte les battemens du corps sonnant qui est en vibration, et quand ces battemens se recontrent reguliermemt à des intervalles court, elle y trouve du plaisir. Ainsi elle fait ses comptes sans le savoir. C'est ainsi qu'elle fait encore une infinité d'autres petites operations très justes, quoyqu'elles ne soyent point volontaires ny connues que par l'effet notable ou elles aboutissent enfin, en nous donnant un sentiment clair mais confus, parceque ses sources n'y sont point apperçues." Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Eclaircissement des difficultés que Monsieur Bayle a trouvées dans le systeme nouveau de l'union de l'ame et du corps," *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 7 vols., ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1875-90), 4:550-51. For a brief discussion, see John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961), 12 (where this passage is misquoted).

For Leibniz, numerosity is a category of perception. While the airy pleasures of harmony may seem mysterious, they ultimately derive from our involuntary, imperceptible tabulations: unbeknownst to ourselves, we experience their beauty by counting and judging "immutable proportions." In the 1770s, James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, would characterize the occult arithmetic of numerosity in a manner anticipating Kantian intuition:

> I am convinced that there is a natural propensity in the human mind to apply number and measure to every thing we hear; and indeed to every thing, as it is a necessary operation of intellect, being that by which intellect creates to itself its proper objects. For, though sense perceives things indiscriminately, and as it were in the lump, intellect apprehends nothing that is not reduced to number, measure, or order of some kind or another…. [T]his propensity of the mind is previous to any opinion or determination of the will… [and] is undoubtedly the foundation of all rhythm.[21]

Even Locke, whose fame rests on his rejection of innate ideas, cannot help but accord to numerosity a privileged cognitive function. Number, he writes, "is the most intimate to our Thoughts, as well as it is, in its Agreement to all other things, the most universal *Idea* we have;" it "is that, which the Mind makes use of in *measuring all things,* that by us are measurable."[22] Leibniz's arithmetic, Monboddo's intuition, and Locke's "universal *Idea*" are a far cry, of course, from Augustine's view that harmony – structuring elements of creation "both great and small," from the music of the moving spheres down to the elements of human speech – "participates in divine being";[23] yet they continue to share with this view a notion of number as a bedrock of human experience.

Thus, numerosity as an abstract concept. Yet what of the actual experience of writing, reading, and scanning poetic numbers? Throughout the early modern period, the theoretical view of numerosity as an innate aspect of all language and thought is complicated, if not contradicted, by the practical challenges associated with composing and reading these elusive numbers. The English poet's formative experience of numerosity – as a practice, rather than a theory – would have arisen from the schoolroom chore of composing Latin verse. The challenge of composing verse in a dead language would have been doubly alienating. First, there is the issue of the dead language itself, whose inertia has the effect of objectifying thought:

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[21] James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, in a letter published in Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, 94.

[22] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 205, 209; 2.16.1, 2.16.8. (Locke's italics.)

[23] William H. Pahlka, *Saint Augustine's Meter and George Herbert's Will* (Kent, Ohio; London: Kent State UP, 1987), 16-17.

> Devoid of baby-talk, insulated from the earliest life of childhood where language has its deepest psychic roots, a first language to none of its users, pronounced across Europe in often mutually unintelligible ways but always written the same way, Learned Latin was a striking exemplification of the power of writing for isolating discourse and of the unparalleled productivity of such isolation.[24]

In his dedication of *Troilus and Cressida* (1679) to the Earl of Sunderland, Dryden praises this very process of abstraction when he remarks "I am often put to a stand, in considering whether what I write be the Idiom of the Tongue, or false Grammar, and nonsence couch'd beneath that specious name of *Anglicisme*; and have no other way to clear my doubts, but by translating my *English* into *Latine*, and thereby trying what sence the words will bear in a more stable language."[25] The inert grammatical categories of Latin exist for Dryden as a realm of pure reason: a cerebral and seemingly timeless discourse that objectifies thought by divesting it of its familiarity and apparent intuitiveness. For Walter J. Ong, this sort of divestment helped to "mak[e] possible the exquisitely abstract world of medieval scholasticism and of the new mathematical modern science which followed on the scholastic experience."[26]

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[24] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York: Methuen, 1982), 112.

[25] John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols., general eds. Edward Niles Hooker, H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1956-2000), 13:222.

[26] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 112.

Further compounding this experience of abstraction was the challenge of composing, in particular, "that numberous kind of writing which is called verse."[27] If Learned Latin appealed to such as Dryden because it seemed to distinguish true thought from fallible intuition, then the challenges associated with composing Latin numbers only served to undermine intuition all the more. As Derek Attridge explains, nothing about quantity would have seemed intuitive to the English schoolboy during the seventeenth century: "[A]lthough quantity was said to be in the Latin he spoke, it was not there in the same way as accent was, immediately accessible in such a way that if he pronounced a word with the wrong accent, it could be heard as wrong."[28] Drilled to scan verse for "immutable" phenomena that had to be memorized or calculated rather than felt, the schoolboy would have encountered the realm of numbers as an unintuitive and often recondite puzzle. Ultimately, "at the level of unformulated attitudes, the way in which the notion of quantity was learned, and the fact that it bore little relation to spoken Latin, could have had no other effect than that of making it seem something abstract and intellectual."[29]

Numerosity, in this respect, attained the status of a paradox: in *theory*, it was an immutable property of spoken language and a fundamentally human intuition; in *practice*, it was an intensely acquired and often enigmatic compositional and reading process primarily associated with dead languages. It is little surprising, then, that seventeenth-century critics often sought to resolve the paradox of numerosity by recourse to an equally elusive critical category:

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[27] Sidney, *Defense*, 27.

[28] Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (London: Cambridge UP, 1974), 62.

[29] Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables*, 66.

that of nescioquiddity, or the *je ne sais quoi*.[30] René Rapin's remark, in his *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry* (1674), that "there is a certain *I know not what* in the *Numbers*, which is understood by few, and notwithstanding gives great *delight* in *Poetry*,"[31] rehearses a common critical gesture: it characterizes numerosity as an intuitive source of "*delight*" while, at the same time, shrouding it in mystery. At the root of Dryden's allusion to the "silent graces" and "hidden beauties" of his own style, and to the "thousand secrets of versification" of which Virgil is master,[32] is the concept of nescioquiddity. To the extent that it allows the Restoration critic to assert the existence of, and yet withhold access to, a realm of recondite critical theory as notionally important as it is little understood, nescioquiddity dramatizes a fundamental anxiety about the demonstrability of critical knowledge itself. Thus could Dominque Bouhours worry that "the *je ne sais quoi* is the sanctuary of ignorance, for it seems to me that we're forever saving ourselves with it when we don't know what to say."[33]

Scholars have tended to associate eighteenth-century poetics and the rise of modern literary criticism with a rejection of such ideas. For John Hollander and O. B. Hardison, the influence of nescioquiddity within musical and prosodic theory is soon foreclosed by "an age of empiricism" committed to "a systematic account of the workings of language and music."[34] By the eighteenth century, Hollander argues, "the old *musica speculativa* had largely given way to legitimate acoustical studies based on the joint development of classical physics and mathematical analysis, and to more or less professional discussions" of these matters.[35] In this view, the prosodic preoccupations of eighteenth-century poets and critics dramatize an unambiguously empirical urge: a desire to replace the elusive verbiage of "numbers" with actual, honest-to-goodness numbers. Dryden's enigmatic remarks about the sweetness of Denham's couplet can thus seem to represent one of the last gasps of a baroque theory on the eve of its rationalization.

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[30] For a recent discussion, see Richard Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

[31] René Rapin, *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry*, trans. Thomas Rymer (London: H. Herringman, 1674), 61; XXXVII. (Rymer's italics.)

[32] Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, 1:278; 2:235.

[33] "[L]e je ne sçay quoy est l'asyle de l'ignorance; car il me semble qu'on se sauve toûjours par là, quand on ne sçait plus que dire." See Dominique Bouhours, *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (Paris: S. Mabre-Cramoisy, 1671), 344.

[34] Hollander, *Untuning of the Sky*, 12; O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), 262.

Yet the view that "professional discussions" of prosody during the eighteenth century leverage legitimate empiricism and progressive systematization in order to dispel reliance on nescioquiddity is difficult to maintain. For well into Hollander's "age of empiricism," numerosity continues to bedevil scholars – if not as an aesthetic riddle, then as a disciplinary one. Eighteenth-century critics forever venture into the realm of numbers as if, like Bouhours's "sanctuary of ignorance," it were a field as yet untouched by the hand of empirical science. "[O]ur present subject," opines John Foster in 1762, "doth certainly as much fall under the judgement of sense, as of mere erudition. But although it is undoubtedly in its nature scientific as well as literary, it has hitherto been little considered as such."[36] Discussion of prosody is routinely characterized as provisional, as always anticipating some more systematic account. ("To treat of *Cadence* as one ought to do, would require an entire Treatise," apologizes Dennis before sharing his brief notes.[37]) At the heart of this disciplinary rhetoric is a perpetual misgiving about the very nature of the phenomena for which the prosodist seeks to account. Writers will routinely wrestle with the perceived ambiguity of such fundamental terms as *measure* (as when William Kenrick insists that "[b]y poetical measures I do not mean any number of syllables, joined together in the composition of what the ancients called a foot; because I do not find that our English verses are reducible to such elements, and therefore think it absurd to say they are composed of them") or *accent* (which Foster finds used "in four very wide and different senses, expressing sometimes elevation, sometimes prolongation of sound, sometimes a stress of voice compounded of the other two, and sometimes the artificial accentual mark").[38]

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[35] Hollander, *Untuning of the Sky*, 381.

[36] John Foster, *An Essay on the Different Nature of Accent and Quantity* (Eton: J. Pote, 1762), xvii.

[37] Dennis, "Of Prosody," 268.

Near the end of the eighteenth century, Joshua Steele could approach this venerable discipline as if a host of somber systematizers – little-known names such as Manwaring, Say, Mason, Kames, and Foster – had never written: "The puzzling obscurity relative to the *melody and measure* of speech, which has hitherto existed between modern critics and ancient grammarians, has been chiefly owing to a want of terms and characters, sufficient to distinguish clearly the several properties or accidents belonging to language."[39] In his conviction that the only thing lacking for a true science of numbers is a bit more definitional rigour, Steele sounds like none other than Locke; and yet insofar as Steele and other prosodists seem perpetually to characterize themselves as beginning anew – as being employed, like Locke, as "Under-Labourer[s] in clearing Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge"[40] – their empiricism is routinely inflected with anticipation and deferral. Eighteenth-century prosody may *sound* like empiricism – but it is an empiricism caught in a strange loop, forever expunging its own epistemological foundations. Perhaps a more apt glimpse of the eighteenth-century science of numbers rests with Daniel Webb when he confesses that "we find ourselves embarrassed in our attempts to reason on this subject, by the difficulty which attends the forming a clear idea of any natural relations between sound and sentiment."[41]

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[38] William Kenrick, *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (London: John and Francis Rivington, 1773), 48; Foster, *Essay*, xiii.

[39] Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, viii.

[40] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 10.

Particularly striking is the persistence, down to our own time, of this same sense of embarrassment. After reading the likes of Dennis, Foster, and Steele, it is hard to suppress a feeling of *déjà vu* on encountering René Wellek's and Austin Warren's survey of the field in the twentieth century. Because prosody, they remark,

> is a subject which has attracted an enormous amount of labour through the centuries… it might be supposed we need do little more than survey new metrical specimens and extend such studies to the news techniques of recent poetry. Actually, the very foundations and main criteria of metrics are still uncertain; and there is an astonishing amount of loose thinking and confused or shifting terminology even in standard treatises.[42]

In much the same vein can T. V. F. Brogan, in his introduction to the current standard reference work on this topic, lament that prosody is "a field which in historical terms has been (it is not too extreme to say) a great mass of ignorance, confusion, superficial thinking, category mistakes, arguments by spurious analogy, persuasive definitions, and gross abuses of both concepts and terms."[43] More than three centuries after its supposed empirical turn, the field of poetic numbers still appears to its most dedicated systematizers as if it were (to borrow Bouhours's phrase) a "sanctuary of ignorance."

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[41] Daniel Webb, *Observations on the Correspondence Between Poetry and Music* (London: J. Dodsley, 1769), 1-2.

[42] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 165.

[43] T. V. F. Brogan, *English Versification, 1570-1980: A Reference Guide with a Global Index* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), xii.

Simon Jarvis eloquently interprets these sorts of laments as a function of the search for a unified field theory of prosody in the modern era. Exploring the positivistic rhetoric that characterizes this field – a rhetoric that forever begins by asserting epistemological crisis (*honestly, what do we really know about meter?*) and concludes by anticipating a solution grounded in an always more rigorous sort of empirical measurement – Jarvis argues perceptively that "the inexactness of [prosodic] vocabulary is constitutive of its interest rather than an accidental obstacle."[44] Yet as my brief genealogy of prosodic criticism demonstrates, this "modern" anxiety about prosody's epistemological foundations – the prosodist's Sisyphean struggle to fashion his discipline anew *ad infinitum* – is a venerable trait, by no means limited to the modern era. When Thomas Sheridan, writing in 1775, remarked that "our best poets were ignorant of the theory of numbers… [and] scarce any of them, except Milton and Dryden, ever took the trouble to dive into that mystery,"[45] he characterized the end of the seventeenth century as the starting point for a distinctive literary critical preoccupation: a new "theory of numbers" intent on solving this poetic "mystery." In this respect, eighteenth-century literary criticism did not so much reject nescioquiddity as repurpose it. Rather than serving as an enigmatic conclusion to literary critical investigations, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of numbers became an essential premise: a sanctuary of ignorance forever inviting critics to test their theoretical and empirical instruments.

Dryden's name cannot be disentangled from this tradition, even when it seems to go unmentioned. When Wellek and Warren dismissed George Saintsbury's monumental *History of English Prosody* (1906-10), they suggestively characterized it as a typical example of the prosodic science's "strange empiricism": an empiricism that "rests on completely undefined and vague theoretical foundations" and which is "even proud of [its] refusal to define or even to describe [its] terms."[46] Far from considering such an approach to be a fault, however, Saintsbury praised it as a model attributable to none other than Dryden. In his *History of Criticism* (1900-04), Saintsbury lauds Dryden for practicing what he calls "critical reading without theory, or with theory postponed."[47] "He established (let us hope for all time)," wrote Saintsbury, "the English fashion of criticising, as Shakespeare did the English fashion of dramatising, – the fashion of aiming at delight, at truth, at justice, at nature, at poetry, and letting the rules take care of themselves."[48] As a general statement of Dryden's critical method, this account is certainly dubious, for the poet-critic was more than happy to defend and employ prescriptive, often neoclassical rules when the mood suited him.[49] Yet as a description of how Dryden poses his riddle, and as a sketch of the critical tradition the riddle instigates, Saintsbury's notion of "theory postponed" is surprisingly apt. For Dryden and the critics who would follow him, the problem of number seems to invite a species of criticism whose empirical activities do not resolve but tend rather to proliferate questions about the theoretical basis of literary criticism. As the next section of this chapter will argue, these theoretical difficulties cannot be relegated to the sphere of criticism alone, for they inform both Dryden's legacy as a poet as well as eighteenth-century valuations of his verse by readers seemingly little given to prosody's "strange empiricism."

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[44] Simon Jarvis, "Prosody as Cognition," *Critical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2003): 4.

[45] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:41.

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[46] Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 165-6.

[47] George Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh; London: Blackwood, 1900-04), 2:388.

[48] Saintsbury, *History of Criticism*, 2:399.

[49] Robert D. Hume, *Dryden's Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1970), 121, 124.

§ *Alexander's Feast* and the Diagrammatic Imperative

> [T]he Poet gives not a Reason for what he says, as the Philosopher does, but the Reason must be perceiv'd without his offering it.
>
> – Charles Gildon, *The Complete Art of Poetry* (1718)[50]

After struggling to describe the exact role of accent in verse and to distinguish its various gradational "shades" typographically (e.g. "Yea, $\overset{''''}{\text{all}}$ which $\overset{'}{\text{it}}$ in$\overset{''}{\text{her}}$it, sh$\overset{'}{\text{a}}$ll dis$\overset{''}{\text{sol}}$ve…"), Thomas Jefferson concludes his "Thoughts on English Prosody" with a challenge to the reader: "Let those who are disposed to criticise… try a few experiments themselves."[51] For Jefferson, something as simple as the placing of accent necessarily involves the reader in a kind of experimentation, whereby the trial-and-error of internalizing a poem's rhythms becomes a type of empirical investigation in its own right. Despite its schematic appearance, Jefferson's gradational scansion of this pentameter line, like a host of other poetic diagrams fashioned during the eighteenth century, aims to render explicit the rhythmic habits and intuitions that are presumed to inform everyday reading. In asserting this continuity between readerly experience and empirical investigation, Jefferson voices a critical opinion, closely tied to the reception of Dryden and his celebrated odes, that praises poetry's ability to elicit these sorts of experimental responses in readers.

Alexander's Feast; or, the Power of Musique (1697) is an irregular ode of seven stanzas, written to honor the feast of St. Cecilia, patroness of music. Set amid the feasting of Alexander the Great after the taking of Persia, its first six stanzas narrate the ability of Alexander's court musician Timotheus to manipulate his monarch with music and verse: Alexander is variously driven into fits of hubris, revelry, pity, passion, and violence by the power of the bard's numbers. The final stanza draws a comparison between Timotheus and the "Divine *Cecilia*," whose musical graces represent a refined and sanctified version of the pagan bard's musical powers.

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[50] Charles Gildon, *The Complete Art of Poetry* (London: G. Rivington, 1718), 272.

[51] Jefferson, *Writings*, 611-612. Jay Fliegelman associates this interest in prosody with Jefferson's love of music (a "notational language based on precise mathematical relations") as well as his "preoccupation with accounting, scientific measurement, and a lifetime of dividing virtually everything into mathematical units." See Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), 16-17.

Dryden thought *Alexander's Feast* "the best of all my poetry,"[52] and for three centuries many of his critics have agreed with him, although for vastly different reasons. Modern scholars have tended overwhelmingly to focus on the significance of the poem's narrative: its representation of kingship, of the social responsibilities and powers of the poet, of poetry's status within classical and Christian traditions.[53] By contrast, eighteenth-century critics, while fascinated with the ode, devote little attention to its narrative. Although authors of such differing tastes as the classically inclined Johnson and the romantically inclined Warton concur in regarding *Alexander's Feast* as the finest of Dryden's works and arguably the finest ode in the English language, they reserve their highest praise for Dryden's handling of the poem's formal details. For Johnson, it exhibits "the exactest nicety of art"; for Warton, "the variety and harmony of its numbers… have conspired to place [the poem] at the head of modern lyric compositions."[54] It was by appeal to its numbers, rather than its narrative, that the poem's earliest readers justified its canonical status.

This response is partly a function of the poem's genre. More than any other verse form of the eighteenth century, the irregular or "Pindaric" ode privileges a heightened attention to form.

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[52] John Dryden, *The Letters of John Dryden*, ed. Charles E. Ward (Durham: Duke UP, 1942), 98.

[53] See Ruth Smith, "The Argument and Context of Dryden's Alexander's Feast," *SEL* 18, no. 3 (1978): 465-490.

[54] Johnson, "Dryden," *Lives*, 2:148; Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 2 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1756-82), 2:52.

Although critics have referred to the ode as "the 'free verse' of the neoclassical period,"[55] its "freedom," like that of the best modernist free verse, entails a heightening, rather than a laxity, of formal attentiveness. When Edward Young remarks that the ode's "conduct should be rapturous, somewhat abrupt, and immethodical to a vulgar Eye,"[56] he is concerned not only with its style (e.g. how the ode transitions between thoughts, how its jagged lines appear on the page) but also with its status as a kind of test, one that distinguishes the "vulgar" reader from the connoisseur. Eighteenth-century scholars routinely characterize the ode's apparent want of method as if it were a puzzle awaiting a solution. "[A]ll of the sublime transports of the ode must be governed by reason," remarks Louis de Jaucourt in the *Encyclopédie*; "all of its apparent disorder must be in effect nothing more than a more hidden order."[57] The genre, in this respect, is thoroughly in keeping with the spirit of Enlightenment inquiry. Far from marking an absence of order and method, the ode's highly stylized disorder seeks to elicit such method from its reader: perhaps more than any other eighteenth-century poetic form, it supposes, and aims to sharpen, an acute critical perception of underlying structures. Alexander, who in the end remains oblivious to the ways in which Timotheus's numbers move him, is not so much the ode's ideal listener as a representation of the imperceptiveness it would reform.

Eighteenth-century readers devote what seems a surprising amount of attention to the variety and harmony of *Alexander's Feast* because its meter, rather than its narrative, is presumed to elicit a preponderance of the reader's interpretive labors. It is the nature of these labors, rather than the significance or validity of the interpretation, that interests me here. Although a number of scholars have taken up the issue of the meter's symbolic or iconic possibilities (i.e. whether and how Dryden makes the sound seem "an echo to the sense"),[58] I am concerned instead with a more basic phenomenon – namely, the readerly disposition that the metrical structure elicits. What, exactly, the verse *sounds* like seems of less import than the fact that the ode compels a particular kind of attention from eighteenth-century readers, one that increasingly invites the sorts of diagrammatic "experiments" Jefferson associates with the practice of literary criticism. When Johnson and Warton praise the metrical artistry of Dryden's ode, they likely have in mind the sort of complexity on display in the penultimate stanza:

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[55] Norman Maclean, "From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century," *Critics and Criticism*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1952): 424.

[56] Edward Young, *Ocean. An Ode* (London: Tho. Worrall, 1728), 19.

[57] "[T]ous les sublimes transports de l'ode doivent être réglés par la raison, tout ce désordre apparent ne doit être en effet qu'un ordre plus caché." Louis de Jaucourt, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné*, s.v. "Ode."

Now strike the Golden Lyre again:	– / – / – / – /
A lowder yet, and yet a lowder Strain.	– / – / – / – / – /
Break his Bands of Sleep asunder,	/ – / – / – / –
And rouze him, like a rattling Peal of Thunder.	– / – / – / – / – / –
Hark, hark, the horrid Sound	/ / – / – /
Has rais'd up his Head,	– / – – /
As awak'd from the Dead,	– – / – – /
And amaz'd, he stares around.	– – / – / – /
Revenge, Revenge, *Timotheus* cries,	– / – / – / – /
See the Furies arise!	– – / – – /
See the Snakes that they rear,	– – / – – /
How they hiss in their Hair,	– – / – – /
And the Sparkles that flash from their Eyes!	– – / – – / – – /
Behold a ghastly Band,	– / – / – /
Each a Torch in his Hand!	/ – / – – /
Those are *Grecian* Ghosts, that in Battail were slayn,	– – / – – / – – / – – /
And unbury'd remain	– – / – – /
Inglorious on the Plain.	– / – / – /
Give the Vengeance due	/ – / – – /
To the Valiant Crew.	– – / – – /
Behold how they toss their Torches on high,	– / – – / – / – – /
How they point to the *Persian* Abodes,	– – / – – / – – /

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[58] D. T. Mace, "Musical Humanism, the Doctrine of Rhythmus, and the Saint Cecilia Odes of Dryden," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964): 251-92.

And glitt'ring Temples of their Hostile Gods!	– / – / – / – / – /
The Princes applaud, with a furious Joy;	– / – – / – – / – – /
And the King seyz'd a Flambeau, with Zeal to destroy;	– – / – – / – – / – – /
Thais led the Way,	/ – / – /
To light him to his Prey,	– / – / – /
And like another *Hellen*, fir'd another *Troy*.[59]	– / – / – / – / – / – /

With its mixture of iambic and anapestic rhythms, the stanza's metrical structure can seem to border on the chaotic. Eighteen distinct line types occur in this twenty-eight-line stanza: ten are wholly unique, and those line types that do recur rarely do so sequentially.[60] As a result, the ode's reader is hard pressed to intuit an over-arching pattern. (This is a characteristic feature of the genre: in *The Art of English Poetry* [1702], Edward Bysshe regrets that he cannot offer an example of the ode, "for none can properly be said to be given, where no Rule can be prescribed."[61]) The structure, moreover, often seems expressly designed to *invite* erroneous readings. When Dryden slips briefly into a predictable pattern – for instance, with the increasingly anapestic, four-beat cadence of lines 143-44 ("Behold how they toss their Torches on high, / How they point to the *Persian* Abodes") – he does so only to spring a metrical trap, luring one to read the next line ("And glitt'ring Temples of their Hostile Gods!") as a continuation of this rhythm. (That "glitt'ring," under normal circumstances, invites such a reading – i.e. glīttĕrĭng – only baits the trap further.) These admittedly local effects have a direct bearing on the larger significance of the poem, for they stand in ironic contrast with the narrative proper. At the same time that the ode relates an episode of effortless, unperceived artistic manipulation, it pointedly foregrounds the efforts involved in metrical perception: it asks the reader, unlike Alexander, to be not only a listener but also a critic, a parser of measures.

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[59] John Dryden, *Alexander's Feast*, *Works*, 7:7-8; ll. 123-150.

[60] Of the 28 lines, 10 are unique types, 6 occur twice, and 2 recur three times.

[61] Edward Bysshe, *The Art of English Poetry* (London: R. Knaplock, 1702), 35.

In this respect, Dryden's ode, which he began little more than a month after the publication of *The Works of Virgil*, advances the same coy intimation as does his riddle, for it suggests that a world of meaning inheres in the technicalities of verse and it all but begs the reader to parse them. (Thus Thomas Sheridan remarks that "[t]o point out all the beauties arising from the admirable composition of this ode, with regard to its numbers alone, would require a volume."[62]) This invitation is at the heart of Dryden's understanding of the irregular or Pindaric ode's peculiar form:

> the ear must preside, and direct the judgment to the choice of numbers: without the nicety of this, the harmony of Pindaric verse can never be complete; the cadency of one line must be a rule to that of the next; and the sound of the former must slide gently into that which follows, without leaping from one extreme into another. It must be done like the shadowings of a picture, which fall by degrees into a darker colour. I shall be glad if I have so explained myself as to be understood; but if I have not, *quod nequeo dicere et sentio tantum* [what I cannot describe and only feel] must be my excuse.[63]

The rhetoric of this critical gesture should be familiar to us by now: after asserting that the beauty of a particular verse form rests with the "nicety" of its prosodic arrangement, Dryden delves into a technical discussion of "numbers" and "cadency" only to stop short with an appeal to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. His evenly balanced final sentence, like the pairing of the lost *Prosodia* and the riddle, at once suggests poetic harmony's explicability *and* asserts its elusiveness. Thus formulated, the enigma of number – whether creatively enacted by the metrical chaos of *Alexander's Feast* or coyly asserted amid Dryden's critical remarks on Denham – forever invites the reader to illuminate what the poet-critic has left implicit. In a word, the ode and the riddle alike prompt one to *measure*.

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[62] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:316.

[63] Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, 2:32-33.

And measure the ode, critics did. Throughout the eighteenth century, Dryden's ode and the category of numbers more broadly compel what we might term a *diagrammatic imperative*, so called with reference to John Bender and Michael Marrinan's recent study of the diagram in eighteenth-century culture.[64] Bender and Marrinan have in mind the sort of diagram encountered in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-72): a visualization that unpacks how a complex process *works*, rather than a verisimilar representation. The heterogeneity of the diagram – its "proliferation of manifestly selective packets of dissimilar data correlated in an explicitly process-oriented array" – allows it to pry beneath surfaces and disarticulate perspective in order to render imaginable "correlations neither rooted in direct experience nor verifiable by the senses."[65] To admit poetic scansion into the genealogy of the diagram is to recover its status as an instrument of Enlightenment, or what Jefferson characterizes as a species of literary critical experimentation. Not only do scanning and diagramming possess a shared historical origin in the realm of musical notation,[66] but they also facilitate similar processes. Like the diagram, scansion establishes a correspondence between dissimilar data (in this case, number and language), and thereby strives to "open a conceptual space for correlations" that exceed intuitive sensory experience;[67] like the diagram, moreover, it is less a representation than a thing "to work with," a demonstration "situated in the world like an object."[68]

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[64] John Bender and Michael Marrinan, *The Culture of Diagram* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010).

[65] Bender and Marrinan, *Culture of Diagram*, 7; 17.

[66] Bender and Marrinan, *Culture of Diagram*, 7.

[67] Bender and Marrinan, *Culture of Diagram*, 17.

[68] Bender and Marrinan, *Culture of Diagram*, 10, 7.

Throughout the period, Dryden's ode invited many such demonstrations, even from critics little given to "experiment." In all ways but one, Charles Gildon's *The Complete Art of Poetry* (1718) is an unremarkable tome: a treatise in dialogue, after the manner of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), that aims to expound solidly neoclassical principles of art. Yet at the very end of the treatise, Gildon abandons the traditional dialogue in favour of a set of diagrams. (See figure 1.3.)

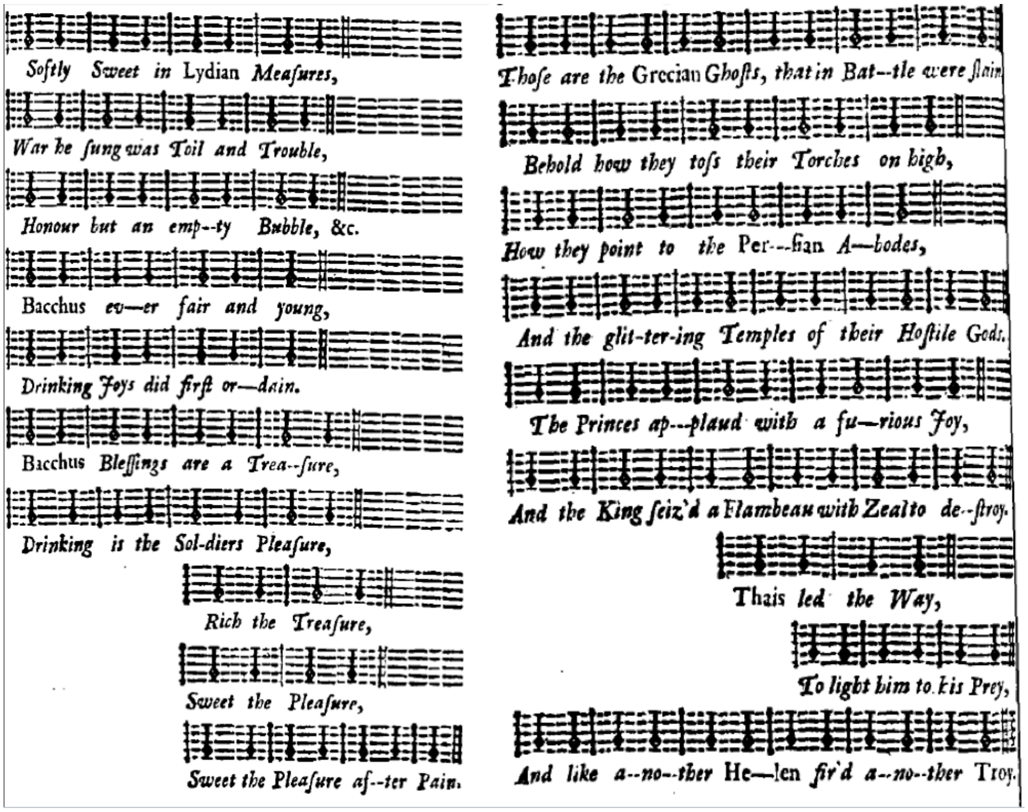
Softly Sweet in Lydian Meaſures,
War he ſung was Toil and Trouble,
Honour but an emp--ty Bubble, &c.
Bacchus ev—er fair and young,
Drinking Joys did firſt or—dain.
Bacchus Bleſſings are a Trea--ſure,
Drinking is the Sol-diers Pleaſure,
Rich the Treaſure,
Sweet the Pleaſure,
Sweet the Pleaſure af--ter Pain.
Thoſe are the Grecian Ghoſts, that in Bat--tle were ſlain
Behold how they toſs their Torches on high,
How they point to the Per---ſian A—bodes,
And the glit-ter-ing Temples of their Hoſtile Gods.
The Princes ap---plaud with a fu—rious Joy,
And the King ſeiz'd a Flambeau with Zeal to de--ſtroy.
Thais led the Way,
To light him to his Prey,
And like a--no--ther He—len fir'd a--no--ther Troy.

Figure 1.3. Diagram of "Alexander's Feast." Charles Gildon. *The Complete Art of Poetry*. (London: G. Rivington, 1718). 301-302. (Please note that the quality of the image may obscure the fact that Gildon's scansion employs both quarter notes and half notes.)

Convinced of the demonstrable presence of "a great Variety [of Numbers] in the *English* Language," as well as of the fact that "Mr. DRYDEN has made the greatest Progress in this… of any Poet we have yet seen,"[69] Gildon attempts to demonstrate this poetic achievement visually.

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[69] Gildon, *Complete Art of Poetry*, 302; 300.

His diagram adopts the notational language of music only to abandon its formal logic. Tellingly, Gildon's musical "bars," which range inconsistently from one to three beats in length, are incoherent as a measurement of time. They are present not because Dryden's ode is presumed to be a kind of music (and explicable via musical notation), but because a system *like* musical notation seems requisite to illuminate Dryden's artistry. Much like Jefferson's scale of accents, Gildon's haphazard use of musical bars represents a compromise with the realities of eighteenth-century typography: in cribbing from the diagrammatic lexicon of music, it imagines an as yet unperfected diagrammatical lexicon for poetry.

Key to this critical experiment is a process of disarticulation. Not only does Gildon's diagram dismember individual words (e.g. "*emp—ty*," "*or—dain*," "*Trea—sure*"), but it disarticulates the poem's grammar and narrative: lines are diagrammed out of the sequence in which they appear in the poem, and with little regard to their sentential logic. This approach elaborates visually and experimentally a central premise of both Dryden's riddle and ode: namely, that while poetic numbers are a category of perception, and thus subject to empirical demonstration, they elude the immediacy of intuition. Like Alexander, we hear and feel them; but to understand them demands that we search for and disclose correlations unmoored from the familiar sequences of sentence or story. The necessity for the critic to disarticulate – and the imperative, in the case of poetry, that he diagram – colors even Gildon's neoclassical dicta. Amid an otherwise accurate summary (by eighteenth-century standards) of a famous passage from the *Poetics*, Gildon has "*Aristotle* declare, That *Poetry* is a better School of Virtue than *Philosophy* [i.e. History] itself, because it goes more directly to Perfection by the Verisimilitude, than Philosophy can do by the *Naked* Truth; and because the Poet gives not a Reason for what he says, as the Philosopher does, but the Reason must be perceiv'd without his offering it."[70] The latter clause, which has no provenance in the *Poetics*, is less a gloss than an inversion of the statement that precedes it. For whereas Aristotle praises poetry for its ability to express the universal (rather than the particular) in mimetic form, Gildon praises poetry for its tendency to compel a particular species of perception – one that actively searches out, and descries, unoffered or hidden principles. This shift from representation to interpretation, and from the poet's powers to the reader's duties, renders poetry an object of critical experimentation, a phenomenon forever awaiting disarticulation.

The eighteenth-century critic's propensity for diagram – see, for instance, Thomas Sheridan's attempt at Dryden's ode (figure 1.4) – cannot simply be dismissed as an aberration of a more "normal" habit of reading (whether critical or otherwise). Rather, one finds in Gildon and Sheridan, as well as in the examples I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, an attempt to render explicit what is assumed to be always implicit in the reading process. To the extent that these diagrams strive to augment perception and thereby to illuminate hidden correlations, they body forth Dryden's conviction that the work of reading verse "proceed[s] by insensible degrees," that is asks us to "dwell upon" what "what we understand not fully at first… till we find the secret force and excellence."[71] Far from a "strange empiricism" run amok, these diagrams are premised on the view that a species of empiricism is always at work in our engagement with poetic numbers, a kind of experimentation that is as creative as it is critical.

