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(Article begins on next page)

Modernism's Melos

Abstract: the word *melody* had a certain ill repute among the Modernists of the early twentieth century: it seemed to refer to an art of bland, stressless lilting. And yet the rejection of traditional meter that Ezra Pound and other poets demanded tended to put unusual pressure on the melodic aspects of poetry: by emphasizing mimetic form ("Direct treatment of the 'thing,'" as Pound's Imagiste manifesto calls it), the poets wound up imitating what might be called the *melos* of the physical and emotional world. In this essay I examine the crypto-melodic aspect of Modernist verse; and at the end I speculate on the relation of Stravinsky's music to this theme, since Stravinsky, around 1927-28, set himself the task of translating traditional poetic meters, such as iambs and trochees, into Modernist music, as if after the poets had abandoned traditional meters, Stravinsky was willing to take them up.

Melody has been a suspect word for a long time. It has a bland, watery sound: *melody* is Bellini, *music* is Beethoven; *melody* is Irving Berlin, *music* is Schoenberg. But even in the world of Italian opera, where melody seems to reign supreme, there is a certain distrust of melody. When Verdi was advising the *prima donna* of his ambitious new opera *Macbeth* (1847) on how to sing the sleepwalking scene, he said: "Everything is to be said sotto voce and in such a way as to arouse terror and pity. Study it well and you will see that you can make an effect with it, even if it lacks one of those flowing, conventional melodies [*canti filati, e soliti*], which can be found everywhere and which are all alike" (Charles Rosen and Andrew Porter, eds., *Verdi's Macbeth: A Sourcebook.* (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 40). No one, it seems, wants to be a tunesmith.

In the domain of poetry, too, if you write flowing, conventional melodies, you're usually not doing too well. "Musical" [and in this disdainful tone of voice the word 'musical' means 'melodic'] says Northrop Frye, "usually means 'sounding nice.' [...] The term musical as ordinarily used is a value term meaning that the poet has produced a pleasant variety of vowel sounds and has managed to avoid the more unpronounceable clusters of consonants that abound in modern English. If he does this, he is musical, whether or not he knows a whole note from a half rest" (*The Educated Imagination and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1933-1962*, ed. Germaine Warkentin (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 237-38). Frye considers Browning a more musical poet than Tennyson, because Browning's jagged rhythms are more vital, peppy, than the even pulses of Tennyson's verse. This, of course, is orthodox Modernist doctrine: Ezra Pound began the Cantos with an homage to Browning, in the *Three Cantos* of the 1917, a vestige of which lingers at the beginning of the final text of Canto II: "Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one 'Sordello'"—a couplet with a Browning-like lilt to it, ejaculatory, emphatic, abrupt. And among the Modernists the praise of Tennyson is often perfunctory or double-edged, as when Virginia Woolf noted that Tennyson was the last man in the British Isles who suffered from the malady of genius.

The poetics of Modernism valued music highly, but only insofar as the music had a certain strangeness to it. One of the tenets of Pound's Imagism was "As regarding

rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (*Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 3). This is in some ways an unremarkable wish: a hundred years before Pound's time, John Keats had been equally eager to emancipate poetry from the tic-toc of Alexander Pope's rhythm:

> a sc[h]ism
> Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,
> Made great Apollo blush for this his land.
> Men were thought wise who could not understand
> His glories: with a puling infant's force
> They sway'd about upon a rocking horse,
> And thought it Pegasus. ("Sleep and Poetry")

Keats of course is writing in heroic couplets, Pope's own favorite verse form, but the caesura doesn't mechanically alternate (as Pope's caesuras tend to do) between the fourth syllable and the sixth syllable of the line; Keats puts the caesura in some quite odd places, even in the middle of a foot ("His glories: ‖ with a puling infant's force"). Keats might not have liked Pound's verse, if he'd lived to read it, but I doubt that he would have quarreled strongly with the third tenet of Imagism.

Still, there is a certain radicalism in Pound's dogma. The metronome may be in low repute; even when it was brand-new, it was an object of fun—Beethoven wrote a little spoof about Johann Nepomuk Mältzel, its inventor, a canon with a springy little tune familiar from the tick-tock movement in the eighth symphony. And it is certainly a commonplace to observe that music gets its life from agogics, rubato, hesitations, accelerations, slight vertical miscoordinations—all sorts of deviances from the notated rhythm. Still, to say that music might be *defined* as the anti-metronomical is to go much farther than just about anyone in the nineteenth century would have gone.

