

AGAINST FREE VERSE

THOMAS FLEMING

“A poet in our times”, wrote Thomas Love Peacock, “is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community.” What Peacock meant by civilized community is not too hard to guess: that rational, humane, progressive society of Britain and Northern Europe, which Peacock’s eccentric friends — Shelley, Coleridge, and Byron — all seemed bent on destroying. Poets were barbaric, because they continued to celebrate heroic violence and religious superstition in a society of steam locomotives and parliamentary commissions.

Of the barbarian qualities of verse, Peacock failed to mention the most characteristic — rhythm. There may be poetic traditions in which the regular alternation of strong and weak elements played no part, but Peacock and his Romantic friends knew nothing of them. (Since much lyric poetry is actually song, even if a text appears to lack formal rhythm, the song probably did not.) The quantitative rhythms of Greek and Latin (relying on the oscillation of long and short syllables) and the accentual rhythms of Germanic languages (including English), while they differ in so many respects that Nabokov thought it pointless to apply Greek terms like “iambic” to English verse, they still share this one essential quality: the predictable rise and fall of light and heavy, weak and strong that echoes the beat of our heart and the patterns of light and dark, cold and hot, life and death by which our existence is ordered.

All savages and barbarians love to sing and dance, including the savage children of our semicivilized race, and the Greeks did not clearly distinguish among the three rhythmic arts of verse, dance, and song. Next to Homeric epic, the greatest of ancient poetry was designed as song and dance routines: the odes of Pindar and the great lyric passages of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. When critics came to devise a language to describe poetic rhythm, the words themselves had to be derived from the terms used by dance-trainers and chorus masters. We still speak of feet as well as arsis and thesis, usually without any sense of the original connection.

In civilized Athens, the most popular literary form may have been the dithyramb, an ode in honor of Dionysius that was sung and danced by a chorus of 50 male citizens. What survives of the Theban poet Pindar’s dithyramb for the Athenians provides eloquent testimony to the powerful place that such poetry had in the life of the city. The extravagant and passionate language — the ancient critics called such a style “dithyrambic” — awakens echoes of earlier times when Greek religion bound its participants in the barbaric ceremonies of blood. Some of the effect may come out in a modern “imitation” of two dithyrambic fragments:

Pindar in Athens

Pindar called the gods down from Olympus
to sanctify his chorus in holy Athens —

Cultural Notes No. 31

ISSN 0267-677X ISBN 1 85637 175 1

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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This article was first published under the title “The Price of Free Verse”, in *Chronicles of Culture*, October 1987, and is reprinted with permission. *Chronicles* is an excellent conservative journal, with a strong emphasis on cultural issues. For further details: *Chronicles of Culture*, Rockford Institute, 934 North Main Street, Rockford, Illinois 61103, USA. Thomas Fleming is the Editor of *Chronicles* and author of *The Politics of Human Nature*.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

where the city’s heart was mobbed and fuming with incense —
and join them there in the marketplace. What
did the poet offer them? Crowns twisted from violets
and songs plucked from the Springtime as he went in a splendor
of music that comes only from Zeus, up to the god
sprouting ivy, the thunder mortals interpret as shouting
in our dazed blood: Dionysius; singing praises of the son
of the highest father and Cadmus’ daughter.

In those days the hills revealed themselves to be the prophet,
when the chamber of seasons dressed in scarlet opened
to let in the spring with its nectar-brimming flowers.
Then, yes then, on the undying earth they flung
tresses of lilacs, roses were braided in hair,
and an unearthly voice echoed to flutes as choirs made their way
to crown Semele,
her sorrows ended at last.

Pindar the hog
from the Boeotian outback glimpsed the gods
in the blinding light off the hills of Athens haloed
in violet, the fortress of Hellas against the East,
when the sons of Athenians laid the foundations of liberty
at Marathon, Salamis, and off Cape Artemisium,
remembered by their stepsons in the days of our freedom.

In English as much as in Greek, poetry is rhythmic speech. Good poetry is something more, but it is never anything less. All the other devices of verse — symbol and metaphor, plot and character, rhetorical argument, rhyme and alliteration — are available to writers of prose. (In the ancient world, rhyme in particular was typically a prose technique.) While good prose is often rhythmical, especially toward the end of a sentence, it can never display a regular rhythm without becoming poetry.