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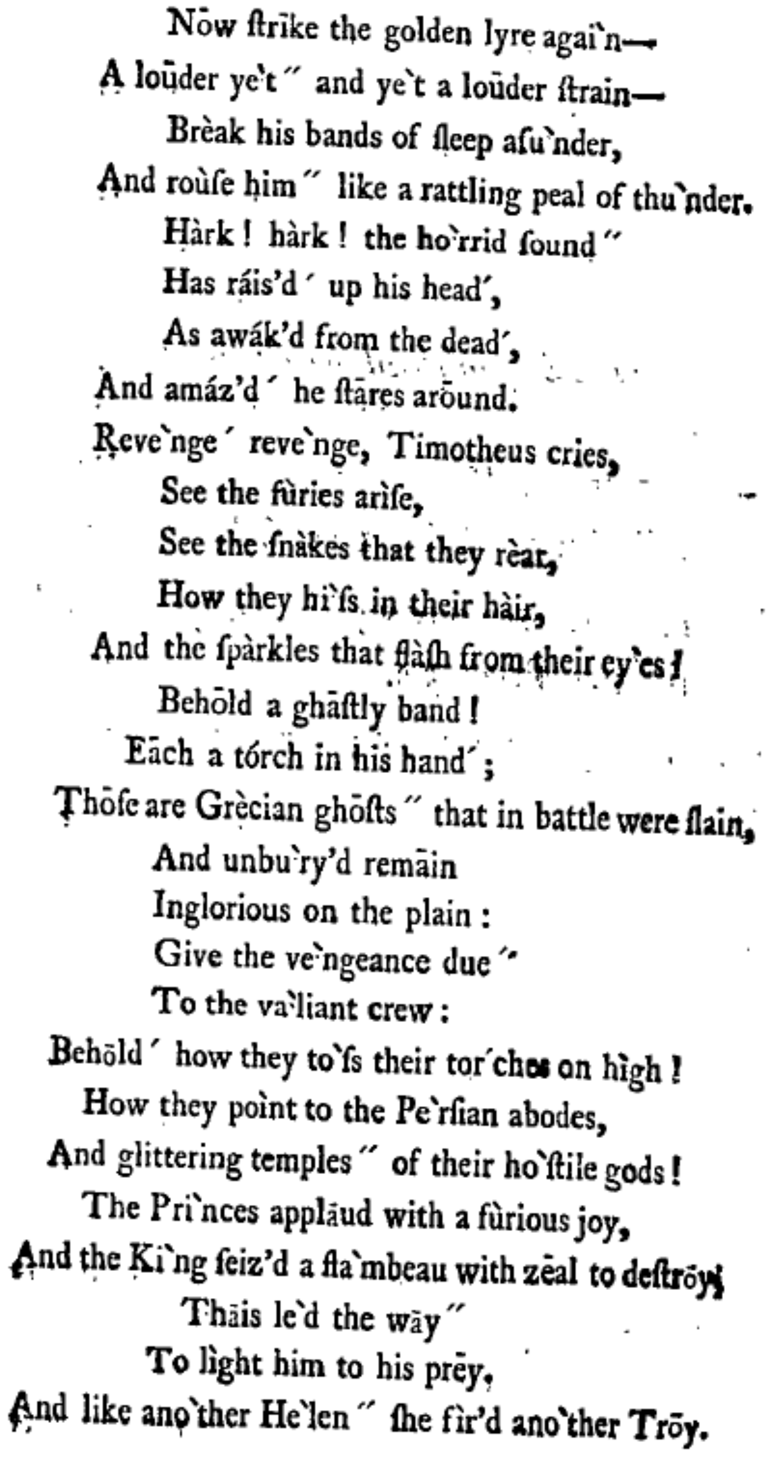
[70] Gildon, *Complete Art of Poetry*, 272.

[71] Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, 2:234



Nōw ſtrīke the golden lyre agai`n—
A loūder ye`t ″ and ye`t a loūder ſtrain—
Brèak his bands of ſleep aſu`nder,
And roùſe him ″ like a rattling peal of thu`nder.
Hàrk ! hàrk ! the ho`rrid ſound ″
Has ráis'd ´ up his head´,
As awák'd from the dead´,
And amáz'd ´ he ſtāres arōund.
Reve`nge ´ reve`nge, Timotheus cries,
See the fūries arìſe,
See the ſnàkes that they rèar,
How they hi`ſs in their hàir,
And the ſpàrkles that flāſh from their ey`es !
Behōld a ghāſtly band !
Eāch a tórch in his hand´ ;
Thōſe are Grècian ghōſts ″ that in battle were ſlain,
And unbu`ry'd remāin
Inglorious on the plain :
Give the ve`ngeance due ″
To the va`liant crew :
Behōld ´ how they to`ſs their tor´ches on hìgh !
How they poìnt to the Pe`rſian abodes,
And glittering temples ″ of their ho`ſtile gods !
The Pri`nces applāud with a fūrious joy,
And the Ki`ng ſeiz'd a fla`mbeau with zēal to deſtrōy;
Thāis le`d the wāy ″
To lìght him to his prēy,
And like ano`ther He`len ″ ſhe fìr'd ano`ther Trōy.

Figure 1.4. Diagram of "Alexander's Feast." Thomas Sheridan. *Lectures on the Art of Reading*. 2 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1775). 2:411.

§ Solutions to Dryden's Riddle

> [B]ecause Dryden has somewhere mentioned the music of these lines as a riddle which few could explain, and has kept that secret to himself, it may not be amiss here to attempt a solution of it.
>
> – John Hughes, "Minutes for an Essay on the Harmony of Verse" (c. 1712-20)[72]

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Dryden's riddle invited a host of responses and attempted solutions.[73] Critics ranging from the canonical (Pope and Johnson), to the once notable (Dennis, Bentley, and Monboddo), to the now woefully obscure (Elstob and Manwaring) proposed readings, sketched diagrams, and measured prosodic phenomena in the hopes of accounting for the supposed beauty of Denham's lines. Their solutions involved everything from the artful arrangement of monosyllables and the manipulation of pauses, to alliteration, assonance, chiasmus, and rhythmic variation. I am less concerned with the validity of the particular answers these critics advanced than with the poetical tenor of their notional empiricism. By this I mean that these diagrammatical experiments, instead of sharpening distinctions between the worlds of poetic creation and critical observation, tended often to blur them. If, on the one hand, attempts to solve Dryden's riddle saw critics develop traditional notions of poetic number into assumptions about the literal mensurability of poetry, these same attempts, on the other hand, regularly engage in a poetics of their own by employing protocols of measurement to project the couplet's supposed ineffability into new, non-linguistic forms.

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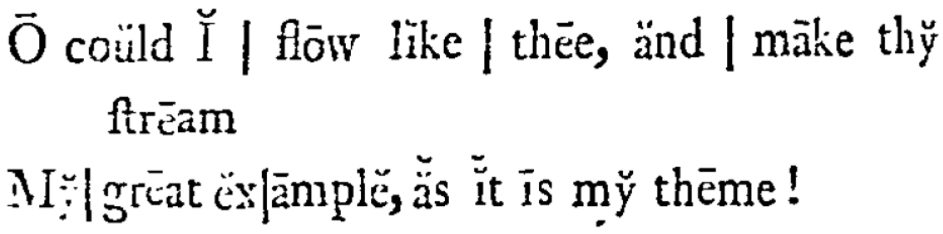
[72] John Hughes, "Minutes for an Essay on the Harmony of Verse," *Letters, by Several Eminent Persons Deceased*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1772), 1:249. References to Pope's "Sapho to Phaon" (c. 1707; pub. 1712) and Matthew Prior's "Henry and Emma" (1709) seem to date these minutes between 1712 and the poet's death in 1720.

[73] See Elizabeth Elstob, *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (London: W. Bowyer, 1715), xv *passim*; Dennis, "Of Prosody," 268; Alexander Pope [, Elijah Fenton, and William Broome] trans., *The* Odyssey *of Homer*, 5 vols. (London: Bernard Lintot, 1725-6), 3:304-05; Bentley, *Publii Terentii Afri Comoediae*, xi; John Oldmixon, *An Essay on Criticism* (London: J. Pemberton, 1728), 92; James Greenwood, *An Essay towards a Practical English Grammar* [3rd ed.] (London: Arthur Bettesworth, 1729), 34; George Wade, ed., *Q. Horatii Flacci carminum libri quinque* (London: William Bowyer, 1731), 76; Edward Manwaring, *Stichology: or, a Recovery of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew Numbers* (London: Printed for the Author, 1737), 71-2; William Benson, *Letters Concerning Poetical Translations* (London: J. Roberts, 1739), 41; Say, *Poems*, 152-3; Hughes, "Minutes," 1:235-262; James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & W. Creech, 1773-92), 2:389; Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:161; Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, 31, 109-10; Johnson, "Denham," *Lives*, 1:238-39; John Walker, *Elements of Elocution*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for the Author, 1781), 1:136-40, 1:151; and John Scott, *Critical Essays…* (London: James Phillips, 1785), 21-5. This is to say nothing of the fact that Dryden's riddle led to Denham's lines being printed in eighteenth-century anthologies as the prototypical instance of the heroic couplet. See for instance Bysshe, *Art of English Poetry*, 23.

John Hughes, a poet, librettist, and dramatist best remembered for his tragedy *The Siege of Damascus* (1720), followed Dryden in lamenting the absence of a theory of numbers among English critics. "[H]aving no *prosodia*, we have not yet distinguished more than the number of syllables in each verse, but have not divided those syllables into different feet with distinct names," he writes.[74] Hughes would attempt to remedy this lack of terms and formal units in his unfinished "Minutes for an Essay on the Harmony of Verse" (c. 1712-1720; pub. 1772) by turning (far more adeptly than Gildon) to musical time, whose ability to capture "the variation of the length and shortness of the syllables, and consequently the various falling of the accent, will best be seen in a diagram"[75] (see figures 1.5 and 1.6):



Ō coüld Ĭ | flōw līke | thēe, änd | māke thy̆
ſtrēam
My̆ | grēat ĕx|āmplĕ, ăs ĭt īs my̆ thēme!

Figure 1.5. John Hughes. "Minutes for an Essay on the Harmony of Verse" (c. 1712-20). *Letters, by Several Eminent Persons Deceased*. 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1772). 1.242.

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[74] Hughes, "Minutes," 1:241. See Dryden's remark in *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693): "we have yet no English *prosodia*, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar; so that our language is in a manner barbarous; and what government will encourage any one, or more, who are capable of refining it, I know not"; Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, 2:152.

[75] Hughes, "Minutes," 1:242.

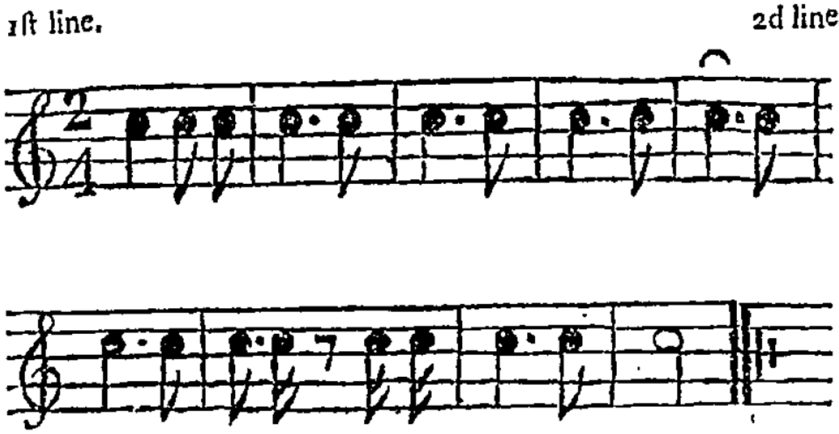

Figure 1.6. John Hughes. "Minutes for an Essay on the Harmony of Verse" (c. 1712-20). *Letters, by Several Eminent Persons Deceased*. 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1772). 1.243.

Although Hughes, like Gildon, invokes an analogy between poetry and music, he does so to a distinctly different end.[76] Notable here is the heightened abstraction and ultimate separation between verse and measure. Although Gildon's diagram distinguishes these two phenomena into separate arrays, it continues closely to correlate them. Hughes, by contrast, scans the verse with the usual diacritical marks only to abstract these measurements once more, yielding a wordless diagram printed on a separate page. This new critical object stands wholly apart from Denham's language and from the world of poetry. Note, for instance, the fact that the couplet's line-break (between "stream" and "My") falls in the middle of a bar in Figure 1.6. The bar, as a unit of measurement for Hughes, is either unconfined by or unconcerned with the traditional metric of the poetic line: what may seem a straightforward boundary to a *reader* disappears entirely amid Hughes's investigation of the riddle.

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[76] Hughes is categorical on this point: "[t]he measure, feet, accents, pauses, come under an analogy to time in music;" see "Minutes," 1:245. This analogical view has been attacked by modern prosodists such as Brogan (for whom "[a]ll that one need remark in reply is that analogies have no logical validity"; see *English Versification*, 209.) Appeal solely to the criterion of validity, however, blinds us to the motivations and rhetoric of these diagrams and, thereby, the cultural and literary tradition associated with measurement.

This process of abstraction is at the heart of Hughes's understanding of poetic style. When he remarks that "Dr. [Henry] Aldrich" – Dean of Christ Church, a composer, and a contemporary of Dryden's – "fancied he could distinguish Virgil's verse from any other, if only the marks were written, and the words left out,"[77] Hughes sketches a theory of style that locates the most characteristic element of Virgil's artistry in something other than his language. The notion that ¯ ˘ ˘ ¯ ˘ ˘ ¯ ¯ ¯ ¯ ¯ ˘ ˘ ¯ ¯ is as identifiably Virgilian as "*Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris*" elevates the central paradox of Dryden's riddle into a methodological premise, for it suggests that critical discernment may be rewarded and distinguished by its attendance to what is *not*, strictly speaking, on the page. "[N]othing that is artful [is] the effect of chance," Hughes remarks, "but [is] governed by some rules, though those rules are not commonly known, or set down in writing."[78] The work of the critic is to unearth these unwritten principles – a task that drives Hughes to become something of a critical librettist who fashions from and for Denham's lines a sort of theoretical musical accompaniment.

A similar preoccupation with what is absent from or hidden by Denham's lines motivates Thomas Sheridan's solution to Dryden's riddle. At first glance, Sheridan would seem to have little truck with diagramming, for he begins his *Lectures on the Art of Reading* (1775) by attacking the sorts of quantitative experiments that would reduce the beauty of poetry to diacritical marks: "In vain shall the poor ear put in its claim of judging on this occasion; it will be told that it has no concern in this business; that the college proceeds on an entirely new system, and that the modern learned have transferred the power of judging of sounds, from the ear to the eye."[79] For Sheridan, the ear is the true connoisseur in these matters, while the eye, which "can form no judgment of measure in sounds, nor take any pleasure in such arrangement of words,"[80] is insensible to the charms of verse. The irony, of course, is that Sheridan is compelled – in spite of his principles – to visualize for his readers all those acoustic phenomena that he suggests elude the eye. What results is a diagrammatic lexicon of pauses that, while notionally devoted to capturing poetry's ineffability, strives to render sensible, if only obliquely, the aesthetic workings of the mind.

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[77] Hughes, "Minutes," 1:243-44.

[78] Hughes, "Minutes," 1:253.

For Sheridan, poetic harmony is not inherent to verse but is rather a function of the auditor's intellect. One's ability to delight in "poetic numbers," he writes, "takes its rise from that act of the mind, which compares the relative proportions that the members of a verse, thus divided, bear to each other, as well as to those in the adjoining lines."[81] This view compels Sheridan to ascribe a particular aesthetic value to the phenomenon that divides, and which helps listeners to distinguish between, the members of a verse – namely, pauses. Far from assigning the elusive sweetness of numbers to the poet's choice or arrangement of words or even of sounds, Sheridan instead holds, counter-intuitively, that "the chief beauty of the versification lies in the happy disposition of the pauses and semipauses," or what he elsewhere terms the "semi-pause" (′) and the "stop of suspension" (″).[82] He insists on the novelty of his attention to this interstitial phenomenon, and asserts that although grammarians have given this sort of pause neither "a name, nor a mark in writing," "it is of such importance, that it is impossible to read poetic numbers without the use of it."[83] This approach, he argues, "will contribute to solve a poetical problem, thrown out by Dryden as a crux to his brethren; and which, though often attempted, remains to this hour unexplained."[84] (See figure 1.7.)

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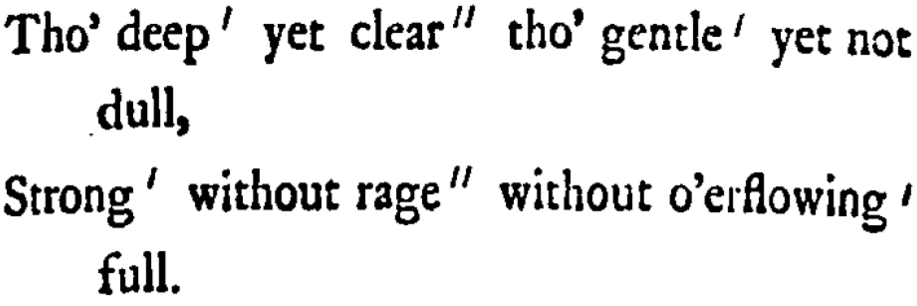
[79] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:8-9.

[80] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:103-4.

[81] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:118.

[82] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:161; Sheridan discusses the "semi-pause" at 2:sig.[A]v and 2:82, and the "stop of suspension" at 2:112-3.



Tho' deep ' yet clear '' tho' gentle ' yet not
dull,
Strong ' without rage '' without o'erflowing '
full.

Figure 1.7. Diagrammatic solution to Dryden's riddle. Thomas Sheridan. *Lectures on the Art of Reading*. 2 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1775). 2.161.

At a glance, there can seem little of import to Sheridan's much-talked-of pauses. What are these if not impressionistic attempts merely to emphasize the sense of the passage itself? Yet Sheridan insists on a radical distinction between his pauses and the realm of grammatical sense: "the pause itself perfectly marks the bound of the metre, and being made only by a suspension, not change of note in the voice, can never affect the sense: because, as the sentential stops, or those which affect the sense, have all a change of note; where there is no such change, the sense cannot be affected."[85] Sheridan's rather ungainly prose distinguishes two types of "stop" – the "sentential stop" and the "stop of suspension." While the former flows from the meaning of the words and naturally inflects the voice, the latter "marks the bound of the metre" without in any way affecting the sense. These elusive stops of suspension are held to operate at a complete remove from the language of the passage itself, neither impeding its meaning nor deriving from it. Far from marking mere emphasis, they are supposed to enact in performance a set of boundaries somehow vital to the poem's beauty but entirely disassociated from its status as language. It will perhaps be helpful to offer a visual analogy. Like the subjective or illusory contours associated with the work of psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa, which invite us to perceive a shape they do not actually delineate (see figure 1.8), Sheridan's notional "stops of suspension" imagine metrical order as a process of *negation*, a shape perceived obliquely through the absence of language.

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[83] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:112-3.

[84] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:160.

[85] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:113.

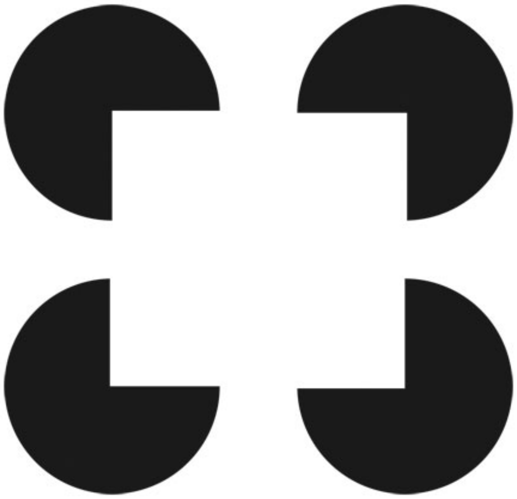

Figure 1.8. Gaetano Kanizsa. "Subjective Contours." *Scientific American* 234, no. 4 (April, 1976): 51.

This theory leads Sheridan to construe the sonic contours of verse as less a quality of the poet's art than an indication of the reader's creative and interpretive faculties. In the *Lectures*, he pointedly attacks Pope's famous dictum that "[t]he *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*."[86]

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[86] Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," *Poems*, 155; l. 365.

Deeming this line "a false principle" that "differs from the true rule, laid down by Lord Roscommon" in "An Essay on Translated Verse" (1684), he instead holds that "[t]he sound should be a *comment* on the sense."[87] Sheridan's gloss of Roscommon advances an entirely different metaphorical scheme than Pope's: not that of a voice and its echo, but that of a text and its commentary. In opposition to the familiar logic of resemblance, he offers a logic of interpretation: poetic measure does not so much embellish sense as constitute a kind of annotation, digression, or even animadversion on the original. The sound interprets the sense, just as the reader interprets the poem. To the extent that the texture of "semi-pauses" and "stops of suspension," divorced from the "sentential" world of the verse, stands as a comment on it, it offers an outward realization of "that act of the mind, which compares the relative proportions that the members of a verse, thus divided, bear to each other." This texture of pauses obliquely sketches, for Sheridan, the occult arithmetic of the mind itself, the tabulation of number and pattern supposed to create the experience of harmony. It is in the silent gaps between verse structures that Sheridan glimpses – if only negatively – the mind's inherent numerosity and the source of Dryden's fabled sweetness.

To the extent that such criticism aims to make sensible what is absent, it necessarily adopts for itself a profoundly creative task, one that often employs some of the very poetic effects it would explain. There is, perhaps, no clearer example of this tendency than John Walker's diagrammatic attempt to answer Dryden's riddle in his *Elements of Elocution* (1781). (See figure 1.9.)

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[87] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:321. Sheridan, too, misreads Roscommon, for the actual couplet is "*Sublime* or *Low*, *unbended* or *Intense*, / The *sound* is still a *Comment* to the *Sense*." See Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon, *An Essay on Translated Verse* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1684), 22.

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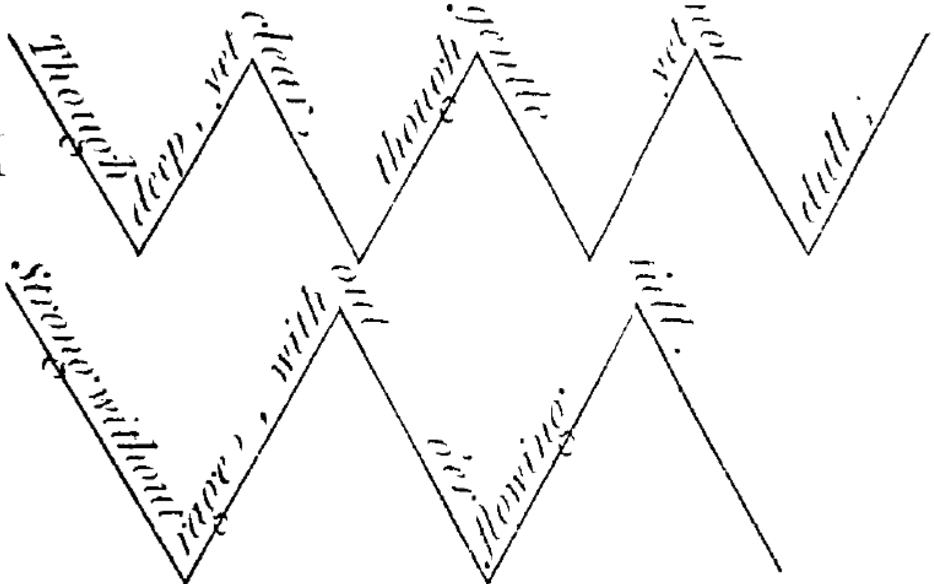

Figure 1.9. Diagrammatic solution to Dryden's riddle. John Walker. *Elements of Elocution*. 2 vols. (London: Printed for the Author, 1781). Detail from Plate I, between pages 1.136 and 1.137.

Like Sheridan, Walker attempts to solve the riddle by diagramming an element of the couplet's performance – in this case, inflexion. "[T]hese angular lines," he explains, "may be considered as a kind of bars in the music of speaking: each of them contain a certain portion of either the rising or falling inflexion."[88] The peaks and valleys of Walker's diagram aims to foreground these emphatic risings (*deep*, *yet*, *dull*, *rage*, *-flowing*) and fallings (*clear*, *gentle*, *not*, *strong*, *-out*, *full*), rendering visible for the reader "something of that wave-like rising and falling of the voice, which constitutes the variety and harmony of speech."[89] (Denham's couplet, when compared to the rest of Walker's diagrams, is seen to regulate and sustain this "wave-like" phenomenon, which suggests that the couplet captures and heightens for Walker something essential to the beauty of speech as such.[90])

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[88] Walker, *Elements*, 1:151.

[89] Walker, *Elements*, 1:139.

Regarded as a species of scansion, Walker's angular lines have little to recommend them over the usual diacritical markings; yet as something approaching a *shape poem,* they reveal this literary critical science's continuity with the realm of poetic creation. To the extent that Walker's diagram has the effect of miming the undulations of water, it presents as an objective prosodic structure what is fundamentally a poetic impression: namely, that there exists some analogy between the sonic contour of Denham's lines and the movement of the Thames. The irony is that Walker says nothing in his treatise of representative versification: his discussion of rising and falling inflexions is uninterested in whether these inflexions can mimic reality, whether their sound echoes their sense. And yet Walker here sublimates the most common interpretation of these famous lines – that their flowing sweetness iconizes the flowing river they describe – into critical method: a manner of diagramming that does not so much resolve Dryden's riddle as employ measure to emblematize it. Although eighteenth-century critics largely deplored the sorts of shape poems associated with early modern poets such as George Herbert, the free play of such poems lives on here as a form of literary critical experimentation.[91] In its attempts to demystify the "silent graces" and "hidden beauties" of harmony, the science of numbers refashions these stylistic cruces into new objects of wonder; in so doing, it offers a vivid representation of the degree to which the poetic and the critical are indissoluble for eighteenth-century readers, for whom the creation and interpretation of literature cannot be segregated neatly into distinct spheres of intellectual activity.

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[90] Walker, *Elements*, 1:137-37.

[91] See for instance Bysshe: "Thus I have given a short Account of all the sorts of Poems, that are most us'd in our Language, The Acrosticks, Emblems, Anagrams, &c. deserve not to be mention'd, and we may say of them what an Ancient Poet said long ago, *Stultum est difficiles habere Nugas, / Et Stultus Labor est ineptiarum*"; see *Art of English Poetry*, 38.

Chapter 2:

Pope's Mechanic Art; or, a Brief History of Machine Reading

> The general methodological problem of the digital humanities can be bluntly stated: How do we get from numbers to meaning?
> – Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac[1]

> But most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's Song,
> And *smooth* or *rough*, with them, is *right* or *wrong*…
> – Alexander Pope[2]

When Leslie Stephen, writing in 1880, referred to "the common theory that Pope's versification was a mere mechanical trick,"[3] he chose a metaphor with a venerable critical history. For well over two centuries, scholars have routinely enlisted the figure of the machine in order to describe and articulate distaste for Pope's characteristic style. The scholarly literature of Pope's own century (to say nothing of later ones) is replete with references to his "monotonous and mechanical harmony," suggestions that his fame arose only from his being "more mechanically *regular*" than other poets, and claims that he "[m]ade poetry a mere mechanic art."[4] In this oft-repeated verdict, Pope is occasionally allowed to model something beautiful, and yet always ultimately soulless and mechanical, as if he were an automaton bird.

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[1] Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac, "A Quantitative Literary History of 2,958 Nineteenth-Century British Novels: The Semantic Cohort Method," *Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet 4* (Stanford Literary Lab, May 2012), 46 http://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet4.pdf.

[2] Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," *Poems*, 154; ll. 337-38.

[3] Leslie Stephen, *Alexander Pope* (London: Macmillan, 1880), 80.

[4] See *The Gentleman's Magazine* (January, 1793), 13; Joseph Weston, *Philotoxi Ardenae; the Woodmen of Arden; a Latin Poem: by John Morfitt… and An Essay on the Superiority of Dryden's Versification over that of Pope and the Moderns* (Birmingham: M. Swinney, 1788), x; and William Cowper, "Table Talk," *The Poems of William Cowper*, 3 vols., ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford UP, 1980-1995), 1:258.

This preoccupation with the mechanical, however, is not limited to Pope's detractors. In an altogether different guise – as a concern with the formal "mechanics" of Pope's mellifluous style – the topic has long merited articles, chapters, and even whole monographs.[5] It is taken for granted that Pope's "genius as a poet cannot be separated from his genius as a master of the rhyming couplet,"[6] and that merely to read Pope is necessarily to consider the significance of such prosodic features as regularity, rhyme, assonance, and euphony. At nearly the same time that Leslie Stephen was discussing Pope's mechanical tricks, Stephen's former colleague at Cambridge, Edwin A. Abbott, was counting these tricks in *A Concordance to the Works of Alexander Pope* (1875). In this concordance – one of the first of its kind, and a type of scholarship that would eventually be delegated to the machine – Abbott, however rudimentarily, would attempt to leverage prosodic data into interpretive claims about Pope's style: "it may be worth while to note his love of the sound of *s*. There are, I believe, nearly twice as many entries in the Concordance under *s*, as under any other letter…."[7] In this scholarly tradition, not only has Pope come to seem synonymous with his metrics, but he has also come to emblematize a certain methodological approach, one that locates in the mechanics of prosody a warrant for presuming the observability and even mensurability of literary phenomena.

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[5] To cite only those works that refer to Pope's prosody in their titles still yields a long list. See, for instance, John Sitter, "Pope's Versification and Voice," *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 37-48; J. Paul Hunter, "Form as Meaning: Pope and the Ideology of the Couplet," *The Eighteenth Century* 37, no. 3 (1996): 257-270; Percy G. Adams, "Pope's Concern with Assonance," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 9, no. 4 (1968): 493-502; Jacob H. Adler, "Pope and the Rules of Prosody," *PMLA* 76, no. 3 (1961): 218-226, and *The Reach of Art: A Study in the Prosody of Pope* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1964); W. K. Wimsatt, "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason: Alexander Pope," *MLQ* 5 (1944): 323-338; H. C. Wyld, "Observations on Pope's Versification," *MLR* 25 (1930): 274-85; and L. Mary McLean, "The Riming System of Alexander Pope," *PMLA* 6, no. 3 (1891): 134-160.

[6] Steven Shankman, "Introduction" to *The Iliad of Homer: Translated by Alexander Pope*, ed. Steven Shankman (London: Penguin, 1996), xxxii.

[7] Edwin A. Abbott, introduction to *A Concordance to the Works of Alexander Pope*, by Edwin Abbott (London: Chapman & Hall, 1875), xiv.

In this respect, to trace Pope's vexed association with the figure of the machine is to recover a history of machine reading and literary measurement that is contemporaneous with the rise of English literary criticism itself. Digital humanists such as Franco Moretti often characterize their methods as a radical departure from the historical practice of literary scholarship: "an altogether new set of categories" governed by "a completely different epistemology."[8] Yet for eighteenth-century authors such as Alexander Pope, literary criticism already entailed questions about the relationship between numbers and meaning, and thus between fundamentally distinct categories of critical perception. This chapter argues that theorization of this relationship first emerges historically in the realm of prosody. It is to eighteenth-century controversies about the mechanics of verse that we owe the enabling presupposition that there exists something meaningful in and about literary form worth measuring, or even something perceivable only through measure. It is likewise within this discourse that the epistemological and cultural anxieties associated with literary measurement first emerge: anxieties about the devaluation and insufficiency of reading in the face of mensurative and mechanical criticism. When Pope warns that "most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's Song, / And *smooth* or *rough*, with them, is *right* or *wrong*," he enfolds within this couplet a cascading series of distinct, perhaps irreconcilable, critical modes: questions of quantity ("*Numbers*"), of taste ("*smooth* or *rough*"), and of judgment ("*right* or *wrong*") slip all too easily from one into the next and elide the perilous methodological leaps – the host of unspoken assumptions – that relate numbers to meaning. I focus in this chapter on Pope because he holds a privileged and exemplary position within this history of literary measurement – on the one hand, as an object of near obsessive mensurative attention among critics; on the other, as a crucial architect of this very sort of attentiveness to meanings bestowed on or sought for in measure.

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[8] See Franco Moretti,"Operationalizing," 9; and "Changes," *Public Books*, 1 March 2014, <http://www.publicbooks.org/briefs/changes>.

As the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment first made it possible for authors to imagine and experiment with radically mechanistic, computational forms of poetry and criticism, Pope and many of his peers would openly condemn such "logarithmic" experiments as philosophically pernicious and artistically naïve. Yet Pope's own theory and practice of metrical style implicitly advances such a mechanistic view, modeling an understanding of reading and measurement as distinct, adversarial forms of literary appreciation. The scholarly controversy surrounding Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733-34) would, in turn, elaborate this distinction in the realm of literary criticism, modeling interpretive habits that locate in measurement a privileged avenue to structures of literary meaning. To read Pope (and readings of Pope) in this light is to encounter the codification and contestation of a set of critical practices dedicated to imagining and measuring what lurks beyond the limits of readerly perception. The history of these practices is vital not simply because it anticipates current experiments in the field of the digital humanities but also, more importantly, because it continues to inflect how we understand and discuss the epistemological gulf that supposedly separates reading from measurement, and poetry from the world of numbers.

§ Poetical Logarithms and Enlightenment Verse Machines

Broadly speaking, the history of measurement within literary criticism reaches back to antiquity: the technical jargon and metrics of prosody still in use today – its iambs and trochees, its dactyls and anapests – were influentially codified by the Alexandrian scholar Hephaestion for purposes of colometry, or the field of editorial criticism that seeks to "determine line-endings and discover corruptions" in received texts.[9] In this venerable field – A. E. Housman described it as "the territory common to metrical science and textual criticism"[10] – a primary function of prosody is to identify and to root out error, to ascertain the reliability of a text by counting and weighing its syllabic quantities. Insofar as the eighteenth-century critic understood himself to be "a man able to distinguish the faults and beauties of writing,"[11] he relied on this form of measurement as one of his most basic and intuitive tools.

In this respect, measure comes to be understood as a tool for observing and judging, not only quantitatively but qualitatively, those things presumed to be otherwise latent in or even concealed by texts. In his infamous edition of *Paradise Lost* (1732), Richard Bentley routinely treats measure as an index of concealment. Notoriously over-eager with his emendations, whenever Bentley encounters in Milton's epic what he regards as "harsh Measure" or "Accent unnatural," he takes it as hiding a more sonorous and regular reading obscured by the thoughtlessness of Milton's amanuenses and printers.[12] This practice necessarily draws Bentley into criticisms concerning wholly conjectural intentions. Commenting on the notably un-metrical line "Burnt after them to the bottomless Pit," Bentley entertains for a moment, only to censure, the possibility that the line is correct as it stands: "This is very strange Measure; unless he affected to make his verse *bottomless* too, to express the Idea. But that Whim pursued, would produce strange Monsters in Verse."[13] In its diagnosis and purgation of such dangerous whims, Bentley's metrical commentary takes measure as a stratum at which to unearth and correct errors more than merely metrical in nature. This logic – which makes mere textual error continuous with more profound errors of authorial and readerly judgment – renders measure a privileged site of critical activity, one uniquely conducive to objective claims.[14]

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[9] Jarvis, "Prosody as Cognition," 5. See also *Hephaestion on Metre*, trans. J. M. van Ophuijsen (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1987).

[10] A. E. Housman, "Prosody and Method," *The Classical Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1927): 7.

[11] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 6th ed. (London: J. F. and C. Rivington, 1785), s.v. "critick."

[12] Richard Bentley, ed., *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton (London: J. Tonson, 1732), 45.