Pound dreamed of a poetic music that was sinewy, sinuous, an unmetered riff— "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave," he tells us in Canto 81. But to some extent this battle had been fought and won long before the Modernists came onto the scene: verse cannot be freer than some of Whitman's. Let's look at the beginning of a late Whitman poem, "Patroling Barnegat" (1880):

> Wild, wild the storm, and the sea high running,
> Steady the roar of the gale, with incessant undertone muttering,
> Shouts of demoniac laughter fitfully piercing and pealing,
> Waves, air, midnight, their savagest trinity lashing,
> Out in the shadows there milk-white combs careering,
> On beachy slush and sand spirts of snow fierce slanting,
> Where through the murk the easterly death-wind breasting …

It is impossible to find a pattern of short vs. long syllables, or of stressed vs. unstressed syllables: or, rather, it is possible to find so many patterns (such as the quasi-dactylic line that begins "Steady the roar of the gale," or the quasi-iambic line that begins "On beachy slush") that no pattern has precedence. On the other hand, to read it is to know that it is poetry: it is strictly formal, but the form is syntactic and kinesthetic, not prosodic. There are no finite verbs anywhere in this passage—in fact there are no finite verbs anywhere in the whole poem, except in one line that Whitman puts in parentheses. Instead of finite verbs we have present participles, always placed at the end of the line, and therefore determining the boundaries of the lineation. The line unit and the syntax unit are

identical. Whitman has achieved a triumph of imitative form: the opening of many lines is the crash of a wave ("Wild, wild" or "Waves, air, midnight") but the great initial clash, splash, of stressed syllables quickly peters out, and the second half of each line tends to thin into light runs of unstressed syllables: "fitfully piercing and pealing"; "savagest trinity lashing." The present participle at the end of each line is like a margin of foam at the upper fringe of the beach, where the wave-surge is completely spent. There is perhaps no poem in the English language that embodies so exactly the hydrodynamics of surf.

Pound called Whitman his "pig-headed father," in its way a term of manly endearment; and Pound plays similar games with imitative form, for example in Canto II (1922-23). Here is a passage describing how Dionysus, captured by pirates, fills the ship with various totems of his magical power:

> grape-leaves on the rowlocks,
> Heavy vine on the oarshafts,
> And, out of nothing, a breathing,
> hot breath on my ankles,
> Beasts like shadows in glass,
> a furred tail upon nothingness.
>
> Lynx-purr, and heathery smell of beasts,
> where tar smell had been,
> Sniff and pad-foot of beasts,
> eye-glitter out of black air.
>
> The sky overshot, dry, with no tempest,
> Sniff and pad-foot of beasts,
> fur brushing my knee-skin …

Again, these lines are impossible to scan, but the melos is nonetheless unmistakable. Many of the lines begin with a spondee (grape-leaves; hot breath; Lynx-purr; eye-glit-; fur brush-) or end with one (rowlocks; oarshafts; black air; knee-skin); but Pound doesn't allow us to settle into any pattern of expectation: he sometimes displaces the spondees to positions in the middle of a line (furred tail; tar smell; pad-foot), and he occasionally introduces a line consisting mostly of unstressed syllables ("And, out of nothing, a breathing"). The strange hexasyllabic line-form of spondee-pyrrhus-spondee ("grape-leaves on the rowlocks"; "fur brushing my knee-skin"; and (almost) "eye-glitter out of black air") occurs just often enough to keep us feeling off-balance from its failure to sustain itself; a poetic form seems to be taking shape, but a shape that we can't quite grasp, just as the pirates on the boat can't quite figure out what's happening: glassy theriomorphs tease the edges of their field of vision, but can't be seen directly. The poem is an exercise in rhythmic virtuosity: a dance, at once light-footed and emphatic, seems to be trying to break out, but just out of the range of audibility. The soft tread of the lynxes' feet seem always to be heard in unexpected places: the poem is a sustained act of surprise. The formal regularity exists only in spectral form, so that a continual irregularity may be felt.

In 1927, in "How to Read," Pound proposed three main tendencies within the art of poetry: *melopoeia*, "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain

meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning"; *phanopoeia*, "a casting of images upon the visual imagination"; and *logopoeia*, "the dance of the intellect among words" (*Literary Essays*, p. 25). Though he returned to these categories in 1934, in *ABC of Reading,* Pound doesn't offer examples of melopoeia, or explain just how you charge words with music. But his comment from 1917, "There is vers libre with accent heavily marked as a drum-beat (as par example my 'Dance Figure')" (*Pavannes and Divisions* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1979), p. 108), suggests that "Dance Figure" (1913) might be a good place to look for melopoeia:

> Dark eyed,
> O woman of my dreams,
> Ivory sandaled,
> There is none like thee among the dancers,
> None with swift feet. …
>
> Thine arms are as a young sapling under the bark;
> Thy face as a river of lights.