Simple people have always grasped the fundamental connection between rhythm and poetry. Popular songs, proverbs, prayers, and advertising jingles all tend to be cast in rhythmic form. (In modern languages, they also rhyme.) A trivial observation or the tritest of platitudes, when expressed in verse, assumes a power that is unrelated either to the thought or the expression. How else to explain the persistence of “a stitch in time saves nine” or the popularity of rapping?

DEFINING POETRY

On this point Aristotle made an uncharacteristic error. Disdaining the popular Greek attitude that identified poetry with rhythmical expression, the philosopher groped for more functional definitions that would describe the object (rather than the nature) of poetry and only succeeded in misleading countless generations of critics and scholars ever since. In their search for a metaphysical explanation, critics came to define poetry in such a way as to include only the most sublime and perfect examples by the same train of thought that leads us to regard intelligence as the only truly human attribute. Coleridge insisted that “poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre.” One might just as well say that computers are more human than half-wits. It is a serious mistake to define anything not by what it is but by what it can become. We leave out the essentials. To leave out any reference to rhythm in a definition of poetry is like omitting tone from a discussion of music. It is precisely because they ignore the most obvious and fundamental property of their subject that writers on poetics so readily fly off into “faery lands forlorn”.

The obvious advantage of such an approach is the opportunity for creativity it affords the critic. Most critics and literary critics could not write a passable schoolboy couplet, and yet they proceed to write grandly of technique or sound/sense echoes. Without ever baking a loaf or eating a slice of bread, they discourse with a gourmet’s affectation on the qualities of wheat and the effect of bricks in the oven. One unintended effect of this search for the genuinely poetic is that poetry has come to be linked with everything that would be unsavory in prose. The worst thing one can say about a novelist’s style is that it is “poetic”, by which we usually intend to mean a certain straining after effect, long-winded descriptions, and a flair for inappropriate metaphor. (Lawrence Durrell, Thomas

Wolfe, and John Updike are among the most “poetic” prose writers of the century.)

By sticking to the most prominent facts, a powerful theory of poetry might be constructed. An important first step in this direction was taken by Frederick Turner (himself an interesting poet) in collaboration with a neurophysiologist. In an article on rhythm in *Poetry* several years ago, Turner backed up his declaration that all poetry was rhythmical with evidence that the brain responds differently to rhythmical verse than it does to prose or (what amounts to the same thing) free verse.

Some of what is called “free verse” is actually not all that free. Eliot’s imitations of *vers libre* typically have the quality of blank verse that has been broken up rhetorically and declaimed by an actor, and there are passages in *The Four Quartets* that are quite regular. Eliot’s lead, in English at least, has been followed by a great many conservative poets, and it is impossible to say at this technique is entirely unsuccessful. There are, however, two major drawbacks.

In the first place, the poet becomes his own interpreter and deprives the reader or reciter of some of the freedom to impose his own voice upon the text. With Laforgue and Eliot, one often has the sensation of being led by the nose down a flight of stairs. But that is a minor point. A more serious consequence of *vers libre* is that the poet is never compelled to learn his craft completely. There is no rhythmical effect in Eliot that was not possible in traditional verse, but the opposite is not true. Dryden and Browning had at their disposal dozens of rhythmic modulations which are only available within the rigid framework of expectation imposed by strictly metrical verse.

Consider the question of syllabic quantity. The first syllable of “butter” is counted as a stress as much as the first syllable of “grandstand”, although the latter is much longer and harder to say. Inspired by ancient poets, Tennyson did a great deal with quantity, but his studied effects would all fail in any scheme of versification that did not (like traditional English verse) number both syllables and stresses, because we can only really appreciate quantity as a secondary phenomenon, a variation upon the strict pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. *Vers libre*, by liberating itself from mechanical counting, is often reduced to making itself merely poetic or to using the simplest, not to say vulgar, jingles. (One has only to turn to “Prufrock” for intentional examples.)

RHYTHMIC POWER

A far more successful alternative to traditional verse is found in Gerald Manley Hopkins and his imitators, who give up the un-German insistence upon counting syllables and treat the so-called tetrameter and pentameter lines as an affair of four and five stresses. In Hopkins the effects are often magnificent: *Summer ends; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise.*

It is not, unfortunately, always this good, and Hopkins took his theory to such absurd lengths that it is impossible to read his observations on rhythm — with all their strange crotchets and quavers — without amused impatience, but that is also true of almost everything written in meter — whether Greek, Latin, or English. It is a field divided between metaphysical theorists (all linguists fall in this category) and pedantic collectors of useless data. The only way to learn about rhythm is by reading and writing verse.