The real novelty of the discussion surrounding poetic measure during the Enlightenment, then, has less to do with the perception of measure as an index of the latent and more to do with the couching of this perception within an aspirational rhetoric of pseudo-empiricism. Error, in a word, seems to become *countable* – not merely a quality of a poem, but a function of the poem's deeper, quantifiable structure. In *Licentia Poetica Discuss'd* (1709), the free-thinker William Coward expresses his displeasure about the lack of rigor with which critical discussions are usually conducted, "conceiv[ing] there ought to be something *more observable* in our Poetry to make it *please*, than what has been already taken notice of by former Writers."[15] Coward's irritation is predicated on a distinction between modes of critical perception: whereas former critics have merely "notice[d]," Coward wished for critics to "*observe*." This distinction between a criticism of chance sense impressions and an aspirational criticism of scientific observation is articulated throughout the century by a distinction between *reading* and *measurement*. As the former comes to seem an insufficient mode of critical perception, the latter, under the guise of prosody, is taken to unveil latent structures of meaning. In 1737, the critic Edward Manwaring draws this distinction in classical terms:

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[13] Bentley, *Paradise Lost*, 212. The line in question is *Paradise Lost*, 6.866.

[14] This tradition endures in W. K. Wimsatt's claim that "versification… has this peculiarity: that of all the features of a poem it offers itself as perhaps the clearest and most firmly definable objective correlative of our responses." W. K. Wimsatt, *Versification: Major Language Types*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt (New York: Modern Language Association; New York University Press, 1972), viii.

[15] William Coward, *Licentia Poetica Discuss'd* (London: William Carter, 1709), sig. A3r. (Coward's italics.)

> After the Harmonies in Sounds were discover'd by the Ear, the *Pythagoreans*, not content with the Criterions of Sense, measured these Intervals by Ratio's or Proportions…. Poets have made these the Proportions of their Rhythms, and the Proportions of these metrical Rhythms have the same Influence over the Affections as the musical Rhythms, and their Effects are various according to the various Powers of Rhythms.[16]

Manwaring's discussion of ancient harmony presumes a sharp and rather modern distinction between modes of critical perception. The powers of rhythm, he insists, are not to be understood by "the Criterions of Sense"; merely attending to the harmonies "discover'd by the ear" – engaging in what Hans-Georg Gadamer characterizes as a hermeneutics of listening[17] – is insufficient to understand how and why verse exercises its influence. Instead, its mysterious "Intervals," "Ratio's," and "Proportions," operating at a level beneath mere sensory impression, are perceptible to measure alone. In Manwaring's history of classical numbers, it is taken for granted that reading and listening are insufficient critical tools. Despite being couched in a discussion of ancient metrics, Manwaring's notion of criticism, like Coward's, is resolutely empirical in its aspirations.

Notwithstanding its tendency to seem abstract and theoretical, this critical interest in the mechanics of verse was ultimately rooted in the material culture of the Enlightenment and its enchantment with all things mechanical. The eighteenth century was "the golden age of the mechanical toy… charged with philosophical implication," remarks Daniel Tiffany. Ingenious automata that could speak, sing, write, and dance mimicked activities once thought distinctly human, challenging philosophers to grapple with the material bases of artistic creation and pleasure.[18] One such innovation was the versifying machine, whose seeming ability to create poetic harmony in the absence of a poet extended these philosophical implications into the realm of literary criticism and metrical theory. That these machines were often notional is beside the point: their mere existence invested discussion of poetic measure with an array of epistemological resonances far exceeding the literary or prosodic. In this respect, if the "mechanics" of verse seemed acutely to pre-occupy writers during Pope's era, attracting a pseudo-empirical species of criticism, such criticism corroborated the emergent and, to many, unwelcome suggestion that reading and writing are best understood as fundamentally mechanical phenomena.

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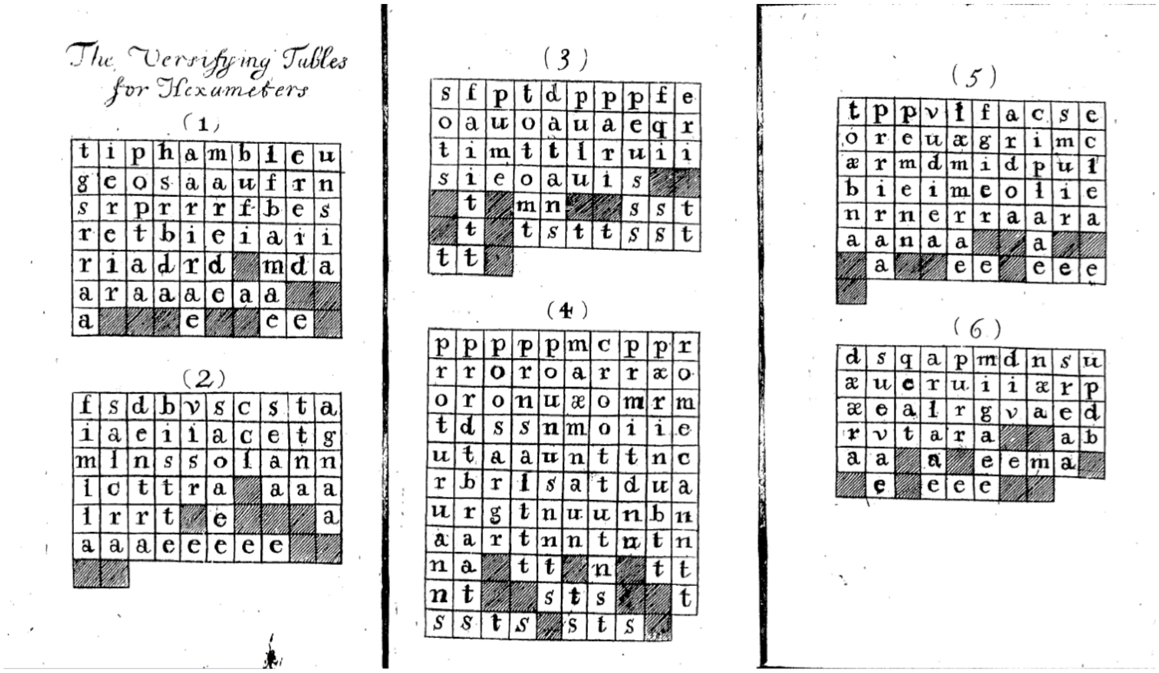
[16] Manwaring, *Stichology*, 20-21.

[17] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 481.

In 1677, John Peter produced a set of "versifying tables," or an early example of machine writing. (See figure 2.1.)



The Versifying Tables
for Hexameters

(1)

t	i	p	h	a	m	b	ſ	e	u
g	e	o	s	a	a	u	f	r	n
s	r	p	r	r	r	f	b	e	s
r	e	t	b	i	e	i	a	i	i
r	i	a	d	r	d	▨	m	d	a
a	r	a	a	a	e	a	a	▨	▨
a	▨	▨	▨	e	▨	▨	e	e	▨

(2)

f	s	d	b	v	s	c	s	t	a
i	a	e	i	i	a	c	e	t	g
m	l	n	s	s	o	ſ	a	n	n
l	c	t	t	r	a	▨	a	a	a
l	r	r	t	▨	e	▨	▨	▨	a
a	a	a	e	e	e	e	e	▨	▨
▨	▨								

(3)

s	f	p	t	d	p	p	p	f	e
o	a	u	o	a	u	a	e	q	r
t	i	m	t	t	ſ	r	u	i	i
s	i	e	o	a	u	i	s	▨	▨
▨	t	▨	m	n	▨	▨	s	s	t
▨	t	▨	t	s	t	t	s	s	t
t	t	▨							

(4)

p	p	p	p	p	m	c	p	p	r
r	r	o	r	o	a	r	r	æ	o
o	r	o	n	u	æ	o	m	r	m
t	d	s	s	n	m	o	i	i	e
u	t	a	a	u	n	t	t	n	c
r	b	r	ſ	s	a	t	d	u	a
u	r	g	t	n	u	u	n	b	n
a	a	r	t	n	n	t	n	t	n
n	a	▨	t	t	▨	n	▨	t	t
n	t	▨	▨	s	t	s	▨	▨	t
s	s	t	s	▨	s	t	s	▨	

(5)

t	p	p	v	ſ	f	a	c	s	e
o	r	e	u	æ	g	r	i	m	c
æ	r	m	d	m	i	d	p	u	ſ
b	i	e	i	m	e	o	l	i	e
n	r	n	e	r	r	a	a	r	a
a	a	n	a	a	▨	▨	a	▨	▨
▨	a	▨	▨	e	e	▨	e	e	e
▨									

(6)

d	s	q	a	p	m	d	n	s	u
æ	u	c	r	u	i	i	æ	r	p
æ	e	a	l	r	g	v	a	e	d
r	v	t	a	r	a	▨	▨	a	b
a	a	▨	a	▨	e	e	m	a	▨
▨	e	▨	e	e	e	▨	▨		

Figure 2.1. John Peter, *Artificial Versifying*, 2nd ed. (London: John Sims, 1678), insert between 10-11.

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[18] Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000), 57-8.

Published under the title *Artificial Versifying*, the work promised that anyone who "can count 9 (though he understands not *One Word of Latin*, or what a *Verse* means) may be plainly taught… how to make *Thousands* of *Hexameter* and *Pentameter Verses*, which shall be *True Latine, True Verse*, and *Good Sense*."[19] Composing a Latin hexameter is no easy feat, even for those versed in the language: one must adhere to a metrical scheme composed of "long" (¯) and "short" (˘) syllables arranged into particular rhythmic groups termed dactyls (¯ ˘ ˘) and spondees (¯ ¯), all the while navigating strict rules regarding substitutions (^{x}) and the elongation of naturally "short" syllables. The basic scheme (¯ ^{x} | ¯ ^{x} | ¯ ^{x} | ¯ ^{x} | ¯ ˘ ˘ | ¯ ¯) admits of much variety, yielding lines that range from thirteen to seventeen syllables. It is all the more surprising, then, that Peter's tables can accomplish this task. His system involves selecting six random numbers, counting a set number of spaces in each box, and then copying down the letters yielded by this process in order to generate a line of Latin verse. For instance, if one were to choose the string "878893," the tables would produce the line "*Turbida signa sequi praemonstrant sidera multa*" or "Gloomy stars reveal many signs to follow" – a rather nonsensical proposition, but an adequately grammatical and metrical one. Peter's system may seem rudimentary, and its output awkward, but its initial readers marveled at the ability of this "ingenious small Tract" to generate over half-a-million unique verses or "above 30 times as many Verses as are in *Virgil*."[20]

Perhaps more interesting than the mechanics of this process are its putative audience and critical reception. Although the first edition of Peter's tract was subtitled *The School-boy's*

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[19] John Peter, *Artificial Versifying* (London: John Sims, 1677), title page.

[20] Thomas Strode, *A Short Treatise of the Combinations…* (London: W. Godbid, 1678), 54-55. The tables were reprinted numerous times throughout the eighteenth century – in encyclopedias, mathematical textbooks, and even as a guide for budding female poets. See Nathan Bailey, *The Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (London: T. Cox, 1727), s.v. "hexameter" and "pentameter"; Joseph Dorman, *The Curiosity: or, A Gentleman and Lady's Library* (London: James Hodges, 1739), 192-201; and Solomon Lowe, *Arithmetic in Two Parts* (London: James Hodges, 1749), 39-40.

Recreation, this is something of a red herring. His versifying system is designed not for the schoolboy (whose instructor, one suspects, would quickly see through the ruse) but rather, as Carin Ruff notes, for "those who are capable of appreciating its ingeniousness, those who know Latin metrics well and who will see the mathematical and grammatical gimmicks in Peter's method."[21] At its heart, Peter's system is a parlor trick intended for those capable of appreciating it *as* a parlor trick – learned readers surprised to discover that a machine may generate passable examples of a craft supposed to take years to learn. The tables are noteworthy, then, because they undermine assumptions about the reader's ability to intuit intention and assign meaning. Meter, more than any other figuration of language, invites the attribution of intention to its steady over-determination of sound and quantity: it promises its reader the co-presence of thought and order. To the extent that the versifying tables present measure as arbitrary, mechanical, and inert, they call into question these basic assumptions about literary form's ability to sustain interpretation.

Peter explicitly locates the value of his versifying tables in their ability to make thought superfluous. Like logarithms or other computational aids, the tables allow those "who… have been altogether *ignorant* of *Arithmetick*, and of all *Literature*… by the benefit of *Instrumental Operation*… to perform *such Conclusions*, as their respective *Faculties* require," even though they are not "able to give a better *Reason*, *than that it is so, because it is so*."[22] Peter's use of tautology is telling here, for his system associates measure with the notion of self-sufficiency: it casts the mechanics of verse as a cause rather than an effect, as a literary phenomenon capable of generating itself without human agency. In the world of Peter's versifying tables, measure "*is so, because it is so*," a condition of order and potential meaning uncoupled from authorial intention.

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[21] See Carin Ruff, "True Latin, True Verse, and Good Sense: John Peter's *Artificial Versifying*," *Anglo-Latin and its Heritage*, ed. Sian Echard and Gernot Wieland (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 251.

[22] Peter, *Artificial Versifying*, 4. (Peter's italics.)

In the decades following the publication of *Artificial Versifying*, writers and critics, including Pope and a number of his peers, treated the versifying tables and their underlying logic to sustained derision. The authors of *The Spectator*, decrying the tables as a mode of "false Wit," likened them to

> a kind of Poetical Logarithms, which being divided into several Squares, and all inscribed with so many incoherent Words, appear to the Eye somewhat like a Fortune-telling Screen. What a Joy must it be to the unlearned Operator to find that these Words, being carefully collected and writ down in Order according to the Problem, start of themselves into Hexameter and Pentameter Verses?[23]

Jonathan Swift famously satirizes such mechanistic writing in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). There he memorably describes a knowledge engine with a passing resemblance to Peter's tables that randomly jumbles together words into phrases and sentences. "[B]y [this] contrivance," Swift writes, "the most ignorant person, at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labour, might write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, laws, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study."[24] (See figure 2.2.) Pope, too, took part in such mockery in *Peri Bathous* (1728), lampooning the notion of writing as reducible to a set of mechanical tasks.[25]

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[23] John Hughes, *The Spectator* 220; 12 November 1711.

[24] Jonathan Swift, *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins (New York; London: Norton, 2010), 428.

[25] He and Swift imagine a world in which "a Poet or Orator would have no more to do, but to send to the particular Traders" for his figures of speech – "to the *Metaphorist* for his *Allegories*, to the *Simile-Maker* for his *Comparisons*, to the *Ironist* for his *Sarcasmes*, to the *Apothegmatist* for his *Sentences*, *&c.*" See Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Sam. Fairbrother, 1728), 2:129.

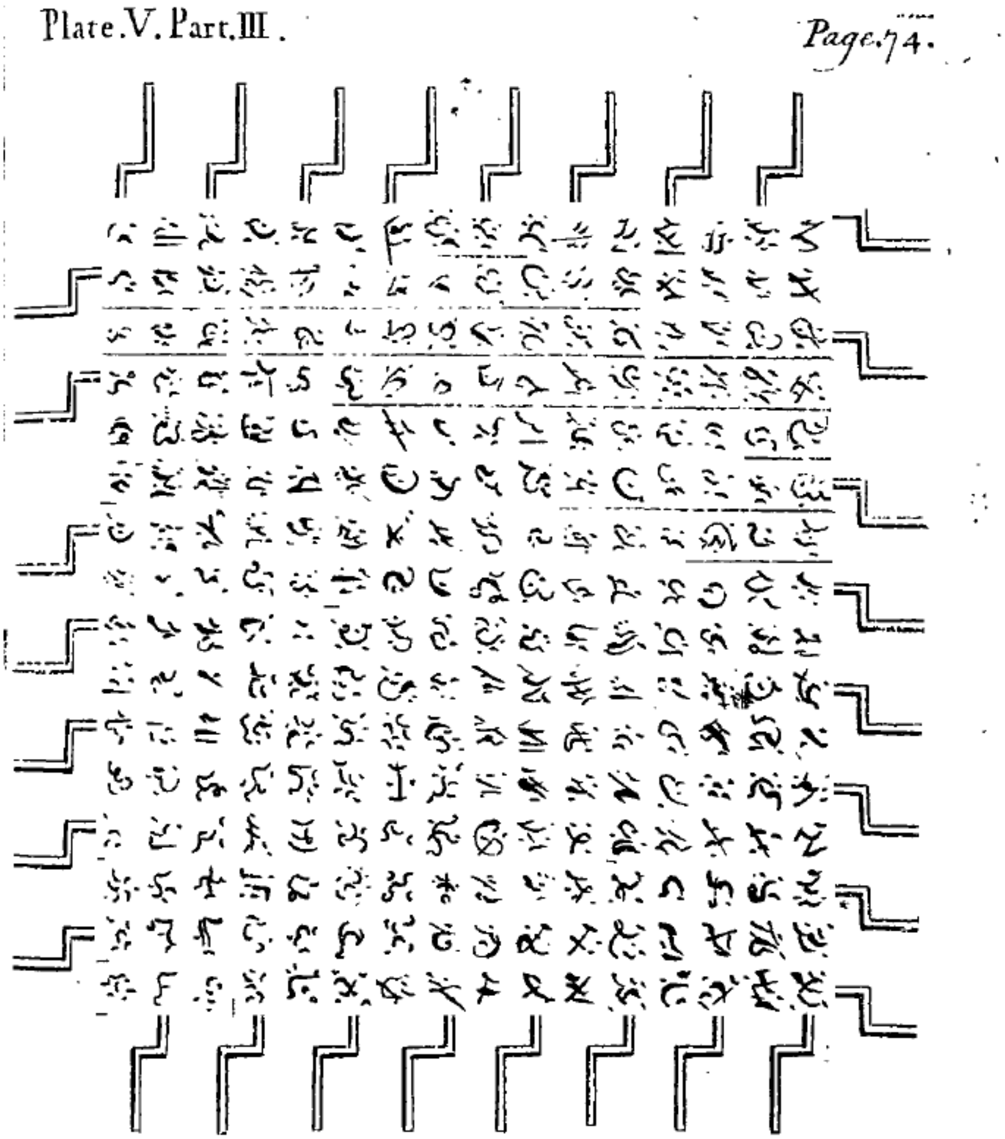
Plate.V. Part.III.
Page.74.

Figure 2.2. Jonathan Swift, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*... 2 vols. (London: B. Motte, 1726), 2:74.

A trifle such as Peter's tables could earn sharp condemnation from the Scriblerians because it elaborated what they considered to be the profoundly pernicious reduction of human thought and agency associated with the new science and materialism. Authors such as Hobbes, Locke, and Sprat had argued for a view of cognition and speech as essentially mathematical in nature. For Hobbes, ratiocination was little more than a kind of mental book-keeping: "When a man *reasoneth*, he does nothing else but conceive a sum total, from *addition* of parcels, or conceive a remainder, from *subtraction* of one sum from another."[26] Similarly, Sprat famously advocates for modern authors to "reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things* almost in an equal number of *words*."[27]

Perhaps the most famous articulation of this view arose on the continent. In 1703, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz's "Explication de L'Arithmétique Binaire" sang the praises of binary arithmetic on the grounds that such a system obviates the need to calculate or reason in the traditional sense.[28] With the aid of the binary tabulations, a very limited set of habits performed by one entirely ignorant of the binary code will nonetheless yield meaningful results, in a process conceptually analogous with Peter's versifying tables. (See figure 2.3.)

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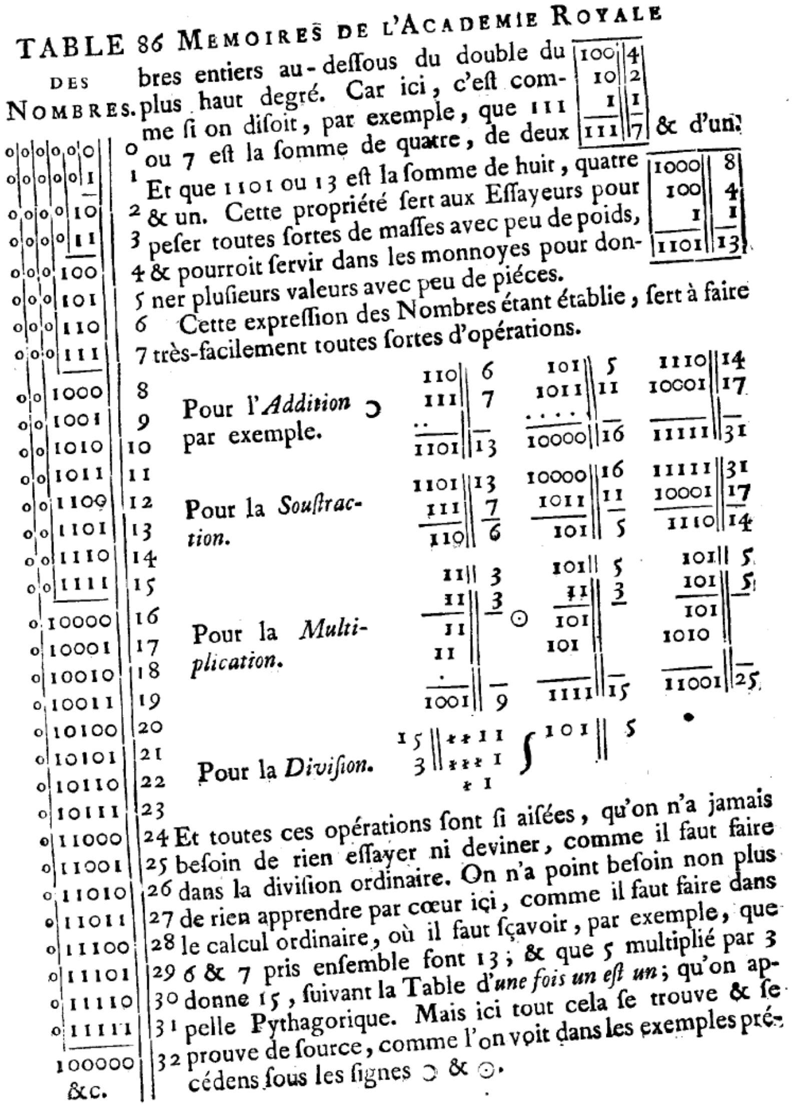
[26] Hobbes, Leviathan, 22; 1.5.1.

[27] Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society* (London: Printed by T. R. for J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1667), 113. (Sprat's italics.)

[28] "All of these operations are so easy, that one need never test or guess, as one must do in ordinary division. There is no need either to learn anything by heart here, as one must do in ordinary calculation" ("[T]outes ces opérations sont si aisées, qu'on n'a jamais besoin de rien essayer ni deviner, comme il faut faire dans la division ordinaire. On n'a point besoin non plus de rien apprendre par cœur içi, comme il faut faire dans le calcul ordinaire"). See Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, "Explication de L'Arithmétique Binaire," *Histoire de L'Académie Royale des Sciences* (Paris: Charles-Estienne Hochereau, 1703), 86.



86 MEMOIRES DE L'ACADEMIE ROYALE

TABLE DES NOMBRES.

bres entiers au-deſſous du double du plus haut degré. Car ici, c'eſt comme ſi on diſoit, par exemple, que 111 ou 7 eſt la ſomme de quatre, de deux & d'un. Et que 1101 ou 13 eſt la ſomme de huit, quatre & un. Cette propriété ſert aux Eſſayeurs pour peſer toutes ſortes de maſſes avec peu de poids, & pourroit ſervir dans les monnoyes pour donner pluſieurs valeurs avec peu de piéces.

100	4
10	2
1	1
111	7

1000	8
100	4
1	1
1101	13

Cette expreſſion des Nombres étant établie, ſert à faire très-facilement toutes ſortes d'opérations.

Pour l'*Addition* ↄ par exemple.

110	6	101	5	1110	14
111	7	1011	11	10001	17
1101	13	10000	16	11111	31

Pour la *Souſtraction.*

1101	13	10000	16	11111	31
111	7	1011	11	10001	17
110	6	101	5	1110	14

Pour la *Multiplication.* ⊙

11	3	101	5	101	5
11	3	11	3	101	5
11		101		101	
11		101		1010	
1001	9	1111	15	11001	25

Pour la *Diviſion.*

15 ‖ ✱✱11
3 ‖ ✱✱✱1
✱1
∫ 101 ‖ 5

Et toutes ces opérations ſont ſi aiſées, qu'on n'a jamais beſoin de rien eſſayer ni deviner, comme il faut faire dans la diviſion ordinaire. On n'a point beſoin non plus de rien apprendre par cœur ici, comme il faut faire dans le calcul ordinaire, où il faut ſçavoir, par exemple, que 6 & 7 pris enſemble font 13; & que 5 multiplié par 3 donne 15, ſuivant la Table d'*une fois un eſt un*; qu'on appelle Pythagorique. Mais ici tout cela ſe trouve & ſe prouve de ſource, comme l'on voit dans les exemples précédens ſous les ſignes ↄ & ⊙.

000000	0
000001	1
000010	2
000011	3
000100	4
000101	5
000110	6
000111	7
001000	8
001001	9
001010	10
001011	11
001100	12
001101	13
001110	14
001111	15
010000	16
010001	17
010010	18
010011	19
010100	20
010101	21
010110	22
010111	23
011000	24
011001	25
011010	26
011011	27
011100	28
011101	29
011110	30
011111	31
100000	32
&c.	

Figure 2.3. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, "Explication de L'Arithmétique Binaire," *Histoire de L'Académie Royale des Sciences* (Paris: Charles-Estienne Hochereau, 1703), 86.

Leibniz's interest in this process transcends mere issues of arithmetic – or, perhaps more accurately, it aspires to project the thoughtlessness of this system onto all forms of reasoning, envisioning a *calculus ratiocinator* (a logical inference engine) capable of eliciting sound conclusions from a *characteristica universalis* (a universal conceptual language) with limited human input. Leibniz suggests that "all reasoning one can derive from ideas could be derived from their characters in a sort of computation that would be one of the most important means of aiding the human mind."[29] A notion of *binarism*, abstracted from the mechanics of the heroic couplet, has tended to reign over discussions of eighteenth-century poetic form and meaning. Critics claim that the couplet's binary form crystallizes profound cultural and ideological oppositions, poising these antitheses "against each other like philosophical rivals or political parties,"[30] or even "that the Augustans had binary minds, that they thought in twos."[31] A less abstracted and a far more mechanical notion of "binarism," however, inheres in Peter's versifying tables and their Leibnizian counterparts: not a binarism of dialectical thought, but rather of *thoughtlessness* – of literary form uncoupled from human calculation.

Such equations of thought and writing with mechanical acts of counting and summing up distressed many authors during Pope's era. Isaac Watts's *Logick: or, the Right Use of Reason* (1725) – the most influential English primer on logic during the eighteenth century[32] – documents how these anxieties could intersect with the seemingly benign issue of poetic measure. Discussing with disapproval the habits whereby schoolchildren learn syllogisms, Watts draws an explicit link between these habits and Peter's versifying machine:

> *Simple Syllogisms* are adorned and surrounded in the common Books of Logick with a Variety of Inventions about *Moods* and *Figures*, wherein by the artificial Contexture of the Letters *A, E, I,* and *O,* Men have endeavoured to transform *Logick*, or the *Art of Reasoning*, into a sort of *Mechanism*, and to teach Boys to syllogize, or frame Arguments and refute them, without any real inward Knowledge of the Question. This is almost in the same Manner as School-boys have been taught perhaps in their trifling Years to compose *Latin Verses*; *i.e.* by certain Tables and Squares, with a Variety of Letters in

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[29] "… tout raisonnement qu'on peut tirer des notions, pourroit être tiré de leurs Caracteres par une maniere de calcul, qui seroit des plus importans moyens d'aider l'esprit humain" [*sic*]; Leibniz, "Explication," 89.

[30] J. Paul Hunter, "Formalism and History: Binarism and the Anglophone Couplet," *MLQ* 61, no. 1 (2000): 116.

[31] Margaret Anne Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 233.

[32] Watts's treatise ran to numerous editions, serving as a *de facto* textbook at Oxford and Cambridge well into the nineteenth century. See Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 342.

> them, wherein by counting every sixth, seventh, or eighth Letter, certain *Latin* Words should be framed in the Form of *Hexameters* or *Pentameters*; and this may be done by those who know nothing of *Latin* or of *Verses*.[33]

This thoughtless species of mechanical reasoning strikes a note of fear in Watts, for it presumes the dislocation of human intention from the linguistic mechanisms of reasoning. Watts recurs to this fear elsewhere in his *Logick*, animadverting on yet another model of metrically mechanized thought. This time, his target is John Fell, whose *Grammatica Rationis* (1673) sought to make memorable the dreary business of certain syllogistic configurations of subjects, predicates, and antecedents by throwing acronyms into the measure of the hexameter ("Doctrina haec versibus istis *Technicis* clauditur: Per NAPCAS, NIPCIS, vel NIPIS, REPSERE, CEPRES, / Et ROPCOS, COPROS, NOSROP medium invenis omne").[34] Far from finding this mnemonic useful, Watts recoils at its implicit theory of cognition:

> By some *logical* Writers this Business of *Topics* and *Invention*, is treated of in such a Manner with Mathematical Figures and Diagrams, filled with the barbarous technical Words, *Napcas, Nipcis, Ropcos, Nosrop, &c.* as tho' an ignorant Lad were to be led mechanically in certain artificial Harnesses and Trammels to find out Arguments to prove or refute any Proposition whatsoever, without any rational Knowledge of the Ideas. Now there is no Need to throw Words of Contempt on such a Practice; the very Description of it carries Reproof and Ridicule in Abundance.[35]

Watts highlights, only to dismiss as beneath contempt, the suggestion that the mere mechanics of verse may artificially harness and guide ratiocination in the utter absence of a human mind – that poetic measure, as it were, delimits a thoughtless realm of meaning. Notwithstanding Watts's disapproval, however, the very fact that he feels compelled to dispute this notion at length in his *Logick* alerts us to the philosophically and religiously subversive valence associated with the mere "mechanics" of verse during the early eighteenth century. Far from a trivial and pedantic preoccupation, discussions of the poet's "mechanical art" articulated a complex set of concerns about meaning's reliance on, and inherence in, inhuman and unintended structures, for which poetic measure came to stand as a privileged figure.

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[33] Isaac Watts, *Logick: or, the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry after Truth*, 8th ed. (London: T. Longman, 1745), 289; pt. 3, chap. 2., sect. 3.

[34] John Fell, *Grammatica rationis, sive, institutiones logicae* [1673] (Oxford: Joh. Howell, 1685), 173-4.

[35] Watts, *Logick*, 307; pt. 3, chap. 2, sect. 7.

§ Pope and the Mechanics of Ease

Pope's reputation as the archetypical poet of measure merits him a prominent place in this history. In the eighteenth century, his name was all but synonymous with this aspect of the poetic craft: "a thousand years may elapse," prophesied Samuel Johnson, "before there shall appear another man with a power of versification equal to that of Pope."[36] To parse this poet's theory and practice of meter in light of the Enlightenment versifying machine is to discover not only that he capitalized on his culture's preoccupation with measure but that he and his characteristic style also contributed to the emerging and epistemologically fraught distinction between reading and measurement as forms of critical inquiry.

Essential to Pope's carefully curated reputation as a poet is the suggestion that his facility with measure is, at base, a natural gift or grace beyond the reach of art. In his prefatory remarks to *An Essay on Man*, addressing the somewhat peculiar fact that he chose to compose a philosophical system in verse, the poet acknowledges that he might have written it

> in prose; but I chose verse, and even rhyme, for two reasons. The one will appear obvious; that principles, maxims, or precepts so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards: The other may seem odd, but is true, I found I could express them more *shortly* this way than in prose itself;

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[36] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980), 1099.

> and nothing is more certain, than that much of the *force* as well as *grace* of arguments or instructions, depends on their *conciseness*.[37]

Boasting that the choice between verse and prose was but a trifling one for him, Pope anticipates his pithier claim, offered in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* (1734), that "[a]s yet a Child, nor yet a Fool to Fame, / I lisp'd in Numbers, for the Numbers came."[38] Pope designs such declarations of metrical virtuosity – grounded in classical allusion, no less – to set himself off from the rabble of mere mechanical versifiers.[39] Yet implicit within such boasts are a set of assumptions about the relation between numbers, reason, and agency. Pope's self-presentation as an irrepressible and natural versifier supposes that not only measure but also a certain argumentative style come to him as if unwilled. These effects are taken to be intimately joined: metrical virtuosity is always also argumentative virtuosity, or what Pope characterizes as a "shortness" or concision verging on the aphoristic. When Swift laments wryly that Pope "can in one couplet fix / More sense than I can do in six," it is this supposed alignment of cogency and measure on which the compliment rests.[40] Whether or not one takes Pope's boast and Swift's compliment literally is beside the point: the mere use of such rhetoric establishes this alignment as a poetic desideratum and a criterion of critical judgment.

Of particular interest, then, are those passages in Pope's writings expressly interested in the powers and limits of human reasoning and perception, such as the opening of the *Essay*'s second epistle:

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[37] Pope, "An Essay on Man," *Poems*, 502.

[38] Pope, "Epistle to Arbuthnot," *Poems*, 602; ll. 127-28.

[39] The allusion is to Ovid, *Tristia*, 4.10.24-26.

[40] Jonathan Swift, "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D." *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 486; ll. 49-50.

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.
> Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
> With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
> In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,
> Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
> Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
> Whether he thinks too little, or too much;
> Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;
> Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
> Created half to rise, and half to fall;
> Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world![41]

For Pope, man knows just enough to know that his existence, such as it is, is providentially fated, but not enough to accept or understand this fate and the severe limits it places on his understanding. The avowal of such epistemological humility within a framework of masterfully constructed, carefully balanced, and self-assured couplets necessarily begets a tension between what the poem says and how it says it. Pope's legislative maxims – "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of Mankind is Man" – can seem to sit uneasily, islands of certainty amid a sea of doubt. The manner in which these maxims draw attention to themselves has as much to do with their manipulation of measurement as with their semantics. The concision of this aphoristic couplet, for instance, enacts its own injunction against scanning the divine order. The verse, like the realm of God, needs no parsing: its very closure figures a divine symmetry. The measure, in this respect, can be said to offer an oblique glimpse of the cosmological order presumed to operate beyond the bounds of human understanding.

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[41] Pope, "An Essay on Man," *Poems*, 516; 2.1-18.

Yet the artful manipulation of measure in such a way as to allow for readings such as this one – artful manipulation that, by its very nature, would seem to abjure any notion that the poet's thoughts are somehow beholden to the mechanics of his verse – cannot help but realize, if only by implication, the very sort of mechanical reading it would deny. Heroic couplets are deceptively easy to read because we know, with a high degree of certainty, exactly where they are going to end as well as what that end will sound like. Rhyme is an engine of providence, a dramatization of inevitability – while discussing Pope's masterful ability to insinuate connections through rhyme, W. K. Wimsatt describes the effect as a "*fait accompli*."[42] When we talk of the regularity and closure of the couplet, then, we necessarily encounter the inexorableness such form courts: a rhyme one perceives as apt and fit can also seem over-determined to the point of evacuating any impression of intention or thought on the part of its author. This is precisely Pope's critique of rhyme as employed by poetasters, which he parodies in the "Essay on Criticism":

> they ring round the same *unvary'd Chimes*,
> With sure *Returns* of still *expected Rhymes*.
> Where-e'er you find *the cooling Western Breeze*,
> In the next Line, it *whispers thro' the Trees*;
> If *Chrystal Streams with pleasing Murmurs creep*,
> The Reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with *Sleep*.
> Then, at the *last*, and *only* Couplet fraught
> With some *unmeaning* Thing they call a *Thought*,
> A *needless Alexandrine* ends the Song,
> That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.[43]

For Pope, the evil of such clockwork rhymes is not only stylistic but epistemological in nature: it is because the lines seem almost to be writing themselves that they allow "some *unmeaning* Thing" to be confused by their author for "a *Thought*." This is the double-edge of rhyme and of poetic form more broadly: if, in the hands of an able author, closure and symmetry can figure a cosmological order, in lesser hands they can dramatize automation and apparent thoughtlessness.[44]

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[42] W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1954), 164.

[43] Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," *Poems*, 154-55; ll. 348-357.