This passage is much lighter and looser than the passage from Canto II, but it too is controlled to some extent by spondees: the first stanza opens with one ("Dark eyed") and closes with one ("Swift feet"). Because "Dark eyed" is grammatically parallel to "Ivory sandaled," and each occupies a line of its own, I hear the two strong beats of "Ivory sandaled" as isorhythmic with the two strong beats of "Dark eyed." The dancer seems equipoised in lines 1, 3, and 5 ("Dark eyed"; "Ivory sandaled"; "None with swift feet")— she poses herself to display her charms; in the other lines her body quickens, twists, runs ("There is none like thee among the dancers"). And by means of archaisms and Biblical-sounding structures of simile ("Thine arms are as a young sapling"), Pound outfits the poem with a sort of resonating cavity—we hear the fine old music of *The Song of Solomon*. "Dance Figure" is one of Pound's most intricate exercises in percussion—Pound fancied himself a drummer, and in fact performed the drum part in a composition of George Antheil's.

Because of the prestige of Imagism and Vorticism—both of them poetic movements with a certain phanopoetic character—Pound's work in melopoeia has been less studied than it should be. Some of Pound's early essays suggest that melody, not picture, is the crucial matter in poetry:

> You wish to communicate an idea and its concomitant emotions, or an emotion and its concomitant ideas … You begin with the yeowl and the bark, and you develop into the dance and into music, and into music with words, and finally into words with music, and finally into words with a vague adumbration of music, words suggestive of music, words measured, or words in a rhythm that preserves some accurate trait of the emotive impression, or of the sheer character of the fostering or parental emotion. ("The Serious Artist" [1913], from *Literary Essays*, p. 51)

This is one of several stories Pound tells about the origin of poetry. Savage ejaculations—ow, ooh, ulp—develop first into music, then into song, finally into poetry that retains the shadow of the absent music. In other passages, Pound regrets the split between words and music, and claims that this divorce caused "melodic invention" to

decline and made "The rhythms of poetry … stupider" (*Ezra Pound and Music*, ed. Harriet Zinnes (New York: New Directions, 1980), p. 5); but here he seems to argue that poetry, even without music, can do exactly the same work of expression that song does—can trace the precise contours of feeling just as well.

Melody in poetry seems, then, to be a phantom of pitch displacement derived from shifts in rhythm. Rhythm can gives the impression of a curving line: through subtle placement and displacement of accent, rhythm can be made to suggest jerky excitement (and therefore a rise in voice pitch) or monotonous laxity (and therefore a fall of vocal pitch)—of course the meaning of the words contributes to this effect. In this way rhythmic virtuosity can imitates the way that anger, or love, or sorrow, ebb and flow in our nervous systems. Again and again Pound insists on a one-to-one correspondence between a rhythm and an emotion, between a rhythm and a writer:

> I believe in an 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable. (*Literary Essays*, p. 9)

> I said … I believed in an absolute rhythm. I believe that every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it.
> (This belief leads to *vers libre* and to experiments in quantitative verse.)
> (*Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, p. 201)

So—if you write in traditional meters, you're probably failing to realize your own unique, uncounterfeitable music; and it's likely that you're betraying the nuances of your own feeling in favor of some generalized, brand-x emotion. Pound could be harsh toward poets who had an inadequate sense of rhythm: he mocked Yeats for misunderstanding Robert Burns's rhythms:

> I had a half hour of unmitigated glee in hearing … 'The Birks o Averfeldy' *keened*, wailed with infinite difficulty and many pauses and restarts to [the tune of Yeats's own] *The Wind Among the Reeds*" (*The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 180).

At least Yeats *had* his own rhythm, even if he couldn't rightly understand anyone else's; Shelley, on the other hand, wrote atrocious poetry (says Pound) because he couldn't match emotion and rhythm at all:

> When you have words of a lament set to the rhythm and tempo of *There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town to-night* you have either an intentional burlesque or you have rotten art. Shelley's *Sensitive Plant* is one of the rottenest poems ever written, at least one of the worst ascribable to a recognized author. It jiggles to the same tune as *A little peach in the orchard grew*. (*Literary Essays*, p. 51)

"A little peach in the orchard grew" is a piece of nineteenth-century light verse, by Eugene Field.