Some 20th-century poets learned a great deal from Hopkins and even improved upon the master. I do not know to what extent Robinson Jeffers had meditated upon these questions, but even a minor poem of his, like “The Bloody Sire”, shows an almost perfect command of the technique:

It is not bad. Let them play.
Let the dogs bark and the bombing-plane
Speak his prodigious blasphemies.
It is not bad, it is high time.
Stark violence is still the sire of all the world’s values.

By limiting himself to four stresses and varying the pattern and number of unstressed syllables, Jeffers achieves some of the effects of Greek lyric. An ancient metrist, who translated Jeffers’ pattern of

accents into quantitative terms, would have been able to cite parallel passages in Sophocles and Euripides, but an untutored reader can feel the rhythmic power quite as much as the classicist.

FREE AND VIGOROUS NATIONS

Jeffers’ ability to stir the blood against foreign wars or imperialism was not unrelated to his rhythms. Other British and American poets have helped to shape the minds of their contemporaries on a host of religious, moral, social, and political questions. Would there have been a British or American mind (by which I mean a shared conscience) without Shakespeare, Dryden, Milton, Wordsworth, and Tennyson? Great poets do more than reflect reality; they recreate it in the minds of their audience. Without poets we are faced with a stale world recreated in the civilized platitudes of politicians and preachers.

I know of no great and free people that has not debated its issues and defined its consensus in verse more than in prose. Greek drama, Roman satire and epic, and the reflective lyric verse of Britain and America were all literatures of free and vigorous nations. Themistocles had his Aeschylus, Augustus his Virgil, Elizabeth her Shakespeare. The last harrah may have been Robert Frost’s appearance at the Kennedy inauguration at which the great conservative gave the lie to all the citizen-of-the-world patriotism that infected Kennedy and every President since:

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(the deed of gift was many deeds of war)
to the land vaguely realizing Westward
but still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
such as she was, such as she would become.

It was not until theorists and bunglers hit upon free verse that poetry lost all social and political significance. During the great “revolution” of the 60’s students did not regale each other with recitations of Allen Ginsberg’s “Wichita Vortex Sutra”. They were listening to Crosby, Stills, and Nash (how hard it was to escape “Judy Blue Eyes” throughout 1969 in San Francisco!) or Bob Dylan. Even Ginsberg knew this and inserted Dylan’s music into the performance of his free verse exorcism. And the reactionaries were not quoting Robert Lowell or even Richard Wilbur (a poet who understands rhythm). They were listening to the Beatles mock “Revolution” or hearing with astonishment, as I did, for the first time, on the way to the infamous free Rolling Stones concert in Altamont, California, Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee”.

SEMIBARBARIAN LIBERTY

If poetry — good and bad — is rhythmical speech, then it is small wonder that popular singers were able to shape the national imagination to an extent undreamed of by most contemporary American poets, who still give their classes lectures on the social significance of literature. Even they knew it is not so. If a poet was once a free man singing to a free people, he is now an underpaid member of a servile interest group at the beck and call of equally servile bureaucrats. If it has any effect at all, the arhythmia of modern verse can only reinforce the sense of powerlessness and anonymity which the carefully dressed men in charge would like to impose on us all. This point was not lost upon Frederick Turner, who, in the same essay, suggested that the totalitarian mind had a special affinity for free verse. Real poetry in a place like the Library of Congress would be as dangerously disruptive as the rebel yell that awakens tribal memories of semibarbarian liberty.

These are not trifling matters. A great poet cannot save the world, but what he does is as close as man can come to the divine creation of the universe. It is by the power of speech, we are told, that the universe was made: The Word became world. Other arts, like music, may be more sublime; others, like painting, capable of more perfect beauty. But it is poetry and poetry alone that takes our most human quality, language, and uses it to express the great rhythms of creation — the beat of our hearts, the ebb and flow of tides, the endless round of planets, and the vast adagio of galaxies as they make their way across the void. A man who has heard this music cannot permanently succumb to the drum and fife rhetoric of despots and demagogues. We shall never again be a free people until we have poets who sing to us in unfree verse.