In this respect, the evacuation of thought and intention associated with the mechanics of verse cannot simply be dismissed as a fringe phenomenon restricted to gimmicky automata and deplorable hack writers, for the specter of such thoughtlessness lurks over Pope's writings as a threat forever to be wrestled with. As Hugh Kenner aptly puts it, "Pope is at pains never to be thought suggestible. He means us, when we are reading lines of his, to be visited by no suspicion that the first rhyme of a pair has suggested the second, or even *vice versa*: to judge rather that the rhyme validates a structure of meaning which other orders of cogency have produced."[45] If the goal of the *fait-accompli* couplet, as practiced by Pope, is to convince the reader that "other orders of cogency" have led to its structure – that it can be first and foremost *read* and only thereafter, as if by a fortuitous accident, *scanned* – this practice must summon both of these orders of perception into being, if only to subordinate one to the other. From this unavoidable association between distinct orders of perception arises the two authorial poses so often deployed by Pope – that of the pre-eminent craftsman ("True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance") and the chosen vehicle of something unwilled and inevitable ("I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came").[46] These poses, despite their seeming opposition, are mutually constitutive – for it is only against the possibility of a poetics of mere, mechanical "Chance" that a poetics of "Art" may even be perceptible.

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[44] On the subject of fate and free will in rhyme, see Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

[45] Hugh Kenner, "Pope's Reasonable Rhymes," *ELH* 41, no. 1 (1974): 77-8.

[46] Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," *Poems*, 155; l. 362.

This tension between modes of perception lurks not only in theory over Pope's verse-craft but over the particular passage already cited. Read with an eye toward questions of prosody, Pope's maxim – "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of Mankind is Man" – presents an irony. The presence of the verb "to scan" – whose primary meaning for much of English literary history has been to analyze verse into parts, to judge its correctness "by reciting it with metrical emphasis and pauses"[47] – sharply highlights the fact that distinct, competing orders of perception are at work in the reading of verse. That is to say, at the very moment that Pope's reader is explicitly commanded not to scan in one sense, she is implicitly invited to do so in another: her sensation of the couplet's closure, of its seeming rhetorical and philosophical inevitability, belies the fact that it must be unconsciously parsed and measured in order to be recognized *as* a couplet. The convenient presence of the word "scan" in this passage only stresses what is true of the couplet style more generally: its sought-after "ease" must invite the very mode of mechanical reading it disavows in order to demonstrate how wholly it has transcended it. Like an inoculation, it must host and purge the very thing it would elude.

Ironically, it is the period's pronounced aesthetic preoccupation with "ease," with the notion that reading and scansion can be the same thing, which stresses their difference. Reading and measurement are nowhere more distinct than in the pointed declaration, effectively what every artfully laboured couplet declares, that they align. Not only does Pope's theory of meter, then, necessarily carry within it the very mechanistic poetics it must abjure, but its aesthetic aim indirectly heightens a theoretical conflict between modes of critical perception – one that readers of the *Essay on Man* were quick to elaborate.

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[47] *OED Online*, s.v. "scan," accessed May 4, 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171869.

§ Crousaz, Determinism, and the *Essay*'s Machine Readers

The furor that surrounded Pope's *Essay on Man* when it was first published can appear strange to modern eyes. Read, parsed, praised, and condemned across Europe by such luminaries as Hume, Voltaire, Lessing, Rousseau, and Kant, Pope's *Essay* sparked a series of Enlightenment skirmishes over questions of human agency and the laws of human nature.[48] The source of the poem's fame and infamy arose from its ambiguity. Like an inkblot test, it seemed at once many things to many thinkers: a blameless declaration of orthodox Christian piety to some, to others a deeply pernicious avowal of heterodox or even atheistic determinism after the manner of Spinoza or Leibniz. More than any other poem of the eighteenth century, Pope's *Essay* raised for readers and critics the fraught possibility that human life may be mechanistically determined by laws as far-reaching and rigid as those Newton had investigated. The great irony of the controversy, then, is that its instigator Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, the critic most devoted to censuring Pope and to dispelling any notion of man as a machine, would come to model a kind of criticism predicated on just such determinism. In Crousaz's influential interpretation of Pope's *Essay*, a mistrust of the mechanics of versification and doubts about the sufficiency of reading combine to foster a radically novel literary critical stance: one that imagines and privileges a mode of perception *other* than reading, a mode of perception capable of unveiling what the mechanics of verse are presumed to insinuate and conceal.

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[48] For an overview, see Maynard Mack's introduction to Pope's *An Essay on Man* (London: Methuen; New Haven: Yale UP, 1950) and Douglas H. White, *Pope and the Context of Controversy: The Manipulation of Ideas in* An Essay on Man (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970); for a discussion of French responses to the poem, see Richard Gilbert Knapp, *The fortunes of Pope's* Essay on Man *in 18th-Century France* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1971).

Although, at first glance, modes of critical perception would seem to have little bearing on the controversy surrounding Pope's *Essay*, attempts to understand the poem's philosophical principles tended to raise methodological questions about literary criticism. For instance, the *Essay*'s noted fixation on the inability of humans to perceive concealed mechanisms of Providence – "All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee; / All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see; / All Discord, Harmony, not understood"[49] – tended to anticipate and mirror problems that critics associated with reading the poem itself. In 1736, reviewing the poem in *Observations sur les écrits modernes*, Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines hesitates about how best to pursue his task, warning that it would be ridiculous to closely analyze particular passages from Pope's *Essay*, "which are held together only by a general and imperceptible relationship."[50] The poem, just like the "mighty maze" of reality Pope describes,[51] is taken to embody a logic that normal habits of critical analysis are insufficient to unfold. So common does this view become that Pope's French translator Du Resnel feels compelled to defend the work against numerous charges that it conceals "a lurking poison."[52] Reflexively, by dint of a process that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick associates with "paranoid reading,"[53] the fact of concealment becomes a presupposition among Pope's reviewers: the poem hides something and in so doing foregrounds the limits of critical discovery. In this respect, the discussion surrounding Pope's *Essay* is acutely self-reflexive: its most devoted readers are frequently preoccupied with the adequacy of their own interpretive strategies to discover the poem's concealed ideology.

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[49] Pope, "Essay on Man," *Poems*, 515; 1.289-91.

[50] "Vous jugez bien qu'il seroit ridicule de faire une analyse de diverses pensées, qui ne tiennent ensemble que par un rapport général & imperceptible." See P. F. G. Desfontaines, *Observations sur les écrits modernes* 4 (1736): 27, reprinted in facsimile in 4 vols. (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), 1:283.

[51] Pope, "Essay on Man," *Poems*, 504; 1.6.

[52] Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, *A Commentary on Mr. Pope's Principles of Morality, Or* Essay on Man, trans. Samuel Johnson, vol. 17 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2004), 348.

[53] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading or Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is about You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 123-151.

Further complicating this critical preoccupation with the poem's "concealed" meaning is the suspicion that Pope was himself an unwitting mechanism of concealment. The critical history of the *Essay* since Pope's time has consistently – obsessively, even – focused on questions of authorship. Namely, from whom did Pope borrow or glean his metaphysics, and how much of the philosophical system ought to be attributed to Pope? As Harry Solomon ably documents, critical arguments about the *Essay* often play out as a game of attribution in which Leibniz, Lucretius, Bolingbroke, or some other candidate is proposed as the ultimate source of the principles presented in Pope's poem.[54] This hunt for the poem's *Ur*-text necessarily carries with it a pair of assumptions not mutually exclusive: (i) that Pope mechanically versified a set of pre-existing propositions, and (ii) that Pope did not fully understand what he was writing. The latter suggestion has long been put forward to defend Pope against charges of heterodoxy. In his life of "Pope" (1781), Johnson writes that "the doctrine of the *Essay on Man* was received from Bolingbroke, who is said to have ridiculed Pope, among those who enjoyed his confidence, as having adopted and advanced principles of which he did not perceive the consequence, and as blindly propagating opinions contrary to his own."[55] Such a defense secures Pope's place within the pale of Christian orthodoxy only by conceding that he was duped by the Deist Bolingbroke – that he served, thoughtlessly and mechanically, as a sort of metrical amanuensis. The always quotable Johnson puts this view more briefly, observing that Bolingbroke "meant to make [Pope] without his own consent an instrument of mischief."[56] This account of Pope as a thoughtless and unintentional "instrument" of heterodoxy essentially casts the poet as an embodiment of the very verse-machine concept that Swift and the Scriblerians had satirized.

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[54] "The history of interpretation of *An Essay on Man* is a narrative of proposed precursors"; see Harry M. Solomon, *The Rape of the Text: Reading and Misreading Pope's* Essay on Man (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1993), 34ff. Solomon offers the best and the most recent account of these critical disputes. See also Brean S. Hammond, *Pope and Bolingbroke: A Study of Friendship and Influence* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1984); and Mack, *Essay*, xxiii-xlvi.

[55] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:39-40. Joseph Warton would echo this claim, writing that "[t]he late Lord Bathurst repeatedly assured me, that he had read the whole scheme of the *Essay on Man*, in the hand-writing of Bolingbroke, and drawn up in a series of propositions, which Pope was to versify and illustrate"; see Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 2:62.

Measure's status as a mechanism of concealment holds a privileged, if largely implicit, place amid such criticism. Crousaz and William Warburton, the most influential of the commentators, notoriously treat the *Essay* as if it were a prose tract or a series of constative propositions.[57] "I shall not consider it as a *Poem*," the latter writer declares, "but as a *System of Philosophy*; and [will] content myself with a plain Representation of the Sobriety, Force, and Connection of *that Reasoning*."[58] Yet such an approach, far from conceiving poetic measure to be irrelevant to the interpretation of Pope's *Essay*, implicitly grants it a profound significance. Crousaz understands his critical task to depend radically on his ability to distinguish philosophical meaning from the poetic mechanism (what he terms the "embellishments") of its delivery:

> let the philosophy and divinity of Mr Pope be proposed in a plain summary, without embellishments, and it will appear whether such positions as he has here laid down, will obtain credit by their own evidence, and it will be more easy to examine whether some secret passions, and latent ill principles, are not the chief motives of the desire that any man feels to find them true.[59]

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[56] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:42.

[57] For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Solomon, *The Rape of the Text.*

[58] William Warburton, *A Critical and Philosophical Commentary on Mr. Pope's* Essay on Man. *In Which is Contain'd a Vindication of the Said Essay…* (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1742), 2. This work collects together Warburton's publications on this topic, which began as a series of letters in *The History of the Works of the Learned* in December 1738.

[59] Crousaz, *Commentary*, 322-23.

Crousaz's habit of exhaustively paraphrasing and criticizing the *Essay* line-by-line is, by its very nature, distrustful toward measure, for it implicitly treats measure as a mode of concealment. The glaring disproportion between Crousaz's polemic – a critical campaign encompassing two separate publications (his *Examen* [1737] and *Commentaire* [1738] totaling over 600 pages) – and Pope's slender volume of thirteen hundred lines itself suggests how much is presumed to be concealed by Pope's concise measures.

Crousaz's desire to unveil and condemn what he perceives to be the *Essay*'s implicit determinism prompts him to meditate frequently on the notion – entirely odious to him – that human thought and language are reducible to purely mechanical explanation. "[I]f it be true that [men's] bodies are only parts of the great machine, and dependent on the motions of the universe; if all the impulses they receive or communicate proceed from a train of causes not to be interrupted," then "we act by a constant impulse, of which we are not conscious, and which we cannot resist while our souls are exposed by their relation to our bodies to a continual train of chimeras and delusions."[60] Pope's poem, Crousaz holds, necessarily conceives of human bodies as machines. To demonstrate what he perceives to be the foolishness of this principle, Crousaz engages in a *reductio ad absurdum* centered on the mechanics of reading and writing in just such an imagined deterministic world. It must follow from the *Essay*'s principles, he suggests satirically, that writing can be a merely mechanical process uncoupled from human thought or perception:

> according to this system, a machine not directed by any power of intelligence, and entirely unconscious of its own notions, shall, upon the pronounciation [*sic*] of these words, *Take this* Greek*, and translate it into* Latin*, and you shall receive a guinea a page*, immediately, without understanding the import of those words, have its parts so disposed, that it shall call for pens, ink, and paper, and, from the impression made upon its eyes by

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[60] Crousaz, *Commentary*, 293; 331.

> the Greek, of which impression it has no perception, write Latin characters, which having no natural relation to the Greek, express the same things, and represent exactly the same ideas.[61]

For Crousaz, this dislocation of intention from meaning, and of literary form from human perception, subtends and vitiates Pope's *Essay*. Pope's poem, he suggests, advances an erroneous and dangerous epistemology of reading, one that would reduce critical perception "to a continual train of chimeras and delusions."

It is all the more ironic, then, that Crousaz's own critique assumes the determinism it sets out to criticize, and in so doing normalizes the distinction between modes of critical perception that it would foreclose. The deterministic logic of Pope's poem, Crousaz insists, would demand that one regard poetry as a mere "mechanic art" disassociated from human intention and perception. Crousaz clearly regards this proposition as transparently absurd, and yet his criticism of Pope throughout the *Commentaire* and *Examen* implicitly grants this very premise by associating the mechanics of verse with a set of dangerous impulses operating beyond the horizon of the reader's perception. In a telling moment, Crousaz satirically suggests that "[t]he Notions and Sentiments of Measures, Rythms [*sic*], Verses, and, in a Word, Ideas exactly resembling Mr *Pope*'s, arose in the Souls of those Machines who have read his Poem, without his having in any Manner contributed to produce in them either the Sensation of Sound, the Idea of Verses, or the understanding of their Signification."[62] The remark is straightforwardly sardonic; and yet Crousaz's fear that the poem insinuates heterodoxy demands a belief in a similar kind of prosodic determinism: a set of involuntary, thoughtless responses to stimuli that occur beneath the horizon of perception.

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[61] Crousaz, *Commentary*, 330.

[62] Jean-Pierre Crousaz, *An Examination of Mr. Pope's* Essay on Man, trans. Elizabeth Carter (London: A. Dodd, 1739), 216.

In the critical tradition surrounding Pope's *Essay*, this issue is often articulated amid discussion of the poem's coherence, or lack thereof.[63] When Crousaz wishes to express skepticism about the coherence of Pope's poem, he does so by drawing an analogy with a controversial strand of Homeric scholarship:

> This is not the only inconsistency to be found in these essays, and I know some who, from the author's disagreement with himself, have conjectured, that he did not compose these poems in a regular series of study, but that having written several fragments of poetry, each finished in its kind… he digested them into these four essays, as they are said to have anciently collected the rhapsodies of Homer.[64]

The shift from *poet* ("a maker") to *rhapsode* ("a stitcher of songs") is more than a matter of nomenclature: it carries with it a set of assumptions about authorial intention and the function of literary form. Although Friedrich August Wolf's famous *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), which doubted the historical existence of Homer, would not be published until the end of the century, this strand of Homeric argument pre-existed Wolf's theorization, most notably in the *Conjectures académiques, ou Dissertation sur l'Iliade* (1715) written by François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac (1604-1676) and published posthumously. Hédelin argues that Homer's *Iliad* is not properly a poem but a "rhapsody" or "cento": "a collection of sewn-together songs, a mass of many pieces previously scattered and since joined together."[65] The figure of the rhapsode destabilizes the concept of the author as a locus of intention, anticipating, in some respects, Roland Barthes's notion of the "scriptor."[66] It diffuses Homer's authorship across a multitude of anonymous singers, as when Hédelin conjectures that Homer's poem existed "in the mouths of the people and the beggars" ("dans la bouche de la populace et des mandians"), and that it was commonly recited "everywhere, even in the public squares" ("par tout jusques dans les carrefours [*sic*]").[67] In this line of criticism, the name "Homer" comes to function as an allegory for a form of authorship de-coupled from individual intentions. Giambattista Vico advances this claim in the 1730 edition of *The New Science* when he suggests that "the reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer."[68]

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[63] Solomon, *Rape of the Text*, 57ff.

[64] Crousaz, *Commentary*, 320-21.

[65] "… un recüeil de chansons cousuës, un amas de plusieurs pieces auparavant dispersées, et depuis jointes ensemble." François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac, *Conjectures académiques, ou Dissertation sur l'Iliade* [1715], ed. Gérard Lambin (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2010), 150-151.

[66] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," trans. Stephen Heath, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York; London: Norton, 2001), 1468.

To the extent that the figure of the rhapsode diffuses and dissolves poetic intention across society as a whole, it offers an alternative to the author, and in so doing foregrounds the issue of poetic form. In the absence of an authorial mind to direct and ordain the whole, measure becomes a pseudo-author in its own right: it, and not Homer, functions as the literary critical category through which particular fragments are understood to be coherent. If, following Vico's logic, "Homer" is an allegory, then the hexameter provides this allegory its discernible shape: the measure renders this allegory perceivable. As a critical concept, the rhapsode renders measure, not authorial intention, the source of coherence and meaning. By describing Pope as a rhapsode rather than a poet, then, Crousaz merely extends, in Homeric terms, the line of thought that associates Pope with the verse-machine.

Unsurprisingly, the notion of Homer as rhapsode was largely unwelcome among English critics invested in traditional accounts of authorship and intention. Edward Manwaring, for instance, insists against the likes of Hédelin that "nothing is more apparent than the Design of the

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[67] Hédelin, *Conjectures*, 160.

[68] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1984), 324; §875.

Poet in [the *Iliad*], where all things are connected with so much Art and Ingenuity, as evidently manifest its intended Unity."[69] However, when it came time for Warburton to defend Pope against Crousaz's charge, he chose in this instance not to re-assert Pope's status as a possessor of authorial intention but rather to adopt and adapt the rhapsody thesis:

> I believe just as much of Mr. *Pope's Rhapsodies*, as I do of *Homer'*s. But if this be the Case, that the *Leaves* of these *two great Poets* were wrote at random, tossed about, and afterwards put in Order, like the *Cumaean* Sibyls; then, what we have till now thought an old lying Bravado of the Poets, *That they wrote by Inspiration*, will become a sober Truth. For, if *Chance* could not produce them, and *human Design* had no hand in them, what must we conclude, but that they are, what they are so commonly called, *Divine*?[70]

Rather than defend the coherence of Pope's intentions and with it the "*human Design*" of the *Essay*, Warburton instead likens the poet to another kind of "scriptor": not the rhapsode but the sibyl, a divine mouthpiece whose prophecies, scrawled on oak-leaves, exist to be re-arranged by the wind. Warburton's tone is facetious here, but there remains a grain of truth to his analogy, as Pope's idiosyncratic mode of composition involved composing verses on scraps of paper and then sorting these fragments into order. Swift offers a glimpse of Pope's compositional process in "Dr Swift to Mr Pope, while he was writing the *Dunciad*" –

> Each Atom by some other struck,
> All Turns and Motion tries;
> Till in a Lump together stuck,
> Behold a *Poem* rise![71]

– likening the composition of *The Dunciad* to Epicurean atomism. More important than the superficial similarity between Pope's and the sibyl's writing habits, though, is the effect of Warburton's critical rhetoric. His shift from the figure of the rhapsode to that of the sibyl implicitly concedes Crousaz's charge that Pope is an instrument of forces beyond his control or perception. Regardless of whether they attribute the final form of the *Essay* to ignorant chance or divine inspiration, both assume the poem's shape and meaning to be 'authored' by a force that transcends and negates the poem's putative maker. The rhetorical leap from the rhapsode's hexameters to those of the sibyl proffers a distinction without a difference: the invocation of either of these figures by the critics serves to associate poetic measure with something other than "*human Design*."

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[69] Edward Manwaring, *An Historical and Critical Account of the Most Eminent Classic Authors in Poetry and History* (London: printed for W. Innys and R. Manby, 1737), 27.

[70] Warburton, *A Critical and Philosophical Commentary*, 182.

[71] Swift, "Dr Swift to Mr Pope, while he was writing the *Dunciad*," *Complete Poems*, 321; ll. 13-16.

Warburton's and Crousaz's talk of rhapsodes and sibyls may seem a sideshow amid the dispute about the *Essay*'s metaphysics; and yet this tendency to associate Pope and his measures with a logic of instrumentality gained a wider currency. Little remarked on by scholars of Pope is the important part played by the poet and his *Essay* in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine* (1748), perhaps the most notorious argument on behalf of materialism published during the eighteenth century. La Mettrie, a monist, likens human thought to clockwork: "to ask whether matter is capable of thinking, without considering it otherwise than in itself, is asking whether matter is capable of pointing out the hours."[72] Throughout his writings, La Mettrie privileges Pope's *Essay* as a supporting document. When asserting, for instance, that man is nothing but a refined sort of animal, La Mettrie paraphrases the *Essay*'s celebrated passage about Newton and the ape: "the entire realm of man, to tell the truth, is nothing but a composite of different monkeys, more or less clever, at whose head Pope has placed Newton."[73] Pope, however, functions not only as a source for La Mettrie but also as a *figure* of the man-machine concept itself. At the climax of La Mettrie's tract, he turns to Pope to exemplify that "material unity of man":

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[72] Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine. Translated from the French…* [1748] (London: W. Owen, 1749), 1-2.

[73] "[T]out leur [i.e. man's] *Régne* n'est, à dire vrai, qu'un composé des differens singes plus ou moins adroits, à la tète des quels Pope a mis Newton." Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L'Homme-Plante*, *Oeuvres Philosophiques* (London [Berlin]: Jean Nourse, 1751), 342; §XXXIII. For further reference to Pope, see La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, 12.

> Let us view the picture of the famous Mr. Pope…. The efforts and nerves of his genius are strongly represented in his physiognomy; it seems to be all in a sort of convulsion; his eyes seem ready to start from their orbit, his eye-brows raise themselves with the muscles of his forehead. Why all this? 'tis because the source of the nerves is, as if it were in labour, and the whole body, if I may say, feels the pangs of a painful delivery. If there is not an inward cord which thus forcibly pulls those without, how can we account for these surprizing phaenomena? In order to explain all this, if we admit a soul, this in effect would be the same as if we were to call in the operation of the holy ghost.[74]

For La Mettrie, Pope's portrait emblematizes the wholly material and mechanistic basis of things commonly supposed to require a spiritual cause – such as life and poetry. Pope's "genius" is likened to "a sort of convulsion," and the act of writing verse to "the pangs of a painful delivery." There is, for La Mettrie, no need to posit either a soul within the man or a "soul" behind the poetry: both life and versification may be understood as a set of physical processes, the admittedly complex result of simple animal machinery. Taking Pope's poetry as a test case – as representing the outer limit of human ingenuity and intention – La Mettrie nonetheless argues for its essentially mechanistic character, thereby disassociating Pope's verse from the critical (and, for La Mettrie, dubious) category of intention.

Although Crousaz would have condemned such a view as heretical, his treatment of Pope implicitly relies on its logic of mechanism, for it treats measure as an instrument of ideology, one capable of engendering heterodox beliefs in unsuspecting minds. "There are some slow capacities," Crousaz warns, "that are satisfied with sounds, and embrace opinions dressed up in plausible language, without seeing *the dreadful consequences that flow necessarily from them*" [my italics].[75] The deep irony here is that while Crousaz argues against what he perceives to be the deterministic worldview latent in Pope's poem, his warning that Pope's poem works nefariously on its readers assumes just this kind of determinism. In taking for granted that readers will necessarily reap dreadful ideological consequences from the perusal of the *Essay*, Crousaz assumes a fundamentally mechanistic theory of reading, one wherein readers, like thoughtless automata, cannot help but react to stimuli of which they need not even be aware. This concern for what the mechanics of verse keep "latent" or "secret" draws the reading process itself into the ambit of the machine, whereby Crousaz comes to sound almost like a free-thinking contemporary he would have condemned, the materialist philosopher La Mettrie: "Nothing, we see, is so simple as the mechanism of our education! All is reduced to sounds or words, that from the mouth of one pass thro' the ears of another, into the brain…"[76]

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[74] La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, 63; 62.

[75] Crousaz, *Commentary*, 328.

In spite of itself, Crousaz's influential reading of Pope's *Essay* articulates an anxiety about reading's sufficiency as a critical tool; in so doing, it elaborates in the domain of literary criticism the same tension between orders of perception latent in Pope's theory of metrical style. This qualified appraisal of reading's perspicuity, in concert with the unwelcome suspicion that the mechanics of measure conceal strata of significance beyond common apprehension, makes possible the imagination of distinct epistemologies of literary criticism grounded on the adversarial, and yet mutually constitutive, practices of reading and measurement. These two orders of perception – and the emergent theories of criticism that attend each of them – depend on one another like the paired lines of a couplet.

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[76] La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, 24.

§ Scansion and Scanning

My focus on measurement may seem tendentious insofar as it looks ahead to the unsupervised machine reading central to quantitative formalism, which makes possible, according to Franco Moretti and others, a whole new epistemology of literary criticism.[77] However, the notion of a mode of perception radically unlike reading, and with it a radically distinct epistemology of criticism, already existed for the eighteenth century in the much homelier concept and practice of *scansion*.[78] In his definition of the verb "to scan," Johnson relies on two revealing quotations from Milton:

> 1. To examine a verse by counting the feet.
>
> Harry, whose tuneful and well-measur'd song
> First taught our English musick how to span
> Words with just note and accent, not to *scan*
> With Midas' ears, committing short and long.
>
> *Milton*
>
> …
>
> 2. To examine nicely.
>
> …
>
> The rest the great architect
> Did wisely to conceal; and not divulge
> His secrets to be *scanned* by them, who ought
> Rather admire.
>
> *Milton's Paradise Lost*[79]

Johnson's choice of quotations adumbrates the essential duplicity of scansion. On one hand, it can denote a purely mechanical and superficial process: the counting of shorts and longs, as opposed to the reading of actual words. Whereas reading is synthetic, scansion is properly analytic: "*Scanning* is the *right Mensuration* of a *Verse*; or *the distinguishing it* into its *several Feet*."[80] This categorical distinction was clear to Pope, for whom the dunce critic is one "[w]ho thinks he *reads* when he but *scans* and *spells*, / A Word-catcher, that lives on Syllables."[81] On the other hand, scansion can denote (for both Johnson and Milton) the very antithesis of this superficial process, in that it acts out a desire to unearth what is latent, or what "the great architect / Did wisely to conceal." In Raphael's warning, scansion is associated with too nice an examination, with a mode of analysis that is unhealthy for the human mind. At once superficial and overly nice, thoughtless and hubristic, scansion in the eighteenth century is always something *other* than "mere" reading – either a dereliction of human capacities, or a pretension to capacities more than human. The current digital alternatives to reading are, in this respect, simply a more powerful elaboration – a difference in degree, not in kind – of a form of critical perception, and a set of epistemological concerns, native to the "binarism" of poetic measure.

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[77] Moretti, "Changes," *Public Books*.

[78] There were, apparently, enough "Moderns" who "distinguish betwixt scanning and reading Verse" that Manwaring feels to need to argue against this view. See Manwaring, *Stichology*, 12.

[79] Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary* (1785), s.v. "scan."

The need to define and valorize a mode of critical perception over against "mere" reading preoccupies many of those working in the digital humanities. In the investigations of Franco Moretti and those working at the Stanford Literary Lab, this distinction repeatedly arises through *anthypophora* or self-questioning about the status of quantitative formalism vis-à-vis reading:

> But was it still *reading*, what I was doing? I doubt it: I read 'through' those stories looking for clues, and (almost) nothing else; it felt very different from the reading I used to know.[82]
>
> Were we therefore doing a “close reading” of *Middlemarch*? Almost certainly not, for the simple reason that we were not reading *Middlemarch*, but a series which—as such—did

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[80] John Milner, *An Abstract of Latin Syntax… To Which is Added, Prosody…* (London: John Noon, 1743), 52.

[81] Pope, "Fragment of a Satire," *Poems*, 491; 15-16.

[82] Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 64-65.

> not exist in the text, but was entirely an artifact of our methodology: an "artificial" object that "no one had ever seen and no one could ever see."[83]
>
> The question is, were we thereby reading *Middlemarch*? I don't think so.[84]

Does this series of questions demonstrate a devaluation of reading? At the very least, it demonstrates a distrust of reading as a critical tool. Moretti asserts that the new critical epistemology no longer presumes a necessary "continuity between the experience of reading a book and the production of knowledge": "I read a lot of books; but when I work in the Literary Lab they're not the basis of my work. The 'lived experience' of literature no longer morphs into knowledge."[85] Reading is explicitly re-categorized here, from a method to a kind of "experience" – an involuntary *frisson* or affect, not a mode of knowing or understanding. Implicit, moreover, in this series of rhetorical questions is the suggestion that reading is not only *not* a method, but that it is also, perhaps, inimical to method. No mere reader, we are assured, could ever have seen the version of *Middlemarch* constructed through the process of scansion, abstraction, and re-combination described by Moretti: to read like a human is only to abet the concealment of the deeper, imperceptible patterns that machine-reading alone may unearth. Moretti's initial experience of estrangement while practicing the sort of scanning or reading-through that would eventually lead to the more rigorous quantitative formalism – "it felt very different from the reading I used to know" – is, perhaps, less the remark of a humanist learning to function as a scientist than that of a human learning to read like a machine. This programmatic denial of reading, and with it the de-humanization and de-individuation of a text's supposed meaning, tends in the same direction as those scientifically-minded prosodists who attempt to make objective claims about "the effect of the metre upon the reader," which, as Simon Jarvis remarks, actually means "the experience of 'the' 'reader' as mechanical doll, in which the range of experiences which readers historically have had, are having, and might have, must know themselves for their own silly and quite private idiocies, and so must measure their lack against this timeless, placeless zombie."[86] The epistemological assumptions of quantitative formalism elaborate, with admirable rigor and computational power, but do not resolve, or resolve only by naturalizing, a conceptual tension between reading and measuring present to all those who sought, in the eighteenth century, to learn something objective about a poem by scanning it. If, on the one hand, the discourse of measure makes it possible to imagine that there are imperceptible structures in literature that measurement alone can access, this same discourse, on the other hand, raises the worry that humans and reading are too blind and weak to serve this process of discovery. The possibility of a more rigorous, "*more observable*" science of literary criticism goes hand in hand with the mechanization of both literary form and reading.

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[83] Sarah Allison et al., "Style at the Scale of the Sentence," *Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet 5* (Stanford Literary Lab, June 2013), 21 <http://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet5.pdf>.

[84] Moretti, "Changes," *Public Books*.

[85] Moretti, "Changes," *Public Books*.

Cases such as the critical reception of Pope's *Essay* radically challenge the categorical distinction between method and literature, or between the tools of the critic and the creations of the poet. Machine reading is not simply a powerful critical technology of the present directed at our distant literary past – for it is already a part of this literary past, lurking combatively beneath Pope's cadences and motivating Crousaz's critical anxieties. The very lines that we might now parse with the help of a computer program are already haunted by the specter of the mechanistic: method, peering into the past, catches a glimpse of itself as the literary. This uncanny reflection is at the heart of the concept of measure. At once noun and verb, artistic shape and critical activity, the poet's distinctive discourse and the digital humanist's characteristic tool, measure forces us to consider continuities and recursions between the poet's art and the critic's discipline. In this respect, the rise in the eighteenth century of a critical program associated with measurement does not so much foreshadow contemporary methodological solutions to reading's supposed shortcomings as inaugurate a theoretical preoccupation with the basis of literary meaning and literary judgment, a preoccupation radical to the practice of literary criticism as such.

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[86] Jarvis, "Prosody as Cognition," 7.

Chapter 3:

Gray's Uncouth Rhymes: Measure, Memory, and Literary History

In his final years, Thomas Gray added to his collected *Poems* (1768) a set of imitations of Old Norse and Welsh verse. These brief compositions – "The Fatal Sisters," "The Descent of Odin," and a fragment called "The Triumphs of Owen" – were to have played a role in a projected *History of English Poetry* that Gray intended to co-author with William Mason. Such a *History*, had it been completed, would have been the first of its kind. Gray devoted nearly a decade of research to the project (c. 1753-62), during which time he pored over manuscripts and antiquities and meticulously recorded his copious findings in his commonplace book – only, in the end, to abandon the endeavor and live to see a similar project taken up in earnest by Thomas Warton, whose *History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century* (1774-81) is now commonly held to have inaugurated English literary history as a modern field of study.[1]

Gray's *History* – or what we have of it – offers a strange and intriguing counterpoint to Warton's narrative. Not only does it exist in the form of fragments, but its very approach to literary history can appear deeply unintuitive to modern readers due to its pronounced preoccupation with literary form. Concerned overwhelmingly with the various "measures" employed by English writers from the Anglo-Saxon period up until the eighteenth century, Gray's *History* largely eschews narrative in favor of catalogues and classification: where one might hope to find accounts of poets, genres, or motifs, Gray's manuscripts instead offer up extensive taxonomies of line-lengths, rhyme schemes, stanzas, and cadences. As I discuss below, scholars tend to dismiss this project as a misguided effort, a history without a coherent historiographical methodology. Yet to dismiss Gray's *History* in this way is merely to elide, not resolve, the fundamental questions that it raises concerning the conception and formation of literary history during the eighteenth century as well as the privileged status of poetic measure within such historiography.

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[1] According to Mason, the joint project was begun around 1753 when he acquired and presented to Gray a brief plan for a history of English poetry found among Alexander Pope's papers; the project was abandoned between the composition of the imitations around 1761 and their publication in 1768, perhaps "as early as 1762." See Roger Lonsdale's remarks in *The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman, 1969), 210-212. (Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Gray's poetry will be drawn from this edition, hereafter cited as *Poems*.) For a detailed discussion of Gray's involvement with this project, see William Powell Jones, *Thomas Gray, Scholar* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1937), 84-107.

In what follows, then, I am led by two closely related questions. Why might Gray have adopted this curious approach to the history of poetry, and how did he understand the relationship between poetic form and historical knowledge? Rather than limit myself to discussing Gray's place within the realm of literary history, properly so called, I will instead pursue these questions by focusing on the status of the "literary" – and, in particular, on the status of verse and meter – within eighteenth-century historiography more broadly. I do so in order to show that Gray's apparently idiosyncratic preoccupation with prosodic history seems far less peculiar when we acknowledge the degree to which eighteenth-century historians shared just such a preoccupation. Namely, in eighteenth-century Britain, many regarded meter as a handmaiden to history. Complex mnemonic schemes such as Richard Grey's *Memoria Technica* (1730), which transformed and compressed historical events and dates into cryptic hexameters, were invoked at the universities as tools requisite for the serious study of the past. Yet for some of the most notable eighteenth-century historians and historiographers – including David Hume, Adam Smith, and Dugald Stewart – these mnemonic systems threated not only to travesty historical understanding but also to pervert the mechanisms of human cognition by "accustom[ing] the mind to associate ideas by accidental and arbitrary connexions."[2] Meter so readily divided Enlightenment thinkers because it seemed to strike at the foundations of Enlightenment thought. The radical caprice of meter – its parceling out of human thought and experience into arbitrarily measured units – seemed to bear witness to the abiding presence of the unintuitive amid the very cognitive processes that these thinkers sought to formalize. Against this backdrop, Gray's *History* and final odes take on new significance, together sketching a theory of literary form that accords the often estranging phenomena of poetic measure a constitutive role in the figuration of thought and history.

§ The Syllables of History: "Cr*othf* Del*etok* Ab*aneb* Ex*afna* Tem*bybe* Cyr*uts*"

To consider Gray's projected *History* on its own terms poses both a material and a methodological challenge. It exists only in the form of fragments and tentative sketches (which I discuss in more detail below), and its very approach to literary history can seem wholly unintuitive to modern readers, who are far more likely to recognize as literary historiography the species of writing modeled in Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-81). As David Fairer remarks, to understand literary history before Warton, "we have to dismantle the concept of literary history as we understand it today. That was Warton's contribution."[3] Whereas Gray had envisioned segregating England's poets according to "their supposed respective schools" – with the result that contemporaries such as Milton, Cowley, and Waller would have been treated under three different stylistic categories – Warton chooses instead "to exhibit the history of our poetry in a chronological series."[4] Literary history, he asserts, should not trace the development of particular genres or motifs apart from one another, but instead should privilege the synchronous, proceeding "as matter successively offers itself, in a series of regular Annals."[5] In other words, it is largely to Warton that we owe the writing of literary history as "an organic narrative," a development seen to usher in "the whole conception and possibility of literary history, before then only very imperfectly realized."[6]

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[2] Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 3 vols. (London: Printed for A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1792-1827), 1:455.

[3] David Fairer, "Introduction" to Thomas Warton, *Thomas Warton's History of English Poetry*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1998), 1:3.

Concerned overwhelmingly with the narration of organic continuities between poets, genres, and styles, such an approach tends to throw into particular relief what appears historically discontinuous. What cannot admit of being narrated within this developmental scheme comes to seem acutely inorganic – stamped as something essentially resistant to the rhythms of human thought and development. Just such a discontinuity defines Warton's stance toward the most ancient and estranging of English verse forms. Although he had once planned to account for the Anglo-Saxons' "sacred Hymns, Songs of Victory, … & scripture-stories," in the final work this topic is omitted;[7] in its stead, Warton offers a pre-emptive defense. He notes "of that jejune and intricate subject" that "the Saxon language is familiar only to a few learned antiquaries" and that

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[4] On the categorization into schools, see Gray, *Correspondence*, Letter 518; 15 April 1770; and Fairer, "Introduction " to *Warton's History*, 1:8. For Warton's account of his plan, see Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, 4 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1774-81; New York & London: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968), 1:iii. For Warton's development of the *History*, see Fairer, "The Origins of Warton's *History of English Poetry*," *RES*, New Series 32, no. 125 (1981): 37-63.

[5] See Thomas Warton, *The Correspondence of Thomas Warton*, ed. David Fairer (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995), Letter 253; 20 April 1770.

[6] Fairer, "Introduction" to *Warton's History*, 1:10; and René Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1941), 199-200. See also Fairer, "Origins," 37, and "Thomas Warton, Thomas Gray, and the Recovery of the Past," *Thomas Gray: Contemporary Essays*, ed. W. B. Hutchings and William Ruddick (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1993): 167.

[7] This passage appears in the fourth of six notebooks (designated by Fairer as notebooks A-F) from the Trinity College, Oxford, Warton MSS (on deposit in the Bodleian Library), ff. 31b-31a. Cited in Fairer, "Origins," 53. See Fairer for a thorough discussion of these materials.

"scarce any compositions remain marked with the native images of that people in their pagan state." Moreover,

> every reader that reflects but for a moment on our political establishment must perceive, that the Saxon poetry has no connection with the nature and purpose of my present undertaking. Before the Norman accession, which succeeded to the Saxon government, we were an unformed and an unsettled race. That mighty revolution obliterated almost all relation to the former inhabitants of this island; and produced that signal change in our policy, constitution, and public manners, the effects of which have reached modern times. The beginning of these annals seems therefore to be most properly dated from that era, when our national character began to dawn.[8]

The Saxon writings pose a conceptual problem for Warton because they resist the organic narrative of "national character" he seeks to offer. The compositions seem to him unmarked by their proper time; they cannot progress toward the "policy, constitution, and public manners" of modern England because they are already, in some sense, alien to this chronology; it is their obliteration, and the obliteration of the polity they represent, that makes modern England's "national character" possible in the first place. Literary historiography must cease for Warton where a familiarly English mind is no longer intuitable beneath the measure. Within this historiographical paradigm, ancient oral verse forms are essentially illegible: these uncouth poetic artifacts seem to tarry like eddies against the otherwise continuous flow of English literary history.

Such discontinuities, however, would come to define Gray's attempts to compose the *History of English Poetry*. Whereas Warton's is a cohesive narrative of English literary history up to the Elizabethan period, Gray's projected work exists, like so much else of his labour, in fragments scattered throughout his correspondence, his notebooks, and his poetry. The most notable fruits of Gray's prolonged research are a set of entries in his commonplace book that remained unpublished until 1814 (and then only in part).[9] The headings of these entries – "Metrum," "Pseudo-Rhythmus," "Additional Observations on the Use of Rhime," and "Addit:^{l} Observ:^{ns} on the Origin of Rhyme" – indicate the formalist approach of Gray's research.[10] They are concerned overwhelmingly with what one would now term the history of *prosody* in the British Isles, or with the various measures through which English poetry has been given form.

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[8] Warton, *History*, 1:vi.

This prosodic turn is all the more striking because Gray did not begin the project in this manner, but instead with a long, narrative essay on the poet John Lydgate.[11] Scholars have tended to privilege this complete essay, suggesting it represents an example of the historiographical method that Gray would have pursued had he completed the *History*.[12] Such a claim, however, elides the fact that the Lydgate entry is essentially an anomaly, and that subsequent entries in the commonplace book eschew this narrative mode in favour of a drily technical and prosodic one. Further complicating our understanding of the intended *History* is Gray himself, whose letter to Warton in 1770 sketches the planned *History* as essentially narrative in character – an account of particular poets and schools, rather than stanzas and lines.[13] Nonetheless, like the Lydgate essay, this letter presents a false impression of Gray's labors. To regard this sketch as representative of Gray's planned *History* is to overlook the degree to which this account is at odds with the notes themselves: nowhere in this sketch does Gray mention a discussion of the poetic measure that his notes so exhaustively taxonomize. In this respect, Gray's 1770 sketch, penned a decade after he had abandoned the project, obscures the tenor of his research during the 1750s and 1760s. Although Gray might have set out to write a literary-historical narrative, and although he might have retrospectively conceived of the project in these terms, his commonplace book traces a different journey entirely – one that develops away from literary-historical narrative towards a set of discontinuous meditations on prosodic phenomena.

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[9] Selections of Gray's work towards the *History* have been appeared in Edmund Gosse ed., *The Works of Thomas Gray in Prose and Verse*, 4 vols. (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1885) 1:323-409; Thomas J. Mathias ed., *The Works of Thomas Gray*, 2 vols. (London: J. Porter, 1814); Thomas Gray, *Essays and Criticisms*, ed. Clark Sutherland Northrup (Boston & London: D. C. Heath & Co., 1911); and Roger Martin, *Chronologie de la Vie et de L'Oeuvre de Thomas Gray* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1931). These publications routinely standardize, silently abridge, and in some instances misprint the content of Gray's Commonplace Book.

[10] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:757-762, 2:765-774, 2:791-792, 2:799-806, 2:809-816. These pages also include Gray's essay "Cambri" concerning the history of ancient British (i.e. Welsh) poetry and versification.

[11] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:741-756.

[12] R. W. Ketton-Cremer, *Thomas Gray: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955), 161.

[13] See Gray, *Correspondence*, Letter 518; 15 April 1770.

Perplexed by these difficulties, scholars tend either to dismiss Gray's historiographical labors or to seek a resolution of sorts in his poetry. Confronted with Gray's taxonomies, Wellek laments that "[c]onsecutive narration, the telling of literary history as a series of events, was the important achievement of the time, and Gray's observations never reached that stage."[14] Modern critics tacitly grant Wellek's premise by searching for just such an historical narrative elsewhere in the poet's corpus. Critics routinely point to Gray's ode "The Progress of Poesy" (1757), a *translatio studii* or progress poem that recounts the development of poetry from the Classical era down to the present, as the poetic culmination of Gray's abortive history. B. Eugene McCarthy goes so far as to opine that Gray, lacking "the physical and emotional energy to labor it through… gave up the history" and "condens[ed] his knowledge into 'The Progress of Poesy.'"[15] Poetry, by this logic, is simply the continuation of history by other means.

Yet this understanding of Gray's ode as the culmination of his historical endeavours, while compelling, rests on a chronological inconsistency. The composition of "The Progress of Poesy" between 1751 and 1754 pre-dates some of Gray's most important work toward the

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[14] Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History*, 159-160.

[15] B. Eugene McCarthy, *Thomas Gray: The Progress of a Poet* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997), 223.

History.[16] To characterize this poem as a "culmination" is to elide the fact that the years between its completion and the abandonment of the project (c. 1762) were still to witness Gray's research into Welsh prosody, his colloquies with Thomas Percy concerning Welsh poetry, his acquaintance with Old Norse verse, his much remarked obsession with Ossian, and, most tellingly of all, his composition of the Norse and Welsh imitations.[17] To assent that "[w]hatever study of early English poetry Gray did after 1757 was in the way of temporary diversion" ignores the explicitly historiographical significance of these later compositions.[18] Gray's contemporaries acknowledged this fact. In his *History*, Warton remarks that "[t]he late lamented Mr. Gray had also projected a work of this kind, and translated some Runic odes for its illustration, now published."[19] Warton points to these later odes – not to "The Progress of Poesy" – as the most visible remains of Gray's labours in the realm of literary history.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the dismissal of Gray's history on the grounds that it fails as narrative overlooks the fact that Gray's notes are modeled after a species of writing entirely unconcerned with narrative. Gray's study of literary form recalls nothing more than the methodology of his beloved Linnaeus, whose 1758 edition of the *Systema Naturae* Gray interleaved and meticulously annotated with his own zoological and botanical scholarship.[20] In the manner of a naturalist, Gray's notes offer up an exhaustive taxonomy of metric flora and fauna, locating fifty-nine distinct species of meter in the British Isles.[21] In this respect, if Gray's notes seem a poor history to modern eyes, this is merely because they are concerned not with narration but with classification; they do not, in any immediately visible way, seem to account for the passage of time.

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[16] On the dating of the poem, see Lonsdale's headnote in Gray, *Poems*, 155.

[17] See Robert L. Mack, *Thomas Gray: A Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 504-28. The imitations must have been composed by 5 May 1761 when Horace Walpole refers to them in his correspondence; see Lonsdale's notes in Gray, *Poems*, 212. In addition, Gray composed three other Welsh-inspired fragments during these years ("The Death of Hoel," "Caradoc," and "Conan"); see Gray, *Poems*, 233-36.

[18] See Jones, *Thomas Gray*, 119.

[19] Warton, *History*, 1:iv.

[20] Charles Eliot Norton, *The Poet Gray as a Naturalist: With Selections from his Notes on the* Systema naturae *of Linnaeus* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1903), 11-18. The edition in question is Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linné), *Systema naturae per regna tria naturae*, 10th ed., 2 vols. (Stockholm: Laurentius Salvius, 1758).

The poet's treatment of the "decasyllabic" measure is exemplary in this regard. He identifies it as one of six families of measure (the others being "the verse of fourteen," the Alexandrine, the octosyllabic, the heptasyllabic, and the "verse of six"), and lists some thirty-three species of verse under this genus.[22] Notions of organic development are largely foreign to Gray: he construes the ten-syllable line not as a poetic phenomenon that has progressed from the rough cadences of Chaucer to the placid regularities of Pope, but rather as a genus of possible kinds, or an a-historical category delimiting all the uses to which the decasyllabic line has been and could be put. Gray's taxonomy of decasyllabic species unfolds in no particular order: forms as familiar as Milton's blank verse, Chaucer's rhyme royal, and the Spenserian stanza jostle alongside such singular and all but forgotten schemes of verse as that exemplified by the prologue to Sir David Lyndsay's "The Testament and Complaynt of our Soverane Lordis Papyngo" (1530).[23] The philosophical underpinnings of this notional *History* would befuddle later readers. Praising Warton's chronological approach over Gray's taxonomic mode, Thomas

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[21] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:765.

[22] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:765-770.

[23] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:765.

Campbell would remark in *Specimens of the British Poets* (1819) that "Poetry is of too spiritual a nature, to admit of its authors being exactly grouped, by a Linnaean system of classification."[24]

The seemingly strange assumptions underlying Gray's approach – i.e. that one might just as easily classify as narrate history, and that meter provides a ready route to the historical past – appear more intuitive and gain significance when placed within the context of Gray's work as an historian (an historian *tout court*, rather than a merely literary one). Appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1768, Gray drafted a rough sketch towards his inaugural lecture listing and ranking the "Preparations and accompanyments" necessary for the study of this subject:

> 1 Knowledge of antient History.
> 3 Geography } Mem. Technica
> 4 Chronology }
> 2 Languages
> 8 Moneys
> 9 Antiquities
> 5 Laws. Government
> 7 Manners
> 6 Education[25]

Although this list has been taken to demonstrate that Gray "construed the field as a modern discipline focused on primary research rather than a rhetorical art,"[26] Gray's marginal notion "Mem. Technica" suggests that a more ancient and poetic art continued to play a vital role in his understanding of history. *Memoria technica* denotes a mnemonic system designed to help one recall intractable information (such as dates, distances, measurements, and formulae). Such arts, of course, are of long standing;[27] but they witnessed a new vogue in the eighteenth century with the publication of Richard Grey's popular *Memoria Technica: Or, a New Method of Artificial Memory* (1730).[28] It is almost certain that the poet has his namesake in mind, as evidenced by the fact that the poet's commonplace book includes a series of entries (dating from the late 1730s) on the topic of Richard Grey's mnemonic system (which I discuss below).[29] Moreover, Grey's work announces on its title page and explains in its preface that it is particularly designed to allow those who study "*History*" to retain "a distinct and accurate Knowledge of *Chronology* and *Geography*," or the two categories that the poet brackets off.[30]

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[24] Thomas Campbell, *Specimens of the British Poets*, 7 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1819), 7:148.

[25] Cited in Jones, *Thomas Gray*, 115-6. That Gray neither completed nor delivered this lecture is not entirely attributable to his famous lack of productivity; the position of Regius Professor was still essentially a sinecure in Gray's time. See Toynbee and Whibley's "Appendix S" in Gray, *Correspondence*, 3:1253-59.

[26] Barrett Kalter, *Modern Antiques: The Material Past in England, 1660-1780* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2012), 135-6.

While many arts of memory are poetic in that they convert facts into memorable rhymes, Grey's system differs in that it is essentially prosodic: it compresses historical information not only into the poetic line, but into the poetic syllable. This rather involved technique works by transforming natural words into what Grey terms "*Artificial*" ones encoded with numerical data of chronological, geographical, historical, or numismatic significance.[31] As Grey optimistically explains it, the process involves "nothing more than this; *To make such a Change in the* Ending *of the Name of a Place, Person, Planet, Coin,* &c. without altering the Beginning *of it, as shall readily suggest the Thing sought, at the same Time that the Beginning of the Word, being*

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[27] See Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1966).

[28] Richard Grey's *Memoria Technica: Or, a New Method of Artificial Memory* (London: Charles King, 1730) was re-issued numerous times between 1730 and 1880. Hereafter I cite from the second edition (1732), which includes a new preface. For a brief discussion of this vogue see Paul Tankard, "Samuel Johnson's 'History of Memory," *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 1 (2005): 121-125.

[29] For Gray's engagement with the *Memoria Technica*, see Commonplace Book, 1:38-39, 1:42-43, 1:54.

[30] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, i.

[31] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, xiv.

preserved, shall be a leading *or* prompting *Syllable to the Ending of it so changed*."[32] The final syllable or syllables of these altered words employ letters to denote particular numbers worthy of recollection – everything from years and distances to the "specifick Gravities" of metals and the dimensions of Solomon's temple.[33] Grey's mnemonic for the progress of history before the birth of Christ is illustrative:

		Before Christ.
1.	The Creation of the World	4004
2.	The universal Deluge	2348
3.	The Call of Abraham	1921
4.	Exodus, or the Departure of the *Israelites* from *Egypt*	1491
5.	The Foundation of *Solomon*'s Temple	1012
6.	Cyrus, or the End of the Captivity	536
	The Birth of *Christ*.	

> All this is express'd in one Line belonging to Tab. I. as follows:
>
> Cr*othf* Del*etok* Ab*aneb* Ex*afna* Tem*bybe* Cyr*uts*.
>
> Cr denotes the Creation, *othf* 4004, Del the Deluge, Ab the Calling of Abraham, Ex Exodus, Tem the Temple, and Cyr Cyrus. The Technical Endings of each represent the respective Year according to the Rules already laid down.[34]

Moreover, "to make even this easier to be remember'd, the *Technical* Words are thrown into the Form of common *Latin* Verse" – that is, this nearly indecipherable chain of syllables, like all of the mnemonic lines that Richard's system is designed to produce, scans as a verse of dactylic hexameter.[35] The longs and shorts of the epic measure employed by Vergil and Homer are here transformed into syllabic storehouses for the compression and retention of historical data.

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[32] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, vi.

[33] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, xii-xiv, 148, 156.

[34] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, 6.

[35] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, vii-viii.

Grey acknowledges his system's "whimsical and out of the way Appearance."[36] Nonetheless, as odd and impracticable as this mnemonic art may now seem, it had its dedicated practitioners, one of whom was the poet Gray. In his memoirs of Gray's life, Mason remarks on the poet's fascination with *memoria technica*; it is "an art in which he had much exercised himself when young. I find many memorial verses among his scattered papers: and I suspect he found good account in the practice; for few men were more ready and accurate in their dates of events than our Author."[37] Gray's commonplace book reveals his interest in this peculiar art of memory. Although at first the poet seems somewhat skeptical of this scheme – referring to its product as "gibberish lines" – he nonetheless would go on to produce several pages of original mnemonic lines of his own devising, "comprehending the most remarkable facts of Roman history from Livy, & their dates" using Grey's rules.[38] (See figure 3.1.) Gray's own twenty-two lines of "gibberish," stretching over five pages of his commonplace book, reveal a fair degree of labour: they mete out in compressed form over a hundred metrical "units" of historical data collected from Livy's history of Rome, transforming Livy's narrative into a seemingly arbitrary arrangement of uncouth syllables.[39]

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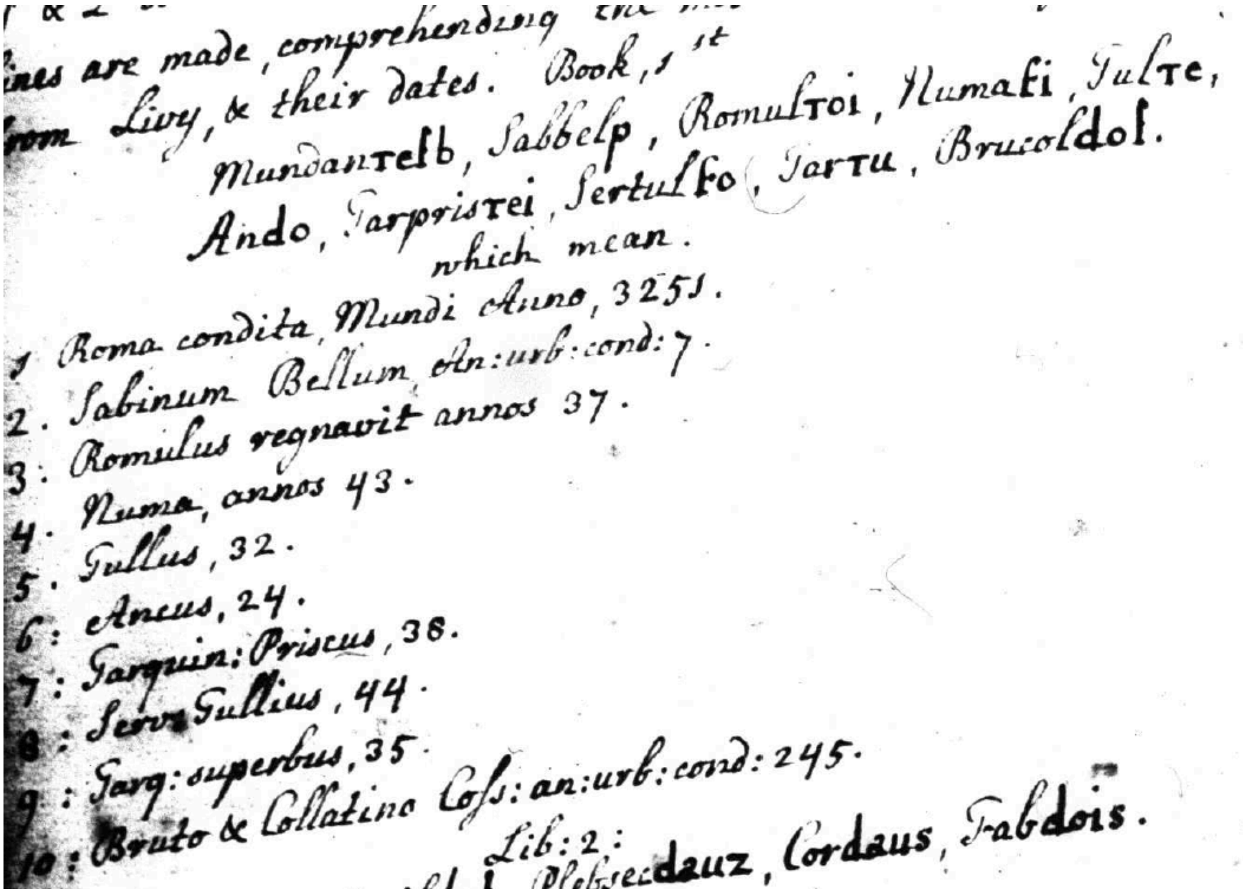
[36] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, "The Preface" (n. p.).

[37] William Mason, ed., *The Works of Thomas Gray*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe, 1807), 2:314.

[38] Gray, Commonplace Book, 1:38-39, 1:42-43, 1:54.

[39] This includes material from Livy's history proper and from Johann Freinsheim's supplement to Livy's history. The first edition listed in Gray's early library catalogue is *T. Livii... Historiarum ab Urbe condita libri… [c]um supplementis librorum amissorum à J. Freinshemio concinnatis*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1735); see Jones, *Thomas Gray*, 151.



& comprehending the
ines are made, comprehending
rom Livy, & their dates. Book, 1st
Mundantelb, Sabbelp, Romultoi, Numaki, Tulte,
Ando, Tarpristei, Sertulko, Tartu, Brucoldol.
which mean.
1 Roma condita, Mundi Anno, 3251.
2. Sabinum Bellum, An: urb: cond: 7.
3: Romulus regnavit annos 37.
4. Numa, annos 43.
5. Tullus, 32.
6: Ancus, 24.
7: Tarquin: Priscus, 38.
8: Serv: Tullius, 44.
9: Tarq: superbus, 35.
10: Bruto & Collatino Coss: an: urb: cond: 245.
Lib: 2:
Plebsecdauz, Cordaus, Tabdois.

Figure 3.1. Mnemonic for Book 1 of Livy's *Ab urbe condita libri*. Thomas Gray. Commonplace Book, Library of Pembroke College, Cambridge, 1:38.

That Gray was still prepared, some thirty years after his first acquaintance with Grey's mnemonic system, to recommend it to an audience at Cambridge suggests that his youthful fascination with this technique had little abated.[40] Although Samuel Johnson, in his antagonistic life of "Gray" (1781), would deride the poet for believing that he could not write "but at certain times, or at happy moments" of inspiration, it is clear that Gray was quite proficient at turning his poetic skills to mechanical writing when the need arose.[41] The peculiar art of memory practiced by both Grey and Gray renders prosody an essential *techne* of knowledge production: it imbues the most mechanical aspects of poetic composition – the mere workmanlike sequencing of syllables – with epistemic force. Thus construed, poetry is not simply an index or document of history, but a tool of historiography in its own right. The syllable mediates history, dividing it into measurable, metrical units; and the historian, in turn, engages with the past by *syllabizing* it (from the Greek *syllambanein*: "to collect, gather, or put together") in the strictest sense of this term.

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[40] Dating the contents of Gray's Commonplace Book, which the poet began around 1736 and continued until the end of his life, can be difficult. His notes on Grey's *Memoria Technica* straddle his transcription of "Ad C: Favonium Aristium," which Gray sent to Richard West in June 1738, suggesting a roughly contemporaneous date. See Gray, *Correspondence*, Letter 53; June 1738.

[41] Johnson, "Gray," *Lives*, 4:180.

§ "The Poeticall Method" and 18th-Century Historiography

To dismiss this poetic approach to history as merely an idiosyncrasy of Gray's is to overlook the mnemonic's significance amid eighteenth-century debates about historiography. Writers such as Joseph Priestley, David Hume, Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart, and Maria Edgeworth were deeply divided over the value and effect of this poetic tool; for some of the most notable eighteenth-century theorists of history, mnemonic verse threatened the very logic by which historical truth was supposed to be perceived and constructed.

Among professors of history, Gray was by no means alone in his admiration for the *Memoria Technica*. Joseph Priestley praises it highly in his *Lectures on History* (1788), declaring "all persons of a liberal education inexcusable, who will not take the small degree of pains that is necessary to make themselves masters of [this method]."[42] This praise arose, in part, from the belief that meter mattered to the historian in more ways than one. For Priestley, meter was not simply to be viewed as a useful historiographical tool; it was also a privileged object of historical inquiry. Early in the *Lectures*, Priestley writes that

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[42] Joseph Priestley, *Lectures on History, and General Policy* (Dublin: P. Byrne, 1788), 131; Lect. XVIII.

> [a] method of transmitting the knowledge of important events with greater accuracy than by simple narration would be by *historical poems*, with which few barbarous nations have been long wholly unprovided. A story reduced to any kind of *metre* would suffer little by repetition; and it can hardly be supposed that any variation in the repetition would be of such a nature as to affect the general facts it contained.[43]

For Priestley, meter's historiographical role is complex. On the one hand, as a structure that subtends and preserves ancient historical narratives, meter allows the historian to gauge the reliability of evidence;[44] on the other hand, as mnemonic, it enables him to "master" the past for his own scholarly use. At once object and instrument, a kind of historical evidence and a category of historical perception, meter bridges and informs seemingly distinct aspects of the historiographical process. The varied functionality accorded to meter compels us to reconsider how we understand the phrase *literary history* within the context of the eighteenth century. Although scholars commonly think of literary history as a genre of writing that began to take shape at the century's end,[45] to attend to historians such as Priestley is to recuperate an antecedent and radically different kind of literary history altogether: one that is preoccupied not with the history of literature but instead with the *literariness* of *history*, which is to say with the literary conditions of history's mediation.

By recuperating this awareness of history's literariness, we can begin to account for the vehemence with which many eighteenth-century historiographers censured Grey's *Memoria*

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[43] Priestley, *Lectures*, 42; Lect. V (Priestley's italics).

[44] For certain eighteenth-century scholars, the historiographical value of verse was axiomatic. Johann David Michaelis, the German biblical scholar (and the translator of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*), voices this belief when he remarks that "[s]o faithful a custodian of historical truth is metre, that what is daily augmented, changed, or corrupted in prose retelling may persist for ages in verse, without variation, without even a change in the obsolete phrasing" ("…metro tam fido custode veritatis historicae, ut quae simplici oratione narrata in dies augentur, mutantur, corrumpuntur, in poemate per multa secula eadem et invariata maneant, ne obsoletis quidem verbis mutatis"). See Johann David Michaelis, *Johannis Davidis Michaelis: ... in Roberti Lowth praelectiones de sacra poesi Hebraeorum notae et epimetra* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1763), 14.

[45] On the development of literary history, see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 165-89, 259-94.

Technica. Vicesimus Knox spoke for many when he opined that "the art is rather to be considered as a curious than an useful contrivance…. Few have really availed themselves of it; and many who have attempted to acquire it, have only added to the obscurity of their conceptions."[46] Although Knox grants that meter may facilitate the retention of facts, he ultimately attributes to technical verses a pernicious effect: to the extent that they shore up fragments of the past, they obscure a holistic view of the over-arching history to which these fragments contribute and from which they draw their significance. Elaborating this line of criticism, Dugald Stewart remarks that technical verses "accustom the mind to associate ideas by accidental and arbitrary connexions; and, therefore, how much soever they may contribute, in the course of conversation, to an ostentatious display of acquired knowledge, they are, perhaps, of little real service to us, when we are seriously engaged in the pursuit of truth."[47] Stewart's critique assumes a dangerous continuity between the formal and the cognitive: the mnemonic does not simply pervert one's knowledge of history, but it also perverts the very mechanism with which one perceives history, by "accustom[ing] the mind to associate ideas" in a wholly arbitrary manner. In the same vein, Maria Edgeworth deplores Grey's mnemonics as positively "hurtful to the understanding, because they break the general habits of philosophic order in the mind."[48]

This concern with the mnemonic's arbitrariness (at once a formal and a cognitive problem) is motivated by the Enlightenment's investment in a genre of historical thought that Stewart famously termed "*Theoretical* or *Conjectural History*."[49] This form of historiography is especially associated with Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith who sought to reconstruct developments in the history of society for which little evidence remained. "[W]hen we cannot trace the process by which an event *has been* produced," Stewart writes, "it is often of importance to be able to show how it *may have been* produced by natural causes."[50] The validity of this shift from the indicative to the subjunctive and from the narrative to the speculative presumes a natural affinity between the workings of the mind, the structure of causality, and the narration of event. Namely, conjectural history is predicated on the supposition that reason, in the absence of historical evidence, can fill gaps in the historical record; and this supposition, in turn, is predicated on the belief that the movements of the human mind are themselves logical and predictable – that, as Hume phrases it, "there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity."[51] On the regularity and predictability of such association rests the conviction that the supposedly analogous movements of the mind can make up, in some sense, for the caprice of history.

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[46] Vicesimus Knox, *Liberal Education* (London: Charles Dilly, 1781), 105-6.

[47] Stewart, *Elements*, 1:455.

[48] Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1798), 2:562.

[49] Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.," *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, 11 vols., ed. Sir William Hamilton (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1854-60), 10:34.

The threat of poetry is that it asserts the fundamental and unavoidable persistence of just such caprice. In early editions of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748 to 1772), Hume originally theorized the association of ideas in literary terms, arranging his three principles of association – causality, contiguity, and resemblance – on a normative hierarchy that privileged their likeness to narrative. For instance, the most stable reasoning is analogous to plot: it must arise from causality and therein possess "*Unity* of *Action*," a concept Hume derives from

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[50] Stewart, "Account," *Works*, 10:34.

[51] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 23; section 3.

Aristotle's *Poetics*.[52] Contiguity, though weaker, is still a vital associative force. Binding together phenomena that are spatially or temporally contiguous, and thus forging "a species of unity, amidst… diversity,"[53] it likewise recalls the Unities of Time and Place associated with the neo-Aristotelian stage. The third and most vexed mode of association, without any analogy in the Aristotelian schema, is what Hume terms "resemblance," or what Smith, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (c. 1748-63), calls "the Poeticall method, which connects the different fact by some slight circumstances which often had nothing in the bringing about the series of the events, or by some relation that appears betwixt them."[54]

This focus on slight resemblances or appearances – tellingly, Hume glosses "[a]ll poetry" as but "a species of painting"[55] – draws a radical distinction between the organizing principles of poetry and narrative. It is revealing that Hume, when compelled to offer a literary example of this mode of thought, suggests Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, that monument of tenuous and arbitrary transitions. Like Ovid's "fabulous transformation[s]" "produced by the miraculous powers of the gods," the poetic mode of thought is what seems to *disdain* human understanding and to undermine assumptions about its regularity and predictability (for which reason, perhaps, a dissatisfied Hume eventually excised this whole discussion from the *Enquiry*).

If prominent practitioners of philosophical history such as Smith and Hume found a problematic place for poetry within their accounts of how the mind associates ideas, it is because poetry's radical arbitrariness bears witness to the abiding presence of the unintuitive amid the formal and cognitive processes by which humans make meaning. There is perhaps no fitter emblem for this arbitrariness than meter, which lurks behind the arras (to paraphrase T. S. Eliot), lending a unified shape to disconnected matter. As W. K. Wimsatt reminds us, meter is by its very nature indifferent to logic: "The smallest equalities, the feet, so many syllables, or so many time units, are superimposed upon the linear succession of ideas most often without any regard for the equalities of logic." At the heart of meter, in this respect, is a *resistance* to the logic or necessity of association, for "where there is need for binding there must be some difference or separation between the things being bound."[56]

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[52] Hume, *Enquiry*, 179. In the next section, Hume's valuation is clear: "All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause and Effect*. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses." See Hume, *Enquiry*, 19; section 4.1.

[53] Hume, *Enquiry*, 179.

[54] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Oxford: Clarendon; New York: Oxford UP, 1983), 100

[55] Hume, *Enquiry*, 180.

When Stewart, then, attacks technical verses for "associat[ing] ideas by accidental and arbitrary connexions," he vocalizes an anxiety that transcends the mere issue of Grey's mnemonic scheme. The philosophical historian's problem with technical verses and poetry is, more accurately, a problem with *form* and with the theory of historical knowledge that meter, in particular, emblematizes. At issue here is the possibility that poetry is inimical to history – that its logic (if we can call it that) flies in the face of historical reasoning. Although a simple tool, Grey's art of memory carries with it a particular theory of history, one predicated on the supposition that vital aspects of historical knowledge are essentially resistant to human intuition. Implicit in the seemingly mundane forgetfulness – the inability to recall names, dates, and events – that Grey's scheme of mnemonic verse seeks to remedy lurks the specter of a more profound nescience. If such syllabic trickery is necessary for the study of history, Grey remarks, this is only because "nothing has been thought more difficult to be *retain'd*, than a distinct and accurate

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[56] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 154-5.

Knowledge of *Chronology* and *Geography*."[57] There is, for Grey and the practitioners of his art, something in the systematization of time and space that tends to resists immediate grasp by human thought and memory. Though they fundamentally condition and texture human experience, these phenomena, when objectified as historical data, routinely exceed the habitual gestures of intuition: they demand mnemonics because they seem to offer no immediate purchase to the mind. (Priestley remarks that "[o]f all things, there is the greatest difficulty in retaining *numbers*. They are like grains of sand, which will not cohere in the order in which we place them; but by transmuting *figures* into *letters*, which easily cohere, in every form of combination, we fix and retain numbers in the mind with the same ease and certainty with which we remember words."[58]) Verse thus functions within Grey's mnemonic system not merely as a handy instrument of recall but as a mode of mediating or humanizing the non-intuitive substance of historical knowledge. This epistemological compromise is nowhere more noticeable than in the inarticulable syllables themselves, whose "harsh" and "barbarous" and "uncouth" sounds figure the strangeness and recalcitrance of the history they seek to piece together.[59]

To the extent that meter seems to foreground the arbitrariness with which historical narrative may be assembled, it calls into question the stability of the truth that history is supposed to construct or reveal. For philosophical historians such as Hume, Smith, and Stewart, the specter of poetry is necessarily the specter of the arbitrary: the would-be historian's reliance on meter to piece together the past not only inhibits the use of reason but symbolizes a reversion (both sonically and historically) to the very barbarism that the enlightened historian would escape. This anxiety over technical verses comes to be inscribed among the histories themselves, as when Edmund Burke, reflecting on the poetry and history of the Druids, relates:

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[57] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, i.

[58] Priestley, *Lectures*, 131; Lect. XVIII.

[59] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, vi, 7.

> There was a class of the Druids whom they called Bards, who delivered in songs (their only history) the exploits of their heroes; and who composed those verses, which contained the secrets of druidical discipline; their principles of natural philosophy and moral; their astronomy; and the mystical rites of their religion.... The proficiency of their pupils was estimated principally by the number of technical verses, which they retained in their memory: a circumstance that shows this discipline rather calculated to preserve with accuracy a few plain maxims of traditionary science, than to improve and extend it.[60]

The philosophical historians disparage technical verses not only on theoretical grounds but also through a series of artful conflations, whereby the use of modern mnemonics, the strangeness of ancient verse forms, and a vague sense of barbarism become difficult to disentangle. Burke's vision of the past cannot help but glance at the present: the pupils of Grey, intoning their uncouth dialect, come to seem as shrouded in ignorance as medieval druidical acolytes.

In this light, Gray's preoccupation with the history of British metrics represents a fundamental break from the historiography of his philosophically minded peers. Not only is Gray untroubled by the epistemological implications of the mnemonic as an instrument of historiography, he is fascinated with it as an object of historical inquiry.[61] He all but projects the logic of Grey's *Memoria Technica* onto his study of Welsh prosody. His commonplace book remarks of the ancient Welsh poets that their "excellent Prosodia… were admirably contrived for assisting the memory," since "each verse [was] so connected with, & depending on those, wh^{ch}

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[60] Edmund Burke, *An Essay Towards an Abridgment of the English History* ([London], [1760]), 15-16.

[61] Gray's interest in the topic of cognition was such that he began a poem in Latin hexameters entitled "De principiis cogitandi," or The Principles of Thinking (1740-42), of which he eventually completed 236 lines. (The death of the poem's addressee, Richard West, led Gray to abandon the project.) The poem's exordium suggests that the unfinished second book would have addressed "from what beginnings Memory arises and sets in order the sequence of events and her slender chain" ("Quibus incohet orsa / principiis seriem rerum, tenuemque catenam / Mnemosyne"). See Gray, "De principiis cogitandi" *Poems*, 322, 328; 1.1-3. For Gray's interest in Lockean philosophy, see S. H. Clark, "'Pendet Homo Incertus': Gray's Response to Locke" (an article in two parts) in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24, no. 3 (1991): 273-291 and *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24, no. 4 (1991): 484-503.

either preceded or follow'd it, that, if any one line in a stanza be remember'd, all the rest must of course be call'd to mind, & it is almost impracticable to forget, or mistake in any."[62] In particular, Gray draws attention to the strange *sound* of this verse, and the ability of these sounds to compress and contain a wealth of meaning: "tho' at first sight it may be naturally thought, their Poetry is clogg'd with so many rules, that it is impossible to write a Poem of Common Sense in the language, yet the vast number of flexions of Consonants in it, & the variations in Declensions &c: make it almost as copious, as four or five Languages added together."[63]

Gray's description recalls the historiographical method that he had practiced in his youth: it takes poetic measure as an instrument of history, and it casts the articulation of a single line – the inflection of a single syllable – as a figure for the recuperation of historical knowledge. Moreover, Gray's description embraces the very critique leveled at poetry by the philosophical historians. Far from avoiding it, Gray draws attention to the fact that this sort of poetry and the historiography for which it stands both look and sound non-intuitive and arbitrary: an apparent affront both to "Common Sense" and to common modes of associating ideas. Gray's account of ancient Welsh verse has little to say of the historical narratives it might contain; instead, his account treats these sounds less as signs than as *relics* or *fragments*, replete with historical meaning.

Gray foregrounds these metrical concerns because they reveal, or at least recall, something essential about the attempt to read and write history. Again and again in Gray's research towards the *History*, his remarks on versification lead him away from consideration of the literary past to consideration of the present and to the status of the historical observer. For example, while many of Gray's peers regarded Middle English poetry as "barbarous" or "uncouth," Gray opines, "I can not help thinking it probable, that many great inequalities in the metre are owing to the neglect of Transcribers, or that the manner of reading made up for the defects that appear in the writing."[64] Similarly, some fifteen years before the state of the terminal "e" in Middle English prosody would be understood, Gray is "inclined to think… that their metre… was uniform; not indeed to the eye, but to the ear, when rightly pronounced."[65] For Gray, the readiness to perceive "uncouthness" in Chaucer's or Lydgate's measures reveals more about the eighteenth-century critic than the medieval poet. The observation of such "uncouthness" led many of Gray's peers to construct a familiar literary historical narrative, one of steady stylistic progress from the rustic rhymes of the past up to the refinement of Dryden and Pope. For Gray, however, such an observation is less a stylistic than an epistemological one, serving primarily to call into question the basic assumptions and practices of the literary historian. Far from indicating the refinement of the critic's ear, the sound of uncouth cadences makes audible what the critic cannot intuitively grasp – as when Gray, discussing ancient Welsh poetry, suspects that it must enclose (but despairs of ever fully understanding) "a conceal'd harmony… doubtless very pleasing to ears accustom'd to the Cadence of their Poetry & Language."[66] For Gray, the apparent uncouthness of the measure figures the imperfect state of the historian's knowledge and historiographical process rather than the supposed imperfection of the literary past itself. Uncouth measures are not only relics of Britain's poetic past but also, in a vital sense, part of the critical *method* by which this past is to be construed. To re-situate Gray's final odes in this historiographical context is to recover their enactment in poetic form of this very method.

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[62] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:799. This passage is a very close paraphrase – essentially a transcription – of Thomas Carte's *A General History of England*, 4 vols. (London: Printed for the Author, 1747-55), 1:33.

[63] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:799. As above, this is another close paraphrase of Carte, *General History*, 1:33.

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[64] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:757.

[65] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:744. See also Thomas Tyrwhitt ed., *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer*, 5 vols. (London: T. Payne, 1775-78), 4:1-111.

[66] Gray, Commonplace Books, 2:799. Gray's impression of Welsh prosody derives from John David Rhys's *Cambrobrytannicae Cymraecaeve linguae institutiones et rudimenta accuratè* (London: Thomas Orwinus, 1592).

§ Gray's Runic Rhymes

One scholar remarks of Gray's imitations that they are "too insular and bizarre, too much concerned with affect and too little with content" to successfully contribute to an account of British literary history.[67] In light of the poet's interest in the historiographical significance of measure, however, such a characterization of the imitations offers a fruitful heuristic for their re-assessment. To grant that these compositions privilege the notionally affective strata of rhythm and sound over narrative "content" is not the same as concluding that they are merely pedantic experiments with lost prosodies. If Gray's imitations foreground their status as prosodic media, they do so to court the reader's reaction to the material and historical conditions of their articulation. To observe that the prosody of these poems is more compelling than their strictly semantic "content" is only to acknowledge that they seek to articulate meaning by less intuitive means.

The attention Gray pays to the mediated status of the imitations supports this assessment. The poems' subtitles draw attention not only to the medium of language (they are drawn from the "Norse" and "Welch" tongues) but also to the obscure textual provenance of the poems. (For example, the reader is none-too-helpfully informed that "The Fatal Sisters" appears in "The Orcades of Thormodus Torfaeus" and "The Descent of Odin" in "Bartholinus, de causis contemnendae mortis."[68]) As Warton remarks in his *History*, the historical content and context of these ancient works is difficult to ascertain unless one happens to be one of a handful of antiquarians with access to the Bodleian or perhaps a generous patron. Gray's headnotes and footnotes refer the reader to forgotten eleventh- and twelfth-century battles or to French accounts of Norse mythology; and the explanatory advertisement to the "Triumphs of Owen" tersely declares that "Owen succeeded his Father Griffin in the Principality of North-Wales, A. D. 1120. This battle was fought near forty Years afterwards."[69] Is the fact of Owen's succession somehow related to the battle? The explanation is as opaque as the poem it claims to elucidate.

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[67] Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 398.

This sense of opacity is not merely a function of the poems' paratexts but an essential characteristic of the poems themselves, for these are cryptic verses concerned self-reflexively with the significance of cryptic verse. In "The Fatal Sisters," a native of Scotland overhears the Valkyries singing a fateful song that will determine the outcome of a distant battle in Ireland; in "The Descent of Odin," a Norse god descends to the underworld and incants "runic rhyme[s]" to compel a prophetess to reveal his son Balder's destiny.[70] In both cases, he who hears the prophetic verses possesses no knowledge of what they may come to mean. Gray's choice of these poems as illustrations of the literary past is significant in its own right. By blurring the distinction between history and prophecy, Gray likens engagement with the past to engagement with the future: both alike are construed as "uncouth" in the original sense of the term (i.e. "alien" or "unfamiliar"). In the context of the projected *History*, these specimens of "the Style that reigned in ancient times among… our Progenitors" become something more than quaint prophecies from a forgotten age. They dramatize not only history but the making and understanding of history, equating the reader who attempts to construe the past with the listener who attempts to comprehend the future. Insofar as these prophecies dramatize and poeticize the composition of history itself, the poems serve Gray as poetic reflections on the historiographical process.

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[68] Gray, *Poems by Mr. Gray* (London: J. Dodsley, 1768), 75, 86, 96. By comparison, "The Triumphs of Owen" announces a less obscure origin in "Mr. Evans's Specimens of the Welch Poetry; London, 1764, Quarto," or Evan Evans, *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1764).

[69] Gray, *Poems by Mr. Gray*, 77-8, 95, 99. On 95, Gray points his reader to Paul Henri Mallet, *Introduction à L'Histoire de Dannemarc* (Copenhagen: L. H. Lillie, 1755).

[70] Gray, "The Descent of Odin," in *Poems*, 224; l. 22.

The measure of "The Fatal Sisters" adumbrates this historiographical preoccupation. Eschewing the studied metrical complexity of his earlier odes, Gray opts instead for the over-bearing regularity and apparent simplicity of a four-beat line.[71] The poet likely adopted this measure from his study of Welsh prosody, where its use is quite common;[72] but he also would have detected something quite like it in the Norse original of "The Fatal Sisters," not only in the poem's refrain "*Vindum Vindum* || *Vef Darradar*" (which Gray translates as "Weave the crimson web of war") but also in passages such as the poem's conclusion: *"Ridum hestum* || *allz ut berum / brugdnum sverdum* || *a brott hedan.*"[73] Much scholarly ink has been shed with regard to the question of how much or little Norse and Welsh Gray knew;[74] but the question is beside the point when it comes to measure, which the poet insists "one may perceive" even when "entirely unacquainted with the Language."[75] Lack of understanding does not, for Gray, foreclose the experience of verse, but instead isolates and heightens the aural conditions of this experience. In "The Fatal Sisters," Gray's use of the heptasyllabic line consistently foregrounds the verse's status as sound. Take for instance the nursery-rhyme-like cadences of the fatal sisters' invocation:

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[71] Gray's use of this measure to figure the runic past was influential. When Amos Simon Cottle translated *Icelandic Poetry, or, the Edda of Saemund* (Bristol: Printed by N. Briggs for Joseph Cottle, 1797), he adopted the same form.

[72] Arthur Johnston, "Gray's 'The Triumphs of Owen,'" *RES*, New Series 11, no. 43 (1960): 280.

[73] See Thormodus Torfaeus, *Orcades seu rerum orcadensium historiae libri tres* (Copenhagen: Justini Hög, 1697), 38; and Gray, "The Fatal Sisters" *Poems*, 218-219; ll. 25 and 36. For details on these works, see Jones, *Thomas Gray*, 101-2. It is necessary to recall that scholars of Old English and Old Norse, as late at the nineteenth century, treated as a line-break what modern scholars now regard as the mid-line caesura of the four-beat line, thereby construing and printing as distiches what are now regarded as single lines. I have transcribed these distiches as single lines so as to make audible and visible the four-beat measure Gray adopts.

[74] Lonsdale offers a helpful summary in his headnote to "The Fatal Sisters;" see Gray, *Poems*, 213-214. See also G. L. Kittredge, "Gray's Knowledge of Old Norse," *Selections from Thomas Gray*, ed. W. L. Phelps (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1894), xli-l; Frank Edgar Farley, *Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic Movement* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1903), 35; Jones, *Thomas* Gray, 101-2; and Johnston, "Gray's 'The Triumphs of Owen.'"

> Horror covers all the heath,
> Clouds of carnage blot the sun.
> Sisters, weave the web of death;
> Sisters, cease, the work is done.[76]

The lack of an unstressed syllable at the end of each line (and thus between beats) renders "the movement more abrupt, the lines more self-contained" than were such unstressed syllables present, prompting the reader or hearer to perceive the lines as discrete parcels of sound.[77] (The uniformity between lines and grammatical clauses only adds to this effect.) Like the cadences of a foreign language, this measure's status as a rhythmic figure predominates over its status as a source of meaning.

Yet the affective response elicited by this measure is neither reducible to, nor explicable by, modern theories of scansion alone; for the measure itself carries with it a particular history of responses, and these, in turn, are bound up with problems of articulation and intuition. In *Peri Bathous* (1727), Pope and the other Scriblerians term this measure "The Infantine" and suggest that the poet who uses it "fondles, like a mere stammerer," trafficking in "*lullabies*."[78] Few, perhaps, would associate Gray's Norse imitation with a lullaby. Nonetheless, much like the lullaby or nonsense verse, the "sense" of the lines is secondary to its sound – it is a cadence before it is a proposition, and thus it is properly infantine (from the Latin *infans* or "speechless") insofar as it seems to articulate its own inarticulacy, like a child engrossed with its ability to form sounds rather than words. Gray's versification in "The Fatal Sisters" capitalizes on this association. If the abruptness of the lines, the simplicity of the syntax, and the frequent alliterations work together to heighten the auditor's awareness of the verse as a kind of inarticulate sonic matter – a *spell* rather than an internally differentiated utterance – so too do these qualities contribute to a blurring of distinctions between the matter of verse and the matter of history itself:

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[75] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:799.

[76] Gray, "The Fatal Sisters" in *Poems*, 225-26; ll. 49-52.

[77] Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London; New York: Longman, 1982), 105.

[78] Alexander Pope [and Jonathan Swift and John Arbuthnot], *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 221. See also Johnston, "Gray's 'The Triumphs of Owen,'" 280.

> E're the ruddy sun be set,
> Pikes must shiver, javelins sing,
> Blade with clattering buckler meet,
> Hauberk crash and helmet ring.[79]

Gray here works to conflate the medium and the object of verse in a manner that undermines expectations of onomatopoeia. Rather than strive to have the sound of the verse echo the sense of the lines – whereby one would supposedly hear the breaking of javelins and the clattering of weapons in the versification – Gray inverts this traditional formula and instead construes the sense as an echo to the sound. The object of description (the battle) takes on the qualities of the medium (the verse) used to describe it: the instruments of war are not only sung about but are made to "sing" themselves and "ring" their own uncouth rhymes. The effect here is not mimesis but self-reflexivity. Rather than seek to mimic the sounds of battle, Gray instead draws attention to the continuing status of this history as something sung – a construct of measure and sound. Not only do the fatal sisters magically bring about history by singing it, but they allow Gray to sketch a kind of history that remains essentially and inextricably mediated and comprehensible only as song.

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[79] Gray, "The Fatal Sisters" in *Poems*, 224; ll. 21-24.

It is in this respect that the uncouthness of Gray's imitations begins to make manifest, in poetic form, the critical and historiographical preoccupations latent in the poet's commonplace book. Scholars have often noted the debt Gray's poem bears to the witches in *Macbeth* (1606), who memorably offer up their riddling prophecies in this same measure.[80] Both formally and thematically, Shakespeare's "imperfect speakers" loom over Gray's perception of this poem – in his commonplace book, the poet refers to the Norse original as "The Song of the Wëird Sisters, or Valkyries."[81] The witches also influence contemporary critiques of the poem, as when Johnson tersely links the harshness of Gray's late style to the cadences of the weird sisters:

> These odes are marked by glittering accumulations of ungraceful ornaments: they strike, rather than please; the images are magnified by affectation; the language is laboured into harshness. The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence. "Double, double, toil and trouble"…. His art and his struggle are too visible, and there is too little appearance of ease and nature.[82]

For Johnson, Gray's verse flaunts, rather than conceals, its status as manipulated language; where poetry should be euphonious, Gray's seems willfully harsh and uncouth. Yet this is only a part of Johnson's critique. In turn, he takes this notional stylistic failing to be symptomatic of another, perhaps greater one: Gray's harsh verse seems to offer an unwelcome glimpse of the poet's mind working "with unnatural violence," struggling to give shape and meaning to this poem.

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[80] Suvir Kaul, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: A Study in Ideology and Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), 239-40.

[81] See Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.3.70 in Stephen Greenblatt et al. eds., *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition* (New York: Norton, 1997); and Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:460.

[82] See Johnson, "Gray," *Lives*, 4:183.

Yet what if this "violence" and the uncouthness that betokens it are, in fact, central to the project of this imitation? In echoing Shakespeare's witches, Gray is not merely interested in profiting from the literary resonance of their "sickening, see-saw rhythm";[83] he also capitalizes on the fact that Shakespeare's play makes this measure all but synonymous with the problem of comprehending the inscrutable workings of fate. "The Fatal Sisters" foregrounds this preoccupation. After the native of Scotland has overheard sung a riddling prophecy concerning the future of neighboring nations and kings, the sisters directly address this auditor's ignorance:

> Mortal, thou that hear'st the tale,
> Learn the tenor of our song.
> Scotland, through each winding vale,
> Far and wide the notes prolong.[84]

This stanza, which has no equivalent in the Norse original, has attracted scholarly attention on account of its "self-reflexivity about oral dissemination" and mediation;[85] one critic goes so far as to suggest that this stanza's interest in the dissemination of oral verse instantiates "the scholarly tracing that Gray had hoped to accomplish in his aborted *History*."[86] Such a conclusion, however, overlooks the fact that the poet here dramatizes a moment in which hearing and historical understanding are explicitly dissociated from one another. Although a reader familiar with Gray's headnote can comprehend that the Valkyries have just prophesied a battle across the sea in Ireland, Gray's focus is on the eavesdropping native of Scotland who remains pointedly oblivious to such context: he cannot take part in the prolongation of their notes until he has first

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[83] See L. C. Knights, *Explorations: Essays in Criticism Mainly on the Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), 23, quoted in David L. Kranz, "The Sounds of Supernatural Soliciting in *Macbeth*," *Studies in Philology* 100, no. 3 (2003), 349.

[84] Gray, "The Fatal Sisters" in *Poems*, 220; ll. 57-60.

[85] James Mulholland, *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire, 1730-1820* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), 62-63. See also Kaul, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority*, 241.

[86] See Mulholland, *Sounding Imperial*, 62-63.

"[l]earn[ed] the tenor" of this strange song. Moreover, the poet suggests that the eavesdropping mortal is essentially superfluous to this process of dissemination – for, properly speaking, the prolongation of song is to be done not by him, but by the insensible landscape of "Scotland" itself, which the fatal sisters address in the vocative as an auditor and disseminator in its own right.

The clarity offered to the reader by Gray's explanatory note thus stands in sharp contrast to the obscurity and irrelevancy that the poet associates with this particular auditor: what is history to one is sound to the other. "The Fatal Sisters" may trace a literary history of oral dissemination, but it does so while foregrounding a gap between sound and understanding, between "tale" and "tenor." Although the measures of the sisters' verse will become the matter of history both prophetically and literarily, they do so in spite of their uncomprehending mortal auditor whose mind must work "with unnatural violence" to find meaning in them. For Gray, the sisters' uncouth measures disdain human understanding, articulating history in an idiom foreign to their auditor. In this respect, they dramatize in poetic form the peculiar historiographical logic of Grey's *Memoria Technica*: their uncouthness figures the conceptual violence and distortion latent in the fashioning of history as narrative. If this poem's self-reflexivity about oral culture offers a glimpse of Gray's projected *History*, it does so by instantiating the poet's skepticism regarding the limits of historical comprehension.

A similar preoccupation with nescience informs "The Descent of Odin." In response to Odin's query concerning who will avenge his son Balder's fate, the Prophetess of the underworld offers Odin a riddling description:

> In the caverns of the west,
> By Odin's fierce embrace compressed,
> A wondrous boy shall Rinda bear,
> Who ne'er shall comb his raven-hair,

> Nor wash his visage in the stream,
> Nor see the sun's departing beam:
> Till he on Hoder's corse shall smile
> Flaming on the funeral pile.[87]

Odin and the reader are in much the same position as auditors, since the significance of these prophetic verses is necessarily deferred, to be made clear only by the passage of time or by recourse to a text named in the footnotes. Gray is well aware of the alienating effect that such reference to Norse mythology could occasion for eighteenth-century readers. In a letter to William Mason about the use of Celtic or Norse motifs in the latter's *Caractacus* (1759), Gray warns: "I would venture to borrow from the Edda without entering too minutely on particulars: but if I did so, I would make each image so clear, that it might be fully understood by itself, for in this obscure mythology we must not hint at things, as we do with the Greek Fables, that every body is supposed to know at school."[88] In the case of his Norse imitations, however, Gray is happy to "hint" at this obscure mythology through the use of opaque names – Odin, Balder, Rinda, Hoder, Loki – whose explication he defers to a perfunctory footnote directing the reader "[f]or a farther explanation" to Paul Henri Mallet's *Introduction à L'Histoire de Dannemarc* (1755). Much like Grey's "*Artificial Word*[s]," the opaque sounds of Gray's Norse names at once point to, and yet withhold, a history all their own: they figure knowledge of a complex mythos pent up mutely behind "uncouth," obscure syllables.[89]

This is not, for Gray, merely a stylistic predilection with obscurity. Rather, as in "The Fatal Sisters," the poet's preoccupation with the uncouth bears a conceptual weight, subtending Gray's broader skepticism about narrative's ability to comprehend and communicate a sense of history. In "The Descent of Odin," Gray alters details of the original poem in order to foreground and de-familiarize the medium of historical narrative itself. Whereas the Latin source text Gray relied on while composing the poem indicates that the Prophetess "arose, all unwilling, / and spoke the language of the dead" ("*invita surgeret, / Et mortuorum sermonem proferret*"), the poet's imitation instead de-anthropomorphizes both the speaker and the act of speaking: Gray writes only that "from out the hollow ground / Slowly breathed a sullen sound."[90] Figuring the prophecy and its speaker as "sound" rather than "language," the poet further heightens the aural strangeness – rather than the oral immediacy – of the Prophetess's fateful pronouncements: she is not exactly a *she*, nor are her words exactly *words*. In this respect, the diffidence of Gray's projected *History* looms over, and lends added meaning to, the poem. Like the *History* in which it was to have played a part, "The Descent of Odin" resists the notion that the otherness of history naturally and intuitively resolves itself into human discourse. As both a poet and literary historian, Gray challenges the assumption that narrative can strip history of its uncouthness.

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[87] Gray, "The Descent of Odin" in *Poems*, 226; ll. 63-72.

[88] Gray, *Correspondence*, Letter 269; 24 March 1758.

[89] Grey, *Memoria Technica*, xiv.

The poet's treatment of the prophetess's speech elaborates this stance. As the mouthpiece of fate, she appears notably reluctant to speak the language of mortals. She must be compelled "[t]o break the quiet of the tomb," and her constant refrain – "Unwilling I my lips unclose," "Now my weary lips I close" – casts speech as something both unfamiliar and unnatural.[91] Although they may look nothing like Grey's "gibberish" mnemonic lines, these verses obey a similar logic, for they self-reflexively depict knowledge of history's unfolding as conformable to human speech only with great labour and artifice. Such a perception of history as essentially inarticulate yields, in turn, a distinctive understanding of the role played by literary form. For

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[90] Gray, "The Descent of Odin" in *Poems*, 224; ll. 25-26. The translation is Mason's, and is cited by Lonsdale in *Poems*, 221-222; for Gray's transcription of the Latin, see Commonplace Book*,* 3:1045.

[91] Gray, "The Descent of Odin" in *Poems*, 225, 227; ll. 49 and 71.

Gray, the uncouth rhymes of ages past are not merely stylistic markers of this past, but the material conditions of its perception: they alone foreground this history's status as an effect of verbal or poetic figuration (and, necessarily, distortion). In "The Descent of Odin," Gray draws attention to the aural matter of prosody as the essential condition of access to the prophetess's cryptic and sullen sound:

> Facing to the northern clime,
> Thrice he traced the runic rhyme;
> Thrice pronounced, in accents dread,
> The thrilling verse that wakes the dead.[92]

The power of a charm or incantation rests in its unlikeness to speech, an unlikeness often signaled by the heightening of prosodic patterning – "rhyme," "accents," repetition. The semantic "content" of the charm does not merit description by Gray because it is entirely beside the point – as with the Norse and Welsh imitations themselves, it is primarily the aural matter that matters to the poet. Moreover, Gray's research towards the *History* underscores his fascination with the materiality of this "runic rhyme" and ancient prosodies more broadly. As Gray well knew, the phrase "runic rhyme" is an oxymoron; the tongues broadly referred to as "runic" in the eighteenth century (i.e. Gothic, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon) showed no evidence of using rhyme.[93] This exercise of poetic license thus seems designed to stress the materiality of prosody itself. For when Gray speaks of runes in his commonplace book, he is concerned with their unique status as a species of inarticulate and material language, a phenomenon essentially unlike chirographic discourse: of the Gothic tongue he remarks that "their Runes or Letters are now rarely, ~~if at all~~, to be met with otherwise than in Inscriptions engraven on rocks & sepulchers."[94] The poem's association of rhyme with inscription, silence, and the tomb underscores Gray's interest in prosody as a physical medium interposed between speech and silence, between understanding and the matter of history. Far from exemplifying oral immediacy, Gray's imitation works to highlight the layers of mediation – the literal matter of runic inscription, the aural "matter" of prosody, the "sullen sound" of speech – that interpose not only between Odin and knowledge of fate, but more generally between the reader and the literary past.

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[92] Gray, "The Descent of Odin" in *Poems*, 224; ll. 21-24

[93] Gray acknowledges this fact, remarking that from "the settling of the Danes in Northumberland… to the Norman Conquest we have a good deal of their poetry preserved, but none of it in rhyme." (Gray's emphasis.) See Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:772.

In this respect, "The Descent of Odin" develops a central concern of Gray's earlier poetry, as evinced most notably by the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751). In that poem, the "uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture[s]" of the churchyard likewise seek to bridge, via the media of prosody and inscription, the gulf between the living speaker and "the noiseless tenor" of the village dead.[95] Nonetheless, the poems' situations are not identical. The "Elegy" ultimately takes for granted that the past wishes to speak – "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of nature cries" – and that the living poet may "in these lines their artless tale relate."[96] It is a central assumption of the "Elegy" that the voice of past seeks and finds articulation in the present through narrative. "The Descent of Odin," by contrast, is doubtful of this process. It presents history as radically silent, and the prosodic charms of verse as a breaking or distortion of this past's muteness: "What call unknown, what charms, presume / To break the quiet of the tomb?"[97] As in Grey's *Memoria Technica* and Gray's reticent *History*, "The Descent of Odin" locates in the uncouth rhymes that interpose between past and present a poetic figure for the violence of historiography itself. The poem's notional narrative – its apparent structure of questions and oracular replies – belies Gray's preoccupation with the gap between the poem's interlocutors. Odin and the prophetess speak *at* rather than *to* one another: he must murmur charms to compel her to speak, she must adopt the unfamiliar cadences of human speech to answer him, and both seem to encounter more sound than sense. In this respect, "The Descent of Odin" essentially narrates the disarticulation of narrative, for in place of "an artless tale" – the very possibility of which Gray's work towards the *History* increasingly calls into doubt – it instead accentuates the mere matter of verse as that which stands between the silence of the past and the discourse of the present. The stylized uncouthness of Gray's final poems does not mark an ebbing of his powers nor a sudden and inexplicable turn towards the "insular and bizarre," but rather a culmination of the poetic and historiographical efforts that define Gray's career.

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[94] Gray, Commonplace Book, 2:775.

[95] Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in *Poems*, 131-32; ll. 76 and 79.

[96] Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," in *Poems*, 134-35; ll. 91 and 94.

[97] Gray, "The Descent of Odin" in *Poems*, 224; ll. 27-28.

Ultimately, both structurally and thematically, Gray's notes towards the *History* manifest a suspicion of narrative as a tool commensurate with the understanding of literary history. Gray takes the seemingly placid surface of measure to be replete with theoretical significance: in the "conceal'd harmony" of Welsh versification, as in the "gibberish" of Richard Grey's mnemonic lines, he locates a kind of historical knowledge whose very form perpetually reminds us of its status, first and foremost, as a product of literary form. Measure challenges both the inevitability and the supposed intuitability of historical narrative. In this respect, the poet's pre-occupation with classifying rather than narrating the history of these measures serves to preserve their uncouthness as well as the mode of engaging with the past that their uncouthness figures. In its narrow focus on "mere" meter – the matter of its sound and the historical conditions of its articulation – Gray's *History* pointedly refrains from presenting the literary past as intuitively narratable. Instead, if Gray privileges poetic measure as an object of historical analysis in its own right, he does so because its very nature tends to foreground and ask us to scrutinize the theoretical assumptions latent in the writing of history.

Chapter 4:

Rugged Science, Empty Sound: Johnson and the Rhetoric of Literary Measurement

At present, the notion that prosodic analysis could reveal something significant about the meaning or value of a literary text seems not only out of scholarly fashion but ideologically retrograde. For many, to spend time counting and weighing syllables is tacitly to repudiate the opening up of the literary canon to new approaches, new voices, and new realities. As Paul Fussell wryly remarked more than half a century ago, to many students of literary history, "prosodic investigation has seemed at best a fruitless endeavor bearing little relation to the operative processes of poetic creation and serving primarily as an exhibition of the investigator's incapacity for dealing with more vital affairs."[1] This sense of prosody as a redoubt for critical conservatism has, in turn, colored our understanding of the significance of prosodic investigation for both the eighteenth century and its most famous literary critic Samuel Johnson.

Johnson's pronouncements on matters prosodic – his staunch defense of rhyme, his disapproval of departures from strictly regulated meter, his tin-eared responses to the poetry of Donne, Milton, and Gray – have led to his being regarded as the exemplar of everything normative about eighteenth-century poetics.[2] Leopold Damrosch can rescue Johnson's literary criticism from the charge that it unthinkingly adheres to neoclassical norms only by abandoning Johnson's "technical interests" in poetic measure, which must be allowed to be "very traditional."[3] It must be ceded that Johnson is "at his most theoretical" – and, by Damrosch's argument, at his least useful for modern readers – when he treats of "the narrow topic of versification."[4] For Jean Hagstrum, Johnson "came very close to looking upon prosody as a 'science,'" one that offered him a metrical standard that he could apply "with ruthless consistency."[5] "Nothing could be clearer or more dogmatic" than Johnson's metrical conservatism;[6] "as a critic of versification," he "forsake[s] his usual tolerance and sanity in order to erect the system of Pope into the law and gospel of versification."[7] At their most generous, such readings of Johnson's remarks on prosody erect his stylistic orthodoxy into a unified world-view, as when Fussell suggests that "Johnson's morality of prosody is probably the most complete and coherent expression one can find in any post-Renaissance criticism of the ancient belief, essentially humanistic, that the mechanics of poetry, trivial perhaps as they may appear to the uninitiated, are at once a regulation and a revelation of man's ethical and religious state."[8] Meanwhile, at their least generous, they can suggest that we would not be in the wrong to view Johnson's "whole system of metrical criticism" as little more than "a grand rationalization of his own auricular pleasures," a purely idiosyncratic set of norms.[9]

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[1] Paul Fussell, *Theory of Prosody in Eighteenth-Century England* (New London, Conn.: Connecticut College, 1954) v.

[2] Fussell, *Theory of Prosody,* 24; Bradford, *Augustan Measures*, 224.

[3] Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *The Uses of Johnson's Criticism* (Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1976), 3.

My goal in this chapter is to dispute this view of Johnson as one who invokes prosody as a stable body of critical law in order largely to police questions of taste. The reality, I argue, is far more complex. For Johnson, prosody is at once a method and a problem: on the surface, prosodic judgments may aim to resolve literary critical disagreements through a quasi-empirical show of measure, but in reality such prosodic deliberations tend rather to open up, for Johnson, thorny and at times irresolvable questions concerning the theoretical bases of his own reading practices as well as those of his critical peers.

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[4] Damrosch, *Uses of Johnson's Criticism*, 8.

[5] Jean H. Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1952), 105.

[6] Hagstrum, *Johnson's Literary Criticism,* 105.

[7] Hagstrum, *Johnson's Literary Criticism,* 107.

[8] Fussell, *Theory of Prosody,* 44.

[9] Hagstrum, *Johnson's Literary Criticism,* 108.

This chapter pursues its argument in three sections. The first section situates Johnson's turn to prosodic criticism in *The Rambler* (1750-52) within the context of the Lauder Affair, a notorious literary hoax in which Johnson played a pivotal role. I argue that Johnson's turn to prosody at this time serves a self-reflexive and theoretical function: it is less a method for measuring the propriety of particular poems than a means of engaging with, and re-assessing, the very grounds of his critical thought. The second section situates Johnson's understanding of, and misgivings about, prosodic judgment within the broader context of Enlightenment sciences of language. I suggest that Johnson locates in these sciences of language a pervasive and self-effacing rhetoric of measurement, one that can account for the significance of prosody only by stripping prosodic phenomena of their status as language. To the extent that prosody, as a literary critical method, gains explanatory force only by denaturing language in this way, it calls into question for Johnson the function and feasibility of literary criticism itself. Finally, in the third section, I argue that Johnson's satirical portrait of prosodic criticism in *The Idler* (1758-60) carries an overlooked theoretical charge, one that is largely an effect of this portrait's caustic wit. Eschewing overt theorization of prosody, Johnson's satire instead works obliquely to disclose a problematic continuity between critical instruments and literary objects, between the cant of prosodic science and the mere sound it purports to describe. Ultimately, it is as an arena of literary theory, rather than as a canon of law, that prosody plays a constitutive role in Johnson's understanding of literary criticism and its moral and intellectual limits.

§ Prosody and Method in *The Rambler*

In the first weeks of 1751, Johnson's *Rambler* featured a series of essays (numbers 86, 88, 90, 92, and 94) on Milton's versification in *Paradise Lost* and on the topic of prosody more broadly. The existence of this five-part series is unique: in no other instance of *The Rambler*'s run does Johnson devote more than two issues to a topic (let alone five). Moreover, the timing of the issues – released on consecutive Saturdays and thus designed for pious Sunday readers – could not help but lend them an air of solemnity. When Johnson (who was already perceived by many readers to be too austere a moralist) characterizes his prosodic labor in these issues as a "solemn deliberation upon accents and pauses," the choice of adjective, with its hint of liturgical gravity, is not out of place.[10]

Yet this air of solemnity, while a genuine mark of the seriousness with which Johnson treats questions of literary form, aimed also to mitigate a literary critical controversy in which he had embroiled himself. Scholars have little remarked the close relationship between this series of essays and Johnson's role in the Lauder Affair, a once-notorious forgery case. The facts of the affair have been dealt with extensively by Michael J. Marcuse and others.[11] In brief: William Lauder published a series of articles in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1747 alleging that Milton's

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[10] Johnson, *Rambler* 88 in *Works*, 4:99. The timing of these issues clearly recalls Joseph Addison's decision in *The Spectator* (1711-14) to release his series of eighteen essays on *Paradise Lost* on successive Saturdays.

[11] Michael J. Marcuse has written a series of articles on this topic: "The Gentleman's Magazine and the Lauder/Milton Controversy," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 81, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 179-209; "Miltonoklastes: The Lauder Affair Reconsidered," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 4 (1978): 86-91; "The Pre-Publication History of William Lauder's Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Modems in His Paradise Lost," *PBSA* 72, no. 1 (1978): 37-57; and "'The Scourge of Impostors, the Terror of Quacks': John Douglas and the Expose of William Lauder," *HLQ* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 231-61. See also Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 81-102 and "Lauder, William (*c.*1710–*c.*1771)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/16121. For a discussion of Johnson's role in this affair, see James L. Clifford, "Johnson and Lauder," *Philological Quarterly* 54 (1975): 342-56; and Christine Rees, *Johnson's Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 97-107. In what follows, I draw on Baines's biography of Lauder.

Paradise Lost borrowed heavily from little-read neo-Latin works. Johnson aided the controversialist by writing on his behalf a proposal for an edition of Grotius's *Adamus Exsul* (1601) that would serve to document Milton's supposed borrowings from Grotius; this proposal was soon recast as a preface to Lauder's *An Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns* (1750), which laid out the case of all of Milton's alleged plagiarisms at length, and to which Johnson also contributed a post-script. For reasons that continue to be debated, and which Johnson would come to regret, he lent his reputation as a discerning critic to a man who held that Milton's "industrious concealment of his helps, his peremptory disclaiming all manner of assistance" was "criminal to the last degree."[12]

The "industrious concealment," however, truly belonged to Lauder who contrived his "evidence" by interpolating lines from William Hog's Latin translation of Milton's works (1690) into his citations of the supposed source texts, thereby forging uncanny precedents for the imagery and phrasing of *Paradise Lost*. The hoax was soon exposed by (among others) John Douglas, who did not hesitate to draw attention to the complicity of Johnson, "the elegant and nervous Writer, whose judicious sentiments, and inimitable Stile, point out the Author of *Lauder*'s Preface and Postscript."[13] Johnson could do little to shield himself from the controversy at this time.[14] Not only were his "judicious sentiments, and inimitable Stile" currently on display twice a week in the *Rambler* essays, but the publishers of these essays – John Payne and Joseph Bouquet – were deeply embroiled in the controversy too, having been led by Johnson's advice to publish Lauder's exploded *Essay*.[15] Both parties attempted to resolve the situation as best they could – the publishers by announcing that they would continue to sell Lauder's work (at a reduced price) only "as a Curiosity of Fraud and Interpolation," and Johnson by dictating to Lauder and forcing him to sign a recantation and apology published as *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Douglas* (1751).[16]

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[12] See William Lauder, *An Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns, in his* Paradise Lost (London: J. Payne and J. Bouquet, 1750), "Postcript" (n.p), 162-3.

[13] John Douglas, *Milton Vindicated from the Charge of Plagiarism* (London: A. Millar, 1750), 77.

[14] The controversy played out in the London papers over November and December of 1750. In the *London Evening Post*, 1-4 December 1750, issue 3607, the advertisement for Douglas's vindication adds: "Specimens of Mr. Lauder's Forgeries may be seen at Mr. Millar's Shop, where Hogaeus's Latin Translation of Milton, John Foxe's Christus triumphans, and Heywood's Hierarchia Angelica are now lodged for every one's Inspection."

Lauder's forced apology was advertised as published by the 8th of January 1751;[17] later that same week, on the 12th of the month, the first of the *Rambler* entries on Milton's prosody appeared. Although scholars have acknowledged the conspicuous timing of these entries, they are at pains to understand why Johnson – caught up in a controversy that had seen him duped and embarrassed, in which his acumen and standing as a critic were called into question – would respond by immediately returning to the very Miltonic fires that had burned him.[18] In line with the assumption that discussion of prosody represents a retreat to the safe ground of neoclassical orthodoxy, it has been suggested that these essays reflect either a chastised Johnson laying down his cudgel and returning to a form of analysis that is "technical and entirely professional"[19] or an attempt on Johnson's part to advance his political critique of Milton on narrowly formal terms.[20]

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[15] See O. M. Brack, "Payne, John (*d.* 1787)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2006, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/21646.

[16] The publishers' advertisement appeared in the *General Evening Post,* 4-6 December 1750, issue 2653. For further details, see Clifford, "Johnson and Lauder."

[17] See the *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer*, 5-8 Jan. 1751, issue 766.

[18] Even to Johnson's admirers, this choice of topic seemed inopportune to the point of folly. Writing to Elizabeth Carter on the 19th of the month, Catherine Talbot laments "I was sorry the other day to see a Rambler (though a good one) upon Milton, because the author has been much censured for carrying his humanity and good-nature so much too far, as to assist that villainous forger Lauder in his Apology." In response, Carter intimates that the affair has raised questions about the viability of Johnson's publication: "I am sorry Mr. Johnson should have incurred any censure about this wretched business. I am told the Rambler will be continued no longer than to complete the year." *A Series of Letters between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot*, 4 vols., ed. Montagu Pennington (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1809), 2:3-6.

In this view, however, the fact of prosodic reading is taken for granted. That is to say, notwithstanding the fact that Milton's blank verse and Johnson's fondness for rhyme and closure may be taken to carry political subtext, and thus that Johnson's remarks on Milton's style can be read, with little difficulty, as a political and moral critique, what is often overlooked in critical treatment of these *Rambler* essays is Johnson's acute self-reflexivity about just these sorts of symbolic readings of prosody. If the Lauder affair compels us to examine the history underlying Johnson's reading of Milton's measures, it likewise compelled Johnson to examine the nature of critical reading itself. In this light, Johnson is less invested in these essays in resolving or reinforcing, under the dialect of prosody, particular anxieties born of his prejudice towards Milton than in reexamining the basic foundations of his critical method.

This question of critical method was at the heart of Douglas's censure of Johnson for his role in the Lauder Affair:

> 'Tis to be hoped, nay 'tis *expected*, that the elegant and nervous Writer, whose judicious sentiments, and inimitable Stile, point out the Author of *Lauder*'s Preface and Postscript, will no longer allow one to *plume himself with his Feathers* who appears so little to have deserved his Assistance; an Assistance which, I am persuaded, would never have been communicated, had there been the least Suspicion of those Facts, which I have been the Instrument of conveying to the World in these Sheets.[21]

Douglas is less concerned with Johnson's moral error (abetting a forger) than with the critical error that enabled it in the first place. According to Douglas, the Lauder affair could have been avoided had Johnson simply considered the "Facts" of the case in the proper critical light. There is a taunt lurking beneath this apparently sensible remonstrance. What exactly makes for a literary "fact," and by what method the critic should consider it, are questions that Johnson himself had raised in his preface to Lauder's vitiated *Essay*. There he had framed Lauder's research as part of a broader experimentation with critical methods born of the recent canonization of Milton: "There seems to have arisen a contest, among men of genius and literature, who should most advance its [i.e. *Paradise Lost*'s] honour, or best distinguish its beauties. Some have revised editions, others have published commentaries, and all have endeavoured, to make their particular studies, in some degree, subservient to this general emulation."[22] Now that *Paradise Lost* is being valued, Johnson observes, there seems to have arisen a number of distinct ways in which to derive value *from* it. The critical possibilities he mentions – that of emending the poem's notional errors, explaining its cruces, and judging its beauties – are the three activities Johnson associates with "criticism" in the broadest sense;[23] however, these three activities had also developed, during the preceding half-century, into increasingly distinct strands of literary criticism, ranging from the notorious emendation of *Paradise Lost* by the antiquarian scholar Richard Bentley, to the learned, pseudo-Biblical commentary on the poem by Patrick Hume, to the popular and accessible series of *Spectator* essays by Joseph Addison.[24] That Johnson can describe these seemingly reconcilable approaches to *Paradise Lost* as, instead, various sides in a "contest" reveals a careful discernment as well as a concern for the relative merits of critical methods.

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[19] See Michael Payne, "Johnson vs. Milton: Criticism as Inquisition," *College Literature* 19, no. 1 (1992): 65.

[20] See for instance Rees, *Johnson's Milton*, 108-120.

[21] Douglas, *Milton Vindicated*, 77.

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[22] William Lauder, *Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns*, sig. a3^r.

[23] In his "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765), Johnson characterizes his critical notes as "either illustrative, by which difficulties are explained; or judicial, by which faults and beauties are remarked; or emendatory, by which depravations are corrected"; see *Works*, 7:102.

[24] See Bentley, ed., *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton; Patrick Hume, *Annotations on Milton's* Paradise Lost (London: Jacob Tonson, 1695); and Joseph Addison, *Notes Upon the Twelve Books of* Paradise Lost (London: J. Tonson, 1719).

Moreover, to aid Lauder's research into Milton's notional sources was for Johnson merely to continue his support for a particular critical method, one with which he had become closely associated in the 1740s. During this decade, aside from his work as a hack writer, Johnson had earned for himself a reputation as a budding antiquary due to his time spent cataloguing the Earl of Oxford's vast library of manuscripts and printed rarities. Years spent organizing the five-volume *Catalogus Bibliothecae Harleianae* (1743-5) and the eight-volume *Harleian Miscellany* (1744-6) led Johnson to endorse in his introduction to the latter work much the same critical strategy that Lauder seemed to practice. Ephemeral tracts and disregarded broadsides, Johnson argues, "preserve a Multitude of particular Incidents, which are forgotten in a short Time, or omitted in formal Relations, and which are yet to be considered as Sparks of Truth, which, when united, may afford Light in some of the darkest Scenes of State."[25] Three years later, Johnson would find in Lauder's plan an analogous critical method, one that sought to test the accepted truth of Milton's genius against the forgotten historical context of neo-Latin verse. For Johnson, it is imperative to see "from what stores the materials [for *Paradise Lost*] were collected, whether its founder dug them from the quarries of nature, or demolished other buildings to embellish his own."[26]

In light of these critical principles, Johnson's turn to prosodic analysis in the *Rambler* essays marks a distinct shift in method. Instead of focusing on the historical context of Milton's diction and imagery, he attends to the effect on the reader of Milton's verse. This shift in focus from history to readerly response is predicated, for Johnson, on a changing notion of critical authority. After criticizing the roughness of Milton's meter and remarking that mixing iambs and trochees runs contrary to classical practice, Johnson opines "[b]ut where the senses are to judge, authority is not necessary, the ear is sufficient to detect dissonance, nor should I have sought auxiliaries on such an occasion against any name but that of Milton."[27] The turn to prosody provides Johnson new grounds for analysis – grounds that need not Lauder's sources, but only the critic's individual senses, which are, in turn, assumed to stand for those of the reader. In this respect, Johnson associates his prosodic analysis not with the authority of classical scholarship but, instead, with the decidedly modern rhetoric of Lockean empiricism: the individual critic's senses, he asserts, are sufficient to judge Milton's poetic accomplishments. If, in the first weeks of 1751, prosody seems to Johnson a more trustworthy mode of assessing critical value, this is because its methodology would appear to avoid the very problems – of history, of archives, of duplicitous fellow critics – that the Lauder affair had recently brought to light.

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[25] Johnson, "Introduction," *The Harleian Miscellany*, 8 vols. (London: T. Osborne, 1744-46), 1:iii. (In later editions of Johnson's works, this introduction is usually retitled "An Essay on the Origin and Importance of Small Tracts and Fugitive Pieces.")

[26] Lauder, *Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns*, sig. a3^v.

On display here is an explicit attempt to practice a species of empirical criticism over against a more fallible one (in this case, an antiquarian one with similarities to more modern historicist methodologies). Although the empirical ideal in Johnson's criticism has been noted, it has often been understood as a kind of mathematical abstraction. For instance, a pseudo-empirical notion of the mean (and of deviation therefrom) is implicit in Johnson's celebrated critical construct of "the common reader": this imagined average of the experiences of the reading mass offers Johnson a standard against which to gauge his own reading as well as a criterion with which to influence and police critical consensus.[28] In this respect, Johnson's "common reader" can be seen to partake of a broader turn in the eighteenth century toward what

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[27] Johnson, *Rambler* 86 in *Works*, 4:93.

[28] Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), xii.

Mary Poovey terms "gestural mathematics," or the invocation of mathematical tropes to lend currency to philosophical and critical analysis.[29]

Yet one must also note the degree to which Johnson's gestural mathematics and his notion of the "common reader" remain imbricated for him in the world of the somatic. Early in the *Life*, Boswell records that Johnson "at various times attempted, or at least planned, a methodical course of study, according to computation, of which he was all his life fond, as it fixed his attention steadily upon something without, and prevented his mind from preying upon itself."[30] Although one hesitates to attribute Johnson's love of numbers entirely to his disabilities, it remains unavoidably a fact that, because he was blind in one eye and suffered from bouts of deafness, he found in the methodical practice of computation the promise of a stable correlative to the murky world of phenomena without. The numbers that promise to bridge this gulf between Johnson and the world and the readers around him are not only of the literal, but also of the poetic kind. Harmony is elemental for Johnson, and he describes it in much the same terms that Locke uses to establish the essential uniformity of human perception (and, thereby, of ideas): "The perception of harmony is indeed conferred upon men in degrees very unequal, but there are none who do not perceive it, or to whom a regular series of proportionate sounds cannot give delight."[31] Johnson would use himself to exemplify this supposed bedrock of prosodic perception, discussing Milton's use of the *caesura* or pause in terms not of classical precedent but of immediate and unvarying pleasure: "far above all others, if I can give any credit to my own ear, is the rest upon the sixth syllable, which taking in a complete compass of sound, such as is sufficient to constitute one of our lyrick measures, makes a full and solemn close. Some passages which conclude at this stop, I could never read without some strong emotions of delight or admiration."[32] When Johnson, evaluating Milton's verse, suggests that "authority is not necessary" since "the ear is sufficient to detect dissonance," he establishes the judgment of the common reader altogether outside of history ("authority"): he instead characterizes it as an empirical fact predicated on stable, somatic grounds.

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[29] Poovey, *History of the Modern Fact*, 172.

[30] Boswell, *Life*, 53; see also *Life*, 880.

[31] Johnson, *Rambler* 86 in *Works*, 4:89. See Locke, *Essay*, 563; 4.4.2.

Although traditional assumptions about the break between "classical" and "romantic" poetics often incline scholars to read Johnson as an influential foil for the literary critics who would follow him, acknowledgment of Johnson's grounding of his "common reader" in a somatic poetics brings out unexpected continuities. For instance, Johnson's interest in prosody as a bedrock of perception unsullied by the fallibility of other modes of reading persists beneath Vicesimus Knox's suggestion that "[t]here is… in all works of true taste and genius, something of that elevated nature, which cannot be pointed out by verbal description, and which can only be perceived by the vibrations it produces on the nervous system,"[33] as well as Thomas Sheridan's assertion that "poetic numbers keep the mind in a constant state of gentle agitation, by a continued series of emotions, resulting from their mechanical part, *independent of thought*" (my emphasis).[34] This distinction between the mechanical and the intellectual, and its associated suggestion that prosody's effects on the body offer a surer route to critical judgment, lay the critical groundwork for Wordsworth's poetic interest in those "small, but continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise [arising] from the metrical arrangement."[35] Ultimately, far from being a workmanlike exercise in "technical" criticism, Johnson's writings on prosody reflect a preoccupation with the basis of literary critical method, and in this particular case a reliance on a theory of embodied poetics as a rationale for critical judgment.

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[32] Johnson, *Rambler* 90 in *Works*, 4:115.

[33] Vicesimus Knox, "No. XXVII – On Modern Criticism," *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Charles Dilly, 1782), 1:128.

[34] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:178-9.

Prosody could thus easily have become for Johnson a form of critical retreat – a convenient way to rationalize his opinion of Milton through a rhetoric of empirical measure – had he not begun to question the very grounds of this method while still engaged in the act of applying it. While an embodied or somatic approach to prosody might seem to open up a route toward a more empirical criticism, it also prompts Johnson, in both the *Rambler* series and his later criticism, to consider all those failings, of perception and interpretation, which could undermine and vitiate such a criticism. If the *Rambler* essays mark Johnson's first turn to prosody as a mode of critical reading, they also inaugurate Johnson's grave doubts about the basis and ultimate purpose of such reading, doubts that would persist throughout and shape his career.

These doubts first take shape amid Johnson's consideration of the principle of representative versification, or the stylistic dictum, famously articulated by Pope, that "[t]he *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*."[36] Positing a necessary relationship between form and meaning, this influential principle idealizes a logic of resemblance and continuity: to consider a poem's sound is to consider something much like, and intimately related to, its meaning. The exact nature of this relationship can be (and certainly has been) debated; but the notion that poetic expression treats sound and sense as a unified complex has, since Pope's time, passed over into the realm of the axiomatic.

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[35] William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 72.

[36] Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," *Poems*, 155; l. 365.

In light of its general acceptance, Johnson's pronounced suspicion of this principle, which first emerges in the *Rambler* series, is all the more striking. Although much of the series takes for granted and can even laud Milton's mastery of that "species of embellishment" that aims to produce "echoes of the cadence to the sense,"[37] Johnson's critical remarks routinely revert to and undermine these very assumptions. One the one hand, he can grant that Milton was "both a musician and a critick" who "intend[ed] to exemplify the harmony which he mentions" in the lines "Fountains! and ye that warble, as ye flow, / Melodious Murmurs! warbling tune his Praise";[38] and yet, in the same essay, he can question the very basis of this observation by remarking that “[i]t is scarcely to be doubted, that on many occasions we make the musick which we imagine ourselves to hear; that we modulate the poem by our own disposition, and ascribe to the numbers the effects of the sense.”[39] The perception of metrical beauties, Johnson begins to suspect, may not be a uniform perception at all, but rather an unwitting solipsism, as when he warns that "[e]very reader has innumerable Passages, in which he, and perhaps he alone, discovers such Resemblances."[40]

This suspicion – that the music of verse may be nothing more than a deception that the mind visits on itself – would continue to haunt Johnson's criticism. Undoubtedly, such a suspicion was in part rooted in his disabilities, for Johnson could not help but distrust his own ear. Hester Lynch Piozzi remarks that Johnson's scrofula did "irreparable damage to the auricular organs, which never could perform their functions since I knew him."[41] It is common to find notes in Johnson's various diaries attesting to his sensory deprivation ("At night we went to a comedy. I neither saw nor heard");[42] and despite his tendency as a critic to refer to and evaluate the "musick" of verse, Johnson was compelled to admit to Boswell "that he was very insensible to the power of musick."[43]

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[37] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4:142-3.

[38] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4:137; he quotes, with some cosmetic changes, from Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5.195-6.

[39] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4.136.

[40] Johnson, *Rambler* 92 in *Works*, 4:122.

These experiences color Johnson's understanding of the perceptions elicited by poetic measure, and, in particular, those elicited by blank verse. Whereas most eighteenth-century readers praise Milton's ability to unite sound and sense to sublime effect, Johnson persistently associates blank verse with notions of disunity and aural incoherence. In the *Rambler* series, he worries about the tendency of blank verse to break apart into units unrecognizable to the listener as lines. Belaboring the issue of Milton's enjambment, Johnson judges that "the single parts… into which [his verse] was to be sometimes broken by pauses, were in danger of losing the very form of verse."[44] Nearly three decades later, while composing the *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), Johnson would elaborate this judgment into a general critique and argue that the measures of blank verse are all but imperceptible to the listener's senses. "Blank verse, left merely to its numbers, has little operation either on the ear or mind," he writes; "[t]he musick of the English heroick line strikes the ear so faintly that it is easily lost, unless all the syllables of every line co-operate together," and "this co-operation can be only obtained by the preservation of every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds."[45] Far from locating in Milton's *Paradise Lost* an alignment of metrical and semantic significance, Johnson instead seems to discover a problem case, one that raises fundamental questions about the mind's ability to perceive and construe measure in the first place. It is not simply that Johnson dislikes blank verse or that he disapproves of Milton – each of these dispositions is undeniably true – but that he distrusts the seemingly unquestioned critical assumption that mind and measure are necessarily fit for one another.

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[41] Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, 2 vols., ed. George Birbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897), 1:152.

[42] Boswell, *Life*, 650-51.

[43] Boswell, *Life*, 874.

[44] Johnson, *Rambler* 90 in *Works*, 4:111.

As a critic, Johnson goes out of his way to inculcate this same distrust in others by finding ways to make readers and listeners doubt the reliability of their own perceptions. For instance, contending that blank verse produces "such a cloud of words sometimes, that the sense can hardly peep through," Johnson would cite as evidence an experiment that he performed on his unwitting friend Robert Shiels: "I took down Thomson, and read aloud a large portion of him, and then asked, —Is not this fine? Shiels having expressed the highest admiration. Well, Sir, (said I,) I have omitted every other line."[46] Yet this strategy also plays a part in Johnson's more serious criticism. In his life of "Pope" (1781), he lays a similar trap for his readers amid a discussion of meter's ability to convey a sense of motion:

> Motion… may be in some sort exemplified; and yet it may be suspected that even in such resemblances the mind often governs the ear, and the sounds are estimated by their meaning. One of the most successful attempts has been to describe the labour of Sisyphus:
>
> With many a weary step, and many a groan,
> Up a high hill he heaves a huge round stone;
> The huge round stone, resulting with a bound,
> Thunders impetuous down, and smoaks along the ground.
>
> Who does not perceive the stone to move slowly upward, and roll violently back? But set the same numbers to another sense;

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[45] Johnson, "Roscommon," *Lives*, 2:22; "Milton," *Lives*, 1:294.

[46] Boswell, *Life*, 743.

> While many a merry tale, and many a song,
> Chear'd the rough road, we wish'd the rough road long,
> The rough road then, returning in a round,
> Mock'd our impatient steps, for all was fairy ground.
>
> We have now surely lost much of the delay, and much of the rapidity.[47]

There is as much "fairy ground" in the demonstration itself as in Johnson's burlesque of Pope's lines. As he did with Sheils, Johnson invites the reader to admit experiencing certain perceptions, only then to reveal these to be misperceptions orchestrated through critical conjuration. *Who does not perceive…?* asks Johnson, putting his thumb squarely on the scale, daring the reader to trust what she feels, what both he and the text seem to insist. Johnson's distrust of both his and his readers' perceptions of measure presents a stark contrast to the alacrity with which he once embraced prosody as a critical method. Although the Lauder affair led Johnson to retreat from his and Lauder's antiquarianism to the seeming more stable ground of merely reading Milton for his formal beauties, the stability of this new critical position would prove illusory. Whereas, previously, the possibility of error had seemed confined to falsified sources and duplicitous critics, it was now shown to reside in the reader himself, who unknowingly fashions the very music he purports to measure and judge. Measure, once a method, had become a fundamental problem.

This sense of prosody as, at once, method-and-problem comes to underwrite Johnson's consideration in the *Rambler* series of criticism itself. The issue of prosody – which at first glance seems a concern for grammarians rather than critics – recurs, for Johnson, at the highest level of critical consideration, a level to which these essays on Milton's numbers seem somehow to lead him. On one hand Johnson can positively assert that "[i]t is… the task of criticism to establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge," and "to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, from the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy"; and yet, in the same essay, Johnson can distinguish these "means of pleasing" only negatively, by way of the inexplicable and the irrational. "[T]he idea of beauty" is "different in different minds, and diversified by time or place," he admits; "[i]t is, indeed, so little subject to the examinations of reason, that Paschal supposes it to end where demonstration begins, and maintains that without incongruity and absurdity we cannot speak of 'geometrical beauty.'"[48]

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[47] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:70. The original passage is from Pope [, Fenton, and Broome], Odyssey *of Homer*, 11.735-38.

These general doubts about the possibility of literary critical argument closely echo the specific doubts raised by Johnson's attempt to make claims for particular sequences of syllables and sounds. General and metrical beauties alike disdain the very methods that seek to name them. In the *Rambler* entry immediately following the sequence on Milton, Johnson concludes that

> [t]he beauties of writing have been observed to be often such as cannot in the present state of human knowledge be evinced by evidence, or drawn out into demonstrations; they are therefore wholly subject to the imagination, and do not force their effects upon a mind preoccupied by unfavourable sentiments, or overcome the counteraction of a false principle or of stubborn partiality.[49]

For Johnson, prosody discloses only a more acute version of the problem already facing the critic, for it discloses problems associated with the reading process itself: unverifiable assumptions about whether and how literary effects work on the mind, and whether and how these effects can be taken to be generalizable. In this respect, the problem of prosody cuts to the heart of Johnson's program as a critic – which is to say his program as a moralist – for it alienates the matter of reading from its putative moral effect. This sense of alienation is pronounced in the final of the *Rambler* essays. There Johnson chooses to conclude five weeks of prosodic consideration by suggesting that such a form of consideration radically undermines the moral project of both the poet and the critic:

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[48] Johnson, *Rambler* 92 in *Works*, 4:121-2.

[49] Johnson, *Rambler* 93 in *Works*, 4:130.

> Milton… seems only to have regarded this species of embellishment so far as not to reject it when it came unsought…. He had, indeed, a greater and a nobler work to perform; a single sentiment of moral or religious truth, a single Image of life or nature, would have been cheaply lost for a thousand echoes of the cadence to the sense; and he who had undertaken to "vindicate the Ways of God to man," might have been accused of neglecting his cause, had he lavished much of his attention upon syllables and sounds.[50]

What began as "a solemn deliberation upon accents and pauses" closes by characterizing such deliberation as neglectful and morally obtuse.[51] Although Paul Fussell terms Johnson "the most perceptive moralist of prosody in the eighteenth century, and probably of all modern times," this characterization overlooks the fact that Johnson here construes these two modes of critical thought – the moral and the prosodic – to be essentially at odds with one another.[52] To attend to syllables and sounds, Johnson insists, is to neglect the moral purpose of literature entirely: to scan is to search in the wrong place for the wrong thing. What began as an attempt, on Johnson's part, simply to *read* Milton without the baggage of history and authority has led him, insensibly, into the opposite of reading as Johnson understands it – into a process that not only appears unintuitive, but throws into doubt the presumed moral function of reading.

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[50] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4:142-3.

[51] Johnson, *Rambler* 88 in *Works*, 4:99.

[52] Fussell, *Theory of Prosody*, 43.

§ Prosody and the Physiologist Grammarians

If the topic of prosody is such that it seems to embroil Johnson in acute methodological difficulties that extend to broader questions about the possibility of reading and the function of criticism, it is so not only for him but for a much broader circle of eighteenth-century critics and theorists of language. Johnson's brief remarks in the grammar appended to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) offer a glimpse of the methodologies marshaled in Johnson's time to address the problem of prosody. He prefaces his discussion of the sound of language with a revealing reflection on critical method that borders on a *via negativa*:

> In treating on [*sic*] the letters, I shall not, like some other grammarians, enquire into the original of their form, as an antiquarian; nor into their formation and prolation by the organs of speech, as a mechanick, anatomist, or physiologist; nor into the properties and gradation of sounds, or the elegance or harshness of particular combinations, as a writer of universal and transcendental grammar. I consider the English alphabet only as it is English; and even in this narrow disquisition, I follow the example of former grammarians, perhaps with more reverence than judgment, because by writing in English I suppose my reader already acquainted with the English language, and consequently able to pronounce the letters, of which I teach the pronunciation; and because of sounds in general it may be observed, that words are unable to describe them. An account therefore of the primitive and simple letters is useless almost alike to those who know their sound, and those who know it not.[53]

As in the *Rambler* essays on Milton's prosody, Johnson's consideration of "mere" sound is not naïve but deeply self-reflexive. He frames his reading of that most elemental of texts, the English alphabet, in stark contrast to various modes of reading – the "antiquarian," the "physiologist," the "transcendental" – that he could, but refuses to, employ. The whole sweep of the *Rambler* series on Milton's verse, which moves from the stability of Lockean empiricism to profound methodological doubt, finds re-capitulation here in the brief compass of a few sentences. Although Johnson assigns himself what seems the "narrow[est]," most intuitive of tasks – to

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[53] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London: Printed by W. Strahan for J. and P. Knapton, 1755), 1:sig. L^{r}.

"consider the English alphabet only as it is English" – he concedes almost immediately that this task is, at once, redundant and impossible.

This paradox is key. It clarifies the nature of prosody's status as a critical problem for Johnson, throwing into sharper relief what in the *Rambler* essays is a palpable but still murky sense of unease. The problem of prosody, as here crystallized by Johnson, is that it involves contradictory critical acts. On the one hand, to write of sounds and syllables is merely to make explicit what is implicit in the very act of reading. In this light, the parsing of prose and the scansion of verse cannot disclose anything that was not already previously known (if only implicitly), and thus cannot properly be considered an act of interpretation or exegesis. On the other hand, to write of sounds and syllables is to beg the question, for this critical act presumes the same mechanics it sets out to establish. In this light, parsing and scansion un-reflexively re-iterate what was already in doubt to begin with and advance no further in resolving this initial problem. When Johnson declares phonetic analysis as "useless almost alike" to those who know the language and those who do not, he construes this activity as a unique and paradoxical link between critical blindness and insight.

This view emerges, for Johnson, as a response to a particular critical context. That is to say, the basis of prosody's status as an intellectual problem that transcends the sphere of poetics (rather than a method peculiar to grammarians and critics of poetry) is illuminated by its recurrence as a crux in Enlightenment sciences of language. The word "science" must be plural here, for the works that fall under this category can seem to exhibit a wide array of motivations and methodologies. Some of these works, as in the case of Joshua Steele's *Prosodia Rationalis*, anticipate the modern discipline of linguistics; others, such as Charles de Brosses's *Traité de la Formation Méchanique des Langues, et des Principes Physique de l'Étymologie* (1765) are grounded in theories of physiology; yet others, such as Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) and Daniel Webb's *Observations on the Correspondence Between Poetry and Music* (1769) would now be read as contributions to the fields of epistemology and conjectural history. However, despite their apparent dissimilarities, these works were understood to be contributions to a coherent discourse, both by the authors themselves, who explicitly cited and argued with one another, as well as by their readers. At bottom, these writers aimed to eschew classical linguistic theory and instead conceive of language by recourse to material, often physiological phenomena. Yet, to the extent that these sciences of language recur to the narrow issue of prosody, they variously find in it a stumbling block of far-reaching consequence. In particular, in the writings of the authors that Johnson refers to as the "physiologist" grammarians, the notionally trivial issue of poetic measure is routinely swept aside only to re-appear as a foundation of reading and a site of acute critical difficulty. Despite their attempts to replace the jargon of traditional language theory with tangible evidence of the embodied logic of language, these works often reveal a preoccupation with rendering literal and bodily the very terms of prosodic criticism that they wish to dispel.

The peculiar terminology of prosody – for instance, "feet" such as "trochees" and "dactyls," the notion of "caesura," the act of "scansion" – can seem rebarbative to modern readers; but to the eighteenth-century reader with knowledge of Latin and Greek, these terms were self-reflexively figurative. That is to say, to write about prosody using these terms was to be compelled constantly to invoke the phrase "as it were." Thomas Sheridan reminds his readers that "[t]hey are called feet, because it is by their aid that the voice as it were steps along through the verse in a measured pace";[54] the caesura or "cutting" leaves "a Syllable remaining at the End of a Foot, and seeming as it were detach'd from it, to begin the following";[55] in the act of scansion (from the Latin *scandere* or "climb"), "by examining the feet, or syllables, on the fingers, we thereby *climb* as it were, and *ascend* to the true construction, or composition of that verse."[56] In the eighteenth century, as in our own, profound claims were made on behalf of the importance of a classical education. But regardless of whether or not this education happened to instill a native fluency with, and appreciation for, classical poetry – and one suspects that Latinists as accomplished as Milton and Johnson were few and far between – perhaps its more basic and more lasting accomplishment was to afford a sense of how the traditional language of poetic theory is itself forthrightly and insurmountably figurative, often associated with the parts of the body and its movements.

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[54] Sheridan, *Lectures*, 2:34-35.

It is to these same parts and movements that the physiologist grammarians recur not as figures but as the literal origins of linguistic form. Condillac imagines that primitive humans first spoke to one another by means of gestures, and that accent – the raising or lowering of pitch – originated in these movements: "In order then to supply the place of the violent contortions of the body, the voice was raised and depressed by very sensible intervals."[57] In a similar fashion, Steele locates the raising and lowering of pitch not in the primitive past but in the perennial rhythms of the human body:

> Our breathing, the beating of our pulse, and our movement in walking, make the division of time by pointed and regular *cadences*, similar and natural to us. Each of these movements, or *cadences*, is divided into two alternate motions, significantly expressed by

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[55] Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 2 vols. (London: J. and J. Knapton, 1728), s.v. "cesure."

[56] George William Lemon, *English Etymology; or, a Derivative Dictionary of the English Language* (London: G. Robinson, 1783), s.v. "scansion."

[57] Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London: J. Nourse, 1756), 179-80.

> the Greek words *arsis* and *thesis*, *raising* and *posing*, or setting down; the latter of which, coming down as it were with weight, is what we mean to call *heavy*, being the most energetic or emphatic of the two; the other, being more remiss, and with less emphasis, we call *light*.[58]

Here the "as it were" acknowledging the use of figurative language is pointedly deferred. It is not that the raising-and-falling of accent is *like* the rhythms of breathing and walking. These are, for Steele, one and the same phenomenon: the motions expressed by the terms *arsis* and *thesis* seem to him to be inscribed in those cadences of the body that are "similar and natural to us." His acknowledgment of figurative language is limited only to the use of "heavy" and "light" as terms of weight applied to the phenomena of movement. The acknowledgment of this figure of speech masks the more basic figure of speech on which it rests, namely the analogy between poetic "feet" and the act of walking, which Steele takes to be not merely a matter of analogy but *identity*: "So when we lift our foot, in order to walk, that motion is *arsis*, or *light*; and when we put it on the ground, in order to proceed, that act of posing is *thesis*, or *heavy*."[59] Steele here literalizes the time-worn figure of the poetic "foot," stripping it of its metaphoric character and construing the cadence of stepping and the cadence of speaking as effects of the same physical instinct.

To the physiologist grammarian, instinct is key: "Our animal existence being regulated by our pulse, we seem to have an instinctive sense of *rhythmus*, as connected with, and governing, all sounds and all motions; whence it follows, that we find all people feel the effects of *rhythmus*, as they do those of light and warmth derived from the Sun."[60] Not only does the instinctual view of language render language an effect of the body, but it provides a rationale for the study of language as something natural or universal – which is to say, as something *other* than language, a material rather than a figurative reality. The physiologist grammarians' recurrence to the topoi of instinct is designed to replace the arbitrary, often figurative terminology of classical linguistics with a lived theory of language, and thus, by extension, to subordinate the classical tradition's parochial concerns with the mechanics of poetry to a broader science of discourse itself; and yet this recurrence to instinct serves, rather, to re-inscribe these prosodic concerns and their exemplary figures at the level of the body thereby eliding the issue of representation altogether:

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[58] Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, 20.

[59] Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, 20.

[60] Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, 67.

> The swing of the arm, and other such motions, made by public speakers, are derived from their instinctive sense of *rhythmus*, and are, in effect, beating time to their orations. Also cursing, swearing, and many other unmeaning words, so frequently interwoven in common discourse, are merely expletives to fill the measure, and to round each rhythmical period.[61]

As gesturing, cursing, hemming and stuttering are seen to disclose a fundamentally rhythmic scheme, this conception allows the consideration of bodily rhythm to replace the consideration of language itself as the object of critical inquiry.

De Brosses's *Traité de la Formation Méchanique des Langues* exemplifies the theoretical assumptions of the physiologist grammarians, for it implicitly seeks to elide the question of representation altogether, thereby obviating the critical problem that prosody renders acute.[62] De Brosses's materialist theory of language pursues this end by means of a circular chain of analogies between sound and form. Conjecturing on the formation of language, de Brosses holds that the vocal organs naturally mimic the form of the object they seek to name; in so doing, they produce a sound that is not arbitrary but rather a function of this unique shape; and, as a result, this sound is presumed to be analogous to the object itself – it is the very sound the object would make if only it could speak. The author characterizes this as "a real relationship between words, things, and ideas," not a matter of association and representation but of instinct and physical necessity.[63]

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[61] Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis*, 67.

[62] For a discussion of de Brosses, see Gérard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thaïs E. Morgan (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995), chapter 6. Parts of de Brosses's treatise were circulating as early as 1751 and aspects of his theory appeared in the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné*; see J C. Bryce, ed., *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* by Adam Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 26.

De Brosses, of course, is by no means the first to advance a thesis of this sort – notions of "natural" speech have a long intellectual history stretching back to Plato's *Cratylus* and play a vital role in seventeenth-century debates in England about universal and Adamic languages.[64] Yet de Brosses's iteration of this argument, embedded as it is in the language of Enlightenment materialism, is unconcerned with the utopian or theological considerations of seventeenth-century precursors such as Wilkins and Leibniz. Instead, its focus on "natural" language is pointedly concerned with the status of the mind – or, rather, the mind's *isolation* – vis-à-vis language:

> [L]es germes de la parole, ou les inflexions de la voix humaine, d'où sont éclos tous les mots des langages, sont des effets physiques, & nécessaires, résultans absolument, tels qu'ils sont, de la construction de l'organe vocal; & du méchanisme de l'instrument, indépendamment du pouvoir & du choix de l'intelligence qui le met en jeu.
>
> [The elements of speech, or the inflections of the human voice, from which spring forth all the words of languages, are physical and necessary effects, resulting absolutely from the structure of the vocal organ and the mechanism of its instrument, and independently of the capacity and intention of the mind that sets it in motion.][65]

De Brosses takes the intellect entirely out of the equation when it comes to the sound-structure of language: notions of authorial intention and capability ("pouvoir"), of choices made in anticipation of a reader or listener ("choix"), are negated by the supposition of a physiological necessity underlying the relationship between words and ideas, ideas and things. Although couched in a conjectural history of language formation and thus projected into the misty past, such a theory – like its seventeenth-century precursors – likewise idealizes a linguistic present. In de Brosses's case, it idealizes, at the level of prosody, a language without *reflection*, a mechanism that works independently of the intentions and decisions of speakers and listeners. This is to idealize, in other words, a denial of the very existence of poetics and hermeneutics at the most elemental level of discourse. By this logic, the sonic texture of language is not subject to artifice nor requires interpretation – it simply *is*.

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[63] "… un rapport réel entre les termes, les choses & les idées." Charles de Brosses, *Traité de la Formation Méchanique des Langues, et des Principes Physique de l'Étymologie*, 2 vols. (Paris: Saillant, 1765), 1:vi.

[64] For a thorough discussion of this topic, see Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982), particularly Aarsleff's "Introduction."

[65] de Brosses, *Traité*, 1:xi.

Ultimately, the recurrent attempt on the part of these grammarians to account for prosody on purely physiological or material grounds serves to elide the problem of theorizing literary form and language which prosody acutely raises. Their choice of prosodic terminology highlights this fact. Insofar as "measure" – associated as it is with notions of abstraction and evaluation – stands as a figure for reflection, it cannot enter into de Brosses's scheme; instead, as with Condillac and Steele, the theoretical problem of prosody is subsumed beneath, and ultimately elided by, the terms "rhythm" or "accent," which are taken to be necessary functions of physiology and sensation and thus entirely explicable according to a materialist logic.[66] For de Brosses, the elemental matter of verse – the poet's patterning of accent – is reducible to the proportions of his or her vocal organs, or "according to whether the diameter of the throat is greater or less, just as any musical instrument will sound low or high depending on whether the cavity is more or less large."[67] It follows that "la poësie" is primarily to be understood not as a peculiar mental operation or species of language but rather, simply, as a kind of sound that relies heavily on a "nasal voice" ("voix nazale").[68]

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[66] de Brosses, *Traité*, 1:277-8.

[67] "… selon que le diametre du tuyau est plus grand ou moindre; ainsi que tout instrument musical est grave ou aigu, selon que son coffre est plus moins gros" [*sic*]; de Brosses, *Traité*, 1:135-6.

What is bypassed here, in a version of prosody pared down to its physiological elements, is the fact of language itself, which is disarticulated into a set of analogous physical experiences in corresponding bodies – which is to say, into something essentially inarticulate and a-linguistic. This view finds aesthetic expression in England in Daniel Webb's *Observations on the Correspondence Between Poetry and Music* (1769), which, like de Brosses's *Traité*, conceives of poetry in wholly material terms, as a function of the physical parameters of the "human machine."[69] Once again, prosody is construed not as a structure of language, but as a by-product of physical contortion, as when "the organs of speech seem to undergo the very operation specified" by words such as "grind, screw, lisp, yawn";[70] once again, the metaphorical "movements" of music and verse are literalized and projected onto the body, as when the effect of hearing or reading "excites certain vibrations in the nerves, and impresses certain movement on the animal spirits."[71] The ultimate effect, here and throughout the work of the physiologist grammarians, is to subsume language – and, in particular, the problem of reading for which prosody stands – beneath a kind of mute tautology. When Webb declares that "verse is motion, and verse produceth pleasure, which is likewise motion," he essentially offers up a version of

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[68] de Brosses, *Traité*, 1:159.

[69] Webb, Observations, 5. Webb's embrace of the physiological thesis is explicit: "I see no reason why we should hesitate to embrace an hypothesis, which discovers the origin of the representative in the nature of the thing represented; and, by giving meaning to sound, and expression to motion, deduces the invention of language, in its first spring, from a simple and almost mechanical exertion of our faculties;" see Webb, *Observations*, 70-71.

[70] Webb, *Observations*, 65.

[71] Webb, *Observations*, 6.

Newton's second law – motion begets motion – in place of both poetics and hermeneutics.[72] Poetry, in this view, is what manages to beget or repeat itself without reflection on its status as language.

Webb's attempt to substantiate this theory of poetry offers him a glimpse not only of its impossibility, but also of the critical necessity of this impossibility. In the manner of many a theorist before him, Webb sets out to sketch a sentimental schema – a precise catalogue of the measures, rhythms, or sounds that are taken as verbal icons for, and presumed to cause, particular emotional states. The possibility of such a schema is an implicit assumption of the physiologist grammarians, for whom the correspondence between emotional states and vocal sounds is taken to be observable and describable. And yet Webb's consideration of literary form along these lines proliferates into distinctions and qualifications – for "[i]f grief should spring from a consciousness of guilt" then it demands one manner of description, but "if attended with innocence" then it demands another one entirely – until this critical process brings about a moment of insight that at once undermines Webb's treatise and lays bare the unrealizable goal to which it tends:

> In order to treat of the passions with precision, we should determine their several modes, and fix an unalienable sign on each particular feeling. To this end we should have a perfect intelligence of our own natures, and a consummate knowledge of every thing by which we can be affected: in short, we should have conceptions in all points adequate to their objects. Such knowledge would be intuitive. We should, in this case, want no comparisons of our ideas and sentiments; no illustration of one thing by its resemblance to another: thus every proposition would be reduced to a simple affirmation, the operations of the understanding would cease, and the beauties of the imagination could have no existence. Providence has judged better for us, and by limiting our powers has multiplied our enjoyments.[73]

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[72] Webb, *Observations*, 12.

[73] Webb, *Observations*, 35-6.

In the practical attempt to assign necessary and intuitive signs to feelings, to unite *res* and *verba*, Webb – like the universal language theorists of the previous century – is brought up short by the impossibly "consummate knowledge" of objects and conceptions that such a scheme would require. However, this, in and of itself, is not Webb's insight. Not only does Webb discern the scheme to be impossible but he realizes that its very possibility would eradicate the "beauties" of poetry and the function of criticism. That is, one could not experience the peculiar effects of versification if versification *actually* united sound and sense; instead, it is the impossibility of this union and the proliferation and imprecision of critical terms to which this impossibility gives rise that makes the critical act possible in the first place. Paradoxically, Webb's (and the physiologist grammarians') quest for a poetics of intuition, when put into critical practice, leads to the realization that the non-intuition of the relationship between sound and sense is the condition of criticism. To the extent that it always poses the question of this relationship, reading elaborates what is fundamentally a prosodic problem.

The preoccupations of the physiologist grammarians may seem far-fetched, yet the logic of their sentimental schema lurks beneath more popular accounts of versification's articulacy. When Samuel Say opines in his own book of verse that "the First Simple Feet, or Primary Movements of the Voice, are exceeding Few: And yet in the Use of those Few, properly Mixt and Exchang'd with each other, all the Various Passions of the Human Soul, and all the Endless Variety of Ideas that pass thro' it, may be sufficiently and strongly express'd," he ascribes to poetic numbers both a materialist logic and a mensurative function: prosodic elements are literally elemental, a set of determinate and quantifiable building-blocks capable of fixing and expressing – over and above language's referentiality – the "Endless Variety" of physical and mental experience.[74] There is little daylight between this casual statement by a practicing poet and de Brosses's notionally scientific conclusion that "the language of accents is more general, expressive, and intelligible than that of words."[75] Both alike conceive of prosody as an entirely sufficient "language" in and of itself, as a language more articulate, more comprehensive and comprehensible, than a language "of words," which is to say than *language* per se. Such claims on behalf of prosody's expressive potential cast prosody as an alternative to language, and in so doing imagine a species of criticism or science that could measure and account for the effects of language in terms other than words.

Johnson's deep skepticism concerning representative versification, far from an idiosyncratic critical view, responds directly to these sorts of claims. Whereas writers such as Say, Webb, and de Brosses find in poetic measure a form of language more articulate than language itself, Johnson discerns instead a limited range of notes: "The same flow of joyous versification will celebrate the jollity of marriage, and the exultation of triumph; and the same languor of melody will suit the complaints of an absent lover, as of a conquered king."[76] For Johnson, the mensurative and expressive capabilities of prosody are far cruder than many of his fellow critics would like to admit. On the topic of sentimental schema, he argues that

> poetical measure have not in any language been so far refined, as to provide for the subdivision of passion. They can only be adapted to general purposes, but the particular and minuter propriety must be sought only in the sentiment and language. Thus the numbers are the same in *Colin's Complaint*, and in the ballad of *Darby* and *Joan*, though in one sadness is represented, and in the other only tranquillity; so the measure is the same of *Pope's Unfortunate Lady* and the *Praise of Voiture*.[77]

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[74] Say, *Poems*, 104.

[75] "Le language des accens est général, expressif, intelligible encore plus que celui des mots"; de Brosses, *Traité*, 1:278.

[76] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4:136.

[77] Johnson, *Literary Magazine* 1, no. 1 (April 1756), 36.

For Johnson, prosodic analysis cannot represent an escape from, or alternative to, the consideration of language itself since the inarticulacy of prosody is of a piece with the complexities and caprice of language: "The adumbration of particular and distinct images by an exact and perceptible resemblance of sound, is sometimes studied, and sometimes casual…. [Onomatopoeic words] give to a verse the proper similitude of sound without much labour of the writer, and such happiness is therefore to be attributed rather to fortune than skill."[78] Whereas the physiologist grammarians take the presumed resemblance between sound and sense to be a principle of linguistic order and a sign of poetic agency, Johnson, as in the *Rambler* entries on this topic, associates it primarily with an error of reading and criticism. Namely, he locates in this critical habit an over-eagerness to assign articulacy and intuitability – i.e. a human voice – to factors and functions of language that are capricious, non-intuitive, and mute as far as the human intellect is concerned. Johnson's forbearance to locate in poetic measures icons of the human passions is not simply a matter of a dull ear and an unromantic disposition. Rather, in the context of writers such as Say, Webb, and de Brosses, this forbearance represents a pointed refusal to sublimate issues of language into non-linguistic realms of experience.

§ Critical Rhetoric and Prosody in *The Idler*

Reflecting on the state of prosodic criticism, Johnson remarks that

> [i]t is very difficult to write on the minuter parts of literature [i.e. prosody] without failing either to please or instruct. Too much nicety of detail disgusts the greatest part of readers, and to throw a multitude of particulars under general heads, and lay down rules of extensive comprehension, is to common understandings of little use. They who undertake these subjects are therefore always in danger, as one or other inconvenience arises to their imagination, of frighting us with rugged science, or amusing us with empty sound.[79]

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[78] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4:138.

[79] Johnson, *Rambler* 90 in *Works*, 4:109-10.

For Johnson and his contemporaries, criticism is conceived to be not only an instrument of analysis, but a source of readerly pleasure in its own right; it, too, whether prose or verse, should fulfill the Horatian maxim to please and instruct (*delectare et prodesse*). For Johnson, however, the prospect of writing *prosodic* criticism seems to drive a wedge between these two aims. Doggedly to pursue careful distinctions of accent, quantity, and pitch is to involve oneself in a "rugged science" whose rebarbative terms and obtuse preoccupations seem alien to the lived experience and pleasure of reading. On the other hand, simply to generalize pleasantly about the nature of verse is never to rise to the interpretive responsibilities of the critic. Prosodic analysis thus raises for Johnson the possibility that the theorization of literary form at its most elemental level exposes a rift between instruction and pleasure, between criticism and poetry, thereby sundering what the "literary" is nominally supposed to join.

The ruggedness of prosodic discourse leads Johnson to account for his citations of Milton in a striking manner. Not only are the passages of *Paradise Lost* interspersed throughout the *Rambler* essay intended to exemplify the literary effects under discussion, but they serve "to relieve the languors of attention" by alleviating "the irksomeness of grammatical disquisition."[80] By this logic, the relationship between text and commentary takes on a new hue. It is no longer simply a matter of explication (whereby the comment "unpacks" the verse) or justification (whereby the example supports the critical claim), but of *alternation* between modes of discourse that are radically unlike one another. The "sound" of the verse and the "science" of the prosodic analysis are taken to complement one another on a stylistic level. For Johnson, their apposition is intended to make up for, by presenting in the aggregate, the experience of the "literary" that prosodic analysis seems to *dis*aggregate.

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[80] Johnson, *Rambler* 90 in *Works*, 4:110.

In this respect, Johnson's pronounced trepidation about the "ruggedness" of prosodic criticism is as concerned with the style or sound of this criticism as it is with the mode of critical thought this style sustains. That is to say, the problem of the relationship between "sound" and "sense" is not, for Johnson, simply the limited object of prosodic analysis, something about which grammarians and poets may quibble disinterestedly. Instead, the problem extends to take in the writing of criticism itself. In the *Rambler*, Johnson's concern with this problem expresses itself through a preoccupation with the issue of technical jargon or cant: "Every art has its dialect, uncouth and ungrateful to all whom custom has not reconciled to its sound, and which therefore becomes ridiculous by a slight misapplication, or unnecessary repetition."[81] Johnson's preoccupation with this issue grew directly out of his contemporaneous work on the *Dictionary*, which forced him daily to consider the value of "terms of art" – to what extent they amplify the resources of a language, and to what extent they ought to be considered a "fugitive cant… unworthy of preservation."[82]

The problem of avoiding jargon is by no means a simple one for Johnson. It is not merely that the nice distinctions of a critic call for, and justify, the sparing use of "terms of art," such as those closely associated with prosodic analysis – for this would be to propose an easily navigable division between artful and natural language that Johnson nowhere maintains. Instead, Johnson discerns a continuum between sense and sound, between language and cant, that emerges from the act of composition itself:

> Every man speaks and writes with intent to be understood, and it can seldom happen but he that understands himself might convey his notions to another, if, content to be understood, he did not seek to be admired; but when once he begins to contrive how his sentiments may be received, not with most ease to his reader, but with most advantage to

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[81] Johnson, *Rambler* 173 in *Works*, 5:151.

[82] Johnson, Preface to the *Dictionary*, *Works*, 18:103.

> himself, he then transfers his consideration from words to sounds, from sentiments to periods, and as he grows more elegant becomes less intelligible.[83]

Although Johnson couches this observation in a reproof of self-indulgent authors, the process he describes is not a limited but a general one. For insofar as the act of writing always presumes the eventuality of reading – which is to say, criticism – it inherently involves self-reflection, regardless of the particular motive out of which this self-reflection arises. For Johnson, this self-reflection is of a particularly prosodic cast: to the extent that it transfers "consideration from words to sounds," it involves the author, nominally concerned with his or her own prose style, in a task essentially identical with that of the prosodist. In this respect, Johnson conceives the notionally belletristic issue of style to be continuous with that more elemental, seemingly obtuse problem with which the prosodist chooses to bedevil himself. The thorny, technical considerations that seem limited to the grammarian's treatment of poetic measure are, in fact, reduplicated at the broader level of polite, popular critical discourse. For Johnson, to write literary criticism is always to involve oneself in matters prosodic, whether knowingly or not.

This continuity is a central concern of Johnson's most memorable treatment of prosody and popular criticism, his satirical portrait of Dick Minim in *Idler* 60 and 61. In the annals of eighteenth-century writing on prosody (which runs the gamut from the most utilitarian of grammar-school books to the most baroque treatises of metrical theory), these *Idler* entries are the rare texts that deal with this topic by means of satire – only the famous demonstration of prosodic "echoing" in Pope's "Essay on Criticism" stands as a sort of precedent. The slight tonal resemblance between these two rather different texts is perhaps more meaningful than it at first seems – for whereas Pope is concerned with satirizing the faulty numbers of poetasters who fail to make good use of these prosodic tools, Johnson is more concerned with the critical assumptions and habits that sustain the notion of these tools as meaningful in the first place.

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[83] Johnson, *Idler* 36 in *Works*, 2:112-13.

These *Idler* entries offer a caustic satire of Dick Minim, a brewer's apprentice who assumes the port of a critic by mimicking critical cant: "he frequented the coffee-houses near the theatres, where he listened very diligently, day after day, to those who talked of language and sentiments, and unities and catastrophes, till, by slow degrees, he began to think that he understood something of the stage."[84] In this respect, the satirical thrust of these essays seems uncomplicated. Minim is a caricature of the coffeehouse critic who mouths clichés about poetry; the clichés he espouses are taken to be so tired or so transparently nonsensical that they all but condemn themselves. Johnson need only throw them into the fiction of Minim, and gesture at this character's ignorance, to complete the task of mocking critical poseurs while, at the same time, "mak[ing] it appear as if he were somehow outside the institution he mocks."[85] The coherence of this reading, however, relies on the elision of certain aspects of these essays that prove to be critically vital insofar as they render the satire of Minim insightfully *in*coherent.

The first of these aspects, which a number of scholars have sought to resolve, involves the fact that Minim is made to mouth critical precepts that Johnson elsewhere sincerely supports. Like Johnson, Minim criticizes the stanzas of Spenser; like Johnson, Minim "expresse[s] his commiseration of Dryden's poverty, and his indignation at the age which suffered him to write for bread." When Minim insists, in *Idler* 60, "that the chief business of art is to copy nature" or "that the great art is the art of blotting," he expresses the very same sort of "general principles" that Johnson defended a week earlier in *Idler* 59.[86] To explain this contradiction, it is suggested that the satire of Minim depicts a progression from critical truth into critical folly:

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[84] Johnson, *Idler* 60 in *Works*, 2:185-86.

[85] Jonathan Brody Kramnick, "The Making of the English Canon," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (1997): 1097.

> Minim is allowed to begin with the established doctrine of mimesis and various clichés from Horace, Dryden, and Pope, together with critical views which Johnson had himself enunciated elsewhere. From these generally accepted precepts of late Renaissance and neoclassical French criticism, Minim meanders into recent and more debatable constructs, and finally descends into nonsense.[87]

Yet such a reading, which explains Johnson's willingness to satirize precepts that he himself earnestly held, does not so much resolve the problem as give it a new turn. Namely, when and how is the reader supposed to mark the border between sense and nonsense as they shade imperceptibly from one into the next?

Such a reading assumes, at the very least, that Minim's final critical statements are so transparently nonsensical that even the least attentive reader will be forced, if only retroactively, to recognize the satirical progression. Yet this assumption is shaky at best. Johnson concludes *Idler* 60 with a memorable disquisition on representative versification in Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*. Minim, who "has read all our poets, with particular attention to this delicacy of versification" stands amazed that Butler's

> wonderful lines upon honour and a bubble have hitherto passed without notice.
> Honour is like the glassy bubble,
> Which costs philosophers such trouble;
> Where, one part crack'd, the whole does fly,
> And wits are crack'd to find out why.
> In these verses, says Minim, we have two striking accommodations of the sound to the sense. It is impossible to utter the first two lines emphatically without an act like that which they describe; "bubble" and "trouble" causing a momentary inflation of the cheeks by the retention of the breath, which is afterwards forcibly emitted, as in the practice of "blowing bubbles." But the greatest excellence is in the third line, which is "crack'd" in the middle to express a crack, and then shivers into monosyllables.[88]

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[86] Johnson, *Idler* 60 in *Works*, 2:186.

[87] Arthur H. Scouten, "Dr. Johnson and Imlac," *ECS* 6, no. 4 (1973): 507.

[88] Johnson, *Idler* 60 in *Works*, 2:189.

Strictly with regard to the propositional content of these remarks, there is nothing to mark them as transparently nonsensical to Johnson's readers. For instance, Minim's suggestion that the recitation of the first couplet compels the vocal organs to mimic the shape of a bubble does not exaggerate but instead merely echoes the writings of contemporary physiologist grammarians such as de Brosses. Additionally, the closing assertion – that the third line quite literally "cracks" and "shivers into monosyllables" – cannot be regarded as obviously self-condemning since it simply mimics without aping the critical rhetoric of Johnson's peers. In particular, it closely echoes Samuel Say's discussion of versification in Pope's *Iliad*:

> The brittle Steel, Unfaithful to his Hand,
> Brōke shōrt – thĕ Frāgmĕnts glíttĕr'd ŏn thĕ Sānd.
>
> And you hear it *break*, and see the Fragments *glitter*; while the *Evanescent* Sound of the *Pyrrichius*, in a proper Place, fixes the Imagination on the *Fragments*, the *Glittering*, and the *Sand*; and subserves the main Intention of the Poët.[89]

In this, moreover, Say merely echoes Pope's critical remarks on this passage in his translation of Homer[90] – critical commentary that Johnson elsewhere insists "ought not to pass without praise."[91] In the context of mid-century critical rhetoric, then, Minim's remarks, *in and of themselves*, are not risible, but instead hew closely to, and dramatize, critical principles of wide acceptance.

This is not to deny these essays' status as satire, but rather to shift the burden of the satirical effect away from the critical statements *per se* to the manner in which Johnson ventriloquizes them. This shift, however, is not trivial, for it further muddies the supposition of a clear dividing line between critical sense and nonsense. By placing perfectly acceptable critical views (some of which Johnson held) in the mouth of a shallow fool, Johnson suggests that critical claims do not stand or fall on their own merits, but must be judged with respect to the discursive and social context (here, the culture of the coffee house) in which they arise. In other words, Johnson associates the problem of assessing critical truth with an attitude of reflexivity about critical discourse itself.

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[89] Say, *Poems*, 160.

[90] Pope, *The* Iliad *of Homer*, 169.

[91] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:74.

Readings of Johnson's satire often blunt the critical significance of this. For instance, Johnson's satire of Minim can easily seem to admit a rather elitist reading in which Johnson is not interested in the critical views *per se* but only in who is allowed to express them. By this logic, his satire of Minim is primarily concerned with defending criticism as a scholarly pursuit restricted from mere plebeians such as Minim.[92] A corollary of this view, though less grounded in issues of class, likewise shifts the grounds of critical error from the veracity of Minim's individual precepts to his critical method (or lack thereof): "Johnson's satirical point about Dick Minim is not that his opinions are invariably wrong, but that he stands on unexamined positions, and lays down inherited certainties which he has never put to the test of experience."[93]

Yet these views, which suggest that Minim's folly is clearly inscribed for Johnson's readers in a methodological or social deficiency, overlook Johnson's unwillingness to name or correct this deficiency as his predecessors in this genre of satire had done. Johnson's satire of Dick Minim relies on, and departs from, a notable precedent in the essays of Joseph Addison, a precursor with whom Johnson's periodical writings were often explicitly and creatively in tension. In *Tatler* 165 (1710), Addison satirizes a critic named Sir Timothy Tittle, whose very name, indicative of a narrowness of critical understanding, is recalled by the appellation

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[92] Kramnick, "Making of the English Canon," 1096-97.

[93] M. H. Abrams, review of "*Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism*" by Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Kenyon Review* 16, no. 2 (1954): 309.

"Minim." Like Minim, Addison's Tittle traffics in clichés and vague generalities. He is deeply concerned with obeying the rules of neoclassical theatre as laid down by French critics, a pedantic pre-occupation to which Minim's talk of "unities and catastrophes" is a nod. There, however, the similarities largely end. A sharp difference in class – whereas Minim is a brewer's apprentice, Tittle is a pedant and a fop, allied with the university – is overshadowed by an ever sharper difference between the *structure* of these satirical pieces. Addison stages his essay as a dialogue, confronting his pedant with a young lady who possesses "that natural sense which makes her a better judge than a thousand critics." To each of Tittle's claims on behalf of neoclassical rules, she sketches a version of critical common sense whereby "pleasure" alone is her critical guide. The pedant finally departs the scene in defeat, and Addison's Bickerstaff takes the opportunity to remark on Tittle's narrowness and critical folly (as if this were not already explicit enough).[94] Johnson's *Idler* entries on Minim are markedly different. Whereas Addison's Bickerstaff explicitly ridicules Tittle and provides equal narrative space to a proxy to speak on behalf of critical common sense, Johnson pointedly refrains from establishing such a normative frame. He offers no counterpoint to the critical views of Minim, who is last seen reigning over the Coffee-House and the Pit, "feast[ing] upon his own beneficence."[95] If Minim's failing is due merely to his critical method or to his class, Johnson does little to point this out.

Walter Jackson Bate observes that while Johnson "seemed to possess all the positive equipment for satire… he was himself ultimately incapable of writing it": he "was unable merely to observe, but had to participate and share," with the result that we find in Johnson "anger, protest, even ridicule, always in the process of turning into something else." The resultant species of writing Bate describes as "satire manqué" or "satire foiled."[96] In the case of Minim, however, the satire is foiled only by Johnson's apparent reticence; he describes and greets Minim's critical success with silence rather than rebuke. This impression of reticence on Johnson's part colors scholarly readings of the Minim entries. It is taken for granted, ultimately, that the satire serves no positive critical function. It wryly mimics, but it does not refute, for it "neither contains nor suggests any points of critical doctrine that we cannot find elsewhere."[97]

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[94] Joseph Addison, *Tatler* 165 (Saturday, April 29, 1710) in *The Works of Joseph Addison*, 6 vols. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1903), 2:148-51. This episode borrows from Molière; see Katherine E. Wheatley, "Addison's Portrait of the Neo-Classical Critic," *RES* 1, no. 3 (1950): 245-7.

[95] Johnson, *Idler* 61 in *Works*, 2:193.

I wish to entertain the possibility, however, that Johnson's reticence itself may be interpreted as a critical judgment, one that arises as a direct response to the problem of prosodic meaning with which the Minim satires are so closely concerned. That is to say: if these entries do not seem to articulate recognizable critical doctrines of their own, it is because they (and Johnson) are preoccupied with the status of criticism itself – with what it hears, and with the moral consequences of the critical assumptions required to enable this hearing.

Minim stands apart from Addison's Sir Timothy Tittle, as well as from other satires of pedants such as the Scriblerians' Martinus Scriblerus, due to his fixation on things prosodic. He is, above all, "the great investigator of hidden beauties, and is particularly delighted when he finds 'the sound an echo to the sense.'"[98] That Johnson possesses little patience for the doctrine of representative versification is as clear here as it was in *The Rambler* (and as it will be in *The Lives of the Poets* where he will voice his skepticism once more); his argument remains consistent and thus needs no re-iteration. What *The Idler* essays illuminate, however, is not simply Johnson's disbelief concerning the desirability and possibility of this stylistic phenomenon, but – more importantly – his apprehension of the paradoxical assumptions, both critical and moral, required to sustain this stylistic desideratum.

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[96] Johnson, *Works*, 3:xxviii-xxix.

[97] George Saintsbury, *A History of English Criticism* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1911), 217. For Siebert, Minim's "canons of criticism" are clearly "part of a comic or satirical presentation" and thus void of meaning; see "The Reliability of Imlac," 350-51.

[98] Johnson, *Idler* 60 in *Works*, 2:188.

The stress falls on the phrase "hidden beauties," with which Johnson captures the paradox entailed by this readerly delight at finding echoes. A clearer glimpse of this paradox is visible in the writings of Say, whose prosodic remarks Johnson mimics by means of Minim. Explaining the function of such "hidden beauties," Say remarks that "[b]y this Method, the Poet says a Thousand Things, if you will allow the Expression, of which he says Nothing; or says 'em in a Stronger and more Emphatical manner."[99] Measure, by this logic, would seem to accomplish contradictory effects. Namely, it articulates prosodically what it cannot, or refuses to, articulate semantically – *and* it re-articulates prosodically what it has already articulated semantically. Far from acceding to the assumption that measure can simply alternate between these effects, Johnson detects in this a version of the same paradox he outlined in the *Dictionary*, which he here distills down to the collocation "hidden beauties." That is to say, if the sound is an echo to the sense, then one cannot rightly term this beauty "hidden" in the first place, for it merely and redundantly re-duplicates what is already apparent. An echo heard cannot rightly be called hidden. By contrast, if the beauty is truly "hidden" – if it "says a Thousand Things… of which [the poet] says Nothing" – this suggests that measure accomplishes at a non-verbal, symbolic register what the words themselves do not. The measure thus becomes, as it were, an echo without an origin, a reverberation without a source – that is to say, a logical impossibility.

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[99] Say, *Poems*, 162.

For Johnson, the Minim satires are not simply a matter of throwing cold water on a particular poetic theory run wild, since the theory discloses a more general problem related to the language of criticism (of which this paradox is an acute symptom). Johnson makes this paradoxical convergence of poetic redundancy and poetic impossibility explicit when he allows Minim to enlarge on such a hidden beauty in *Paradise Lost*. For Minim,

> when Milton bewails his blindness, the verse
>
> So thick a drop serene has quench'd these orbs,
>
> has, he knows not how, something that strikes him with an obscure sensation like that which he fancies would be felt from the sound of darkness.[100]

The effect of the verse is characterized, at once, as "occult" – it works obscurely, "he knows not how" – and redundantly demonstrative of the very state of blindness it describes. It discloses what it already apparent, and achieves what is impossible. For Johnson, the critical error on display here ultimately derives from a lack of self-consciousness regarding the figurative status of critical language. Readers such as Minim take what is referenced (e.g. the idea of blindness) for what is heard (e.g. the *sound* of blindness): "it may be suspected that in such resemblances the mind often governs the ear, and the sounds are estimated by their meaning."[101] A description of the matter of language is being confused with the effect of referentiality. As a result, the critical act of prosodic exegesis is achieved by means of a metaphor whose status as figurative language is promptly forgotten: "The fancied resemblances, I fear, arise sometimes merely from the ambiguity of words; there is supposed to be some relation between a *soft* line and *soft* couch, or between *hard* syllables and *hard* fortune."[102] Prosody, as a critical method, methodizes this oblivion: it is not a matter of local errors of reading in which one may go too far, but a problem inherent to exegesis itself. The modern, coffee-house criticism of Minim is no more defective in this regard than the ancient model of criticism practiced by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who "tells us, that the sound of Homer's verses sometimes exhibits the idea of corporeal bulk: is not this a discovery nearly approaching to that of the blind man, who, after long inquiry into the nature of the scarlet colour, found that it represented nothing so much as the clangor of a trumpet?"[103] In the *Idler* entries on Minim, Johnson's satire is less concerned with a particular type of critic or method of criticism than it is with the language of criticism itself, which perpetually seems to involve critical expression within the very literary phenomenon it ostensibly explains. The prosodic deliberations of Minim and Dionysius alike reveal the inherent continuity – rather than any natural distinction – between critical instruments and literary objects, insofar as their "rugged science" exemplifies the "sound" it purports to describe.

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[100] Johnson, *Idler* 61 in *Works*, 2:191-92.

[101] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:70.

[102] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:69-70.

Ultimately, to the extent that Johnson's writings on the topic of prosody constitute an awareness of this critical impasse, they are concerned with it not as an academic but as a moral problem, a problem undeniably rooted in language but finally enabled by the desires and choices of readers. Throughout Johnson's career, his caustic remarks on the topic of representative versification routinely subordinate the hidden beauties of oblivious figuration to consideration of the readers who find them: "This notion of representative metre, *and the desire of discovering frequent adaptations of the sound to the sense*, have produced, in my opinion, many wild conceits and imaginary beauties."[104] It is not onomatopoeia but rather the *desire* for onomatopoeia that ultimately concerns Johnson: the figure points always to the will of the reader. Thus it is that Johnson, recurring to this topic in the "Life of Pope," frames it above all as an issue of choice. The question is not whether representative versification *can* be sought, but the cost paid when it *is* sought: "Beauties of this kind are commonly fancied; and, when real, are technical and nugatory, not to be rejected, and not to be solicited."[105]

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[103] Johnson, *Rambler* 94 in *Works*, 4:139. Johnson's discussion of prosodic effects closely echoes Locke's discussion of simple ideas: "A studious blind man, who had mightily beat his head about visible objects, and made use of the explication of his books and friends, to understand those names of light and colours which often came in his way, bragged one day, That he now understood what scarlet signified. Upon which, his friend demanding what scarlet was? The blind man answered, It was like the sound of a trumpet. Just such an understanding of the name of any other simple idea will he have, who hopes to get it only from a definition, or other words made use of to explain it." See Locke, *Essay*, 425; 3.4.11

[104] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:69.

Their status as something neither to be rejected nor solicited – which is to say, their status as a literary phenomenon unworthy of a certain level of critical scrutiny – stems, for Johnson, from a consideration of the moral costs of the critical method required to observe these beauties. Scansion as reading is analytic rather than synthetic, and draws one into a realm of intellectual activity that Johnson, in the life of Cowley, famously associates with the metaphysical poets – a realm of thoughts unnatural and unjust, of thoughts discoverable only by "perverseness of industry."[106] What Johnson describes as a stylistic failure on the part of these poets – a perverse search for "occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" – also represents for him a moral failure in that it makes of these poets (and, by extension, their readers) "beholders [rather] than partakers of human nature."[107] Like the metaphysical conceit, the perverseness of prosodic industry that seeks occult resemblances between sound and sense is symptomatic of a moral abdication for Johnson. It takes verse as an aesthetic end rather than a moral means, thereby prompting poets and readers to assume the disinterested outlook of "Epicurean deities," "Beings looking upon good and evil, impassive and at leisure."[108] When Johnson turns to Cowley's attempts to cultivate a "scientific" (i.e. representative) versification, his criticism is less concerned with the notional echoes of sound to sense than with the intellectual and moral framework required to find these echoes in the first place: "Verse can imitate only sound and motion. A *boundless* verse, a *headlong* verse, and a verse of *brass* or of *strong brass*, seem to comprise very incongruous and unsociable ideas."[109] Subtending the notion of "scientific" versification – and, with it, a notion of reading as disinterested and observational – rests a mode of thought unaware of its own figurative logic, a mode of thought whose association of ideas Johnson construes not only in terms of logic ("incongruous") but in terms of society ("unsociable": "Not kind; not communicative of good; not suitable to society").[110]

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[105] Johnson, "Pope," *Lives*, 4:70.

[106] Johnson, "Cowley," *Lives*, 1:200.

[107] Johnson, "Cowley," *Lives*, 1:200-01.

[108] Johnson, "Cowley," *Lives*, 1:201.

These fundamental misgivings underline Johnson's defense in the life of "Milton" of traditional humanistic learning against the supposed superiority of natural philosophy:

> [T]he truth is, that the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind. Whether we provide for action or conversation, whether we wish to be useful or pleasing, the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong…. [W]e are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance.[111]

To privilege natural philosophy above moral knowledge is to indulge in the same error that Johnson ascribes to the metaphysical poets: "beholders" rather than "partakers," they subordinate "intercourse with intellectual nature" to "speculations upon matter."[112] Yet to read the lives of Cowley and Milton alongside one another is to see that Johnson – both in terms of the order of composition and publication – progresses to this moral and humanistic consideration from formal and prosodic ones.[113] The moral abdication Johnson associates with the privileging of natural philosophy merely elaborates something already latent in the reading of poetry itself – measure, or, more precisely, measure's inherent tendency to reify language as matter by means of a self-effacing logic of figuration. "Figures, criticisms, and refinements are the work of those whom idleness makes weary of themselves," Johnson warns.[114] To the extent that such consideration of measure, like speculation on natural philosophy, is "voluntary" rather than "necessary";[115] to the extent that it arises out of, and further facilitates, weariness with the self, leading imperceptibly away from the moral duty of self-consideration; it threatens, for Johnson, to make us perpetually geometricians rather than moralists, beholders of icons and allegories rather than readers per se. And yet, insofar as Johnson and his contemporaries take prosody to be a foundation of reading, this slippage from morality to measure cannot easily – or perhaps ever – be avoided, as it is inscribed into the reading process itself, forever drawing critics into the ambit of this mode of thought. In the end, far from presenting Johnson at his most tin-eared and doctrinaire, his deep skepticism about representative versification manifests a profound doubt about the moral and methodological underpinnings of literary critical judgment.

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[109] Johnson, "Cowley," *Lives*, 1:232-33.

[110] Johnson, *Dictionary* (1785), s.v. "Unsociable."

[111] Johnson, "Milton," *Lives*, 1:248-49.

[112] Johnson, "Milton," *Lives*, 1:249.

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[113] See Lonsdale's "Introduction" to Johnson, *Lives*, 1:26-28.

[114] Johnson, *Idler* 37 in *Works*, 2:116.

[115] Johnson, "Milton," *Lives*, 1:249.

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