Let's test Pound's derision of "The Sensitive-Plant" by comparing Shelley and Field. This is Shelley:

When Winter had gone and Spring came back
The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck;

>   But the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and darnels,
>   Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels. …
>
>   For love, and beauty, and delight,
>   There is no death nor change: their might
>   Exceeds our organs, which endure
>   No light, being themselves obscure.

And this is Field:

>   A little peach in the orchard grew,—
>   A little peach of emerald hue;
>   Warmed by the sun and wet by the dew,
>   It grew. …
>
>   John took a bite and Sue a chew,
>   And then the trouble began to brew,—
>   Trouble the doctor couldn't subdue.
>   Too true!

There are many differences: Shelley doesn't use Field's mono-rhyme, nor does he end his quatrains with a two-syllable line. But it's true that both Shelley and Field write in tetrameter, mixing two-syllable and three-syllable feet—a sing-songy, nursery-rhyme meter. And Pound reviles Shelley precisely because he writes about the mysteries of death and decay, about the illusoriness of the sensuous world, in a tune that Mother Goose would have approved, a tune well suited to Field's Edward-Gorey-like poem about the Fatal Peach.

What Pound doesn't seem to understand is that there are potent aesthetic effects that can be obtained through counterpoint—through a deliberate mismatch of feeling and form. Pound's motto is that of the Modernist architect Louis Sullivan: Form follows function. When Whitman writes about the surge of the ocean waves, he finds a rhythm that conforms to it as exactly as possible; when Pound writes about the padding of beasts, or an Oriental dance, he tries to make the kinesis of the verse a close approximation of the kinesis of the thing. But Shelley relishes the ironic distance between his oversimple meter and his complicated subject matter. "The Sensitive-Plant" toys with the Parmenidean theme that the universe is spherical and unchanging, and that motion is unreal, born of the defects in our sensory apparatus; as Parmenides' best disciple, Zeno of Elea, put it, the arrow shot from the bow is in a state of perfect rest, since during any given instant it travels no distance at all, and time itself is nothing but a heap of instants. The false meter is a reflex of the falseness of the evidence of our sense-organs: the universe is a changeless sphere, and the verse-form is an unambitious rudiment.

I write here today to praise the tame. Like many scholars of twentieth-century poetry, I imagine, I work with Modernism because I thrill to its wildness—its assaults against convention, its raging, its outraging at the frontiers of art. But there are things that Tennyson could do that Pound couldn't, because Pound's insistence on the One Right Rhythm proscribed much of the usual fun of writing poetry.

We've seen that Pound was deaf to Shelley's use of a "wrong" meter for the sake of irony of form. But there is another defect to Pound's poetics, even more serious: it made the notion of a narrative poem impossible. A narrative poem requires the poet to

treat widely varying emotions in a single meter; even if we differentiate rhythm from meter, the metrical uniformity limits the amplitude of rhythmic change. Of course, narrative poets have always had the resource of a fairly colorless medium, such as blank verse or heroic couplets—a medium that licenses many different kinds of verse movement. But narrative poets have often chosen highly inflected meters, partly because it is possible to relish the challenge of pushing against the natural tendency of the verse. Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" (1837) will provide an example. It is written in a peculiar meter, catalectic trochaic octameter—fifteen syllables per line, with a stressed syllable at the beginning and end. The large number of syllables makes for a leisurely, long-breathed, contemplative sort of line, full of "scope and breathing space," to quote a phrase from the poem; on the other hand, a trochaic line, any trochaic line, seems in English to tip the wrong way, like handwriting that slants backward; and the heavy accent on the first syllable can sound like a fist thumping on a table, not at all leisurely, but explosive. Sometimes Tennyson's lines seem to meander; sometimes they seem to uncoil suddenly, violently:

> There the passions cramp'd no longer shall have scope and breathing space;
> I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race.
>
> Iron-jointed, supple-sinew'd, they shall dive, and they shall run,
> Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun;
>
> Whistle back the parrot's call, and leap the rainbows of the brooks,
> Not with blinded eyesight poring over miserable books—
>
> Fool, again the dream, the fancy! but I know my words are wild,
> But I count the gray barbarian lower than the Christian child.
>
> I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains,
> Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!
>
> Mated with a squalid savage—what to me were sun or clime?
> I the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time—

All Tennyson has to do is to isolate the line's first syllable ("Fool, again the dream"; "I, to herd"; "I the heir"), and the line hurtles forward as if released by a trigger: the slow reverie of the Polynesian idyll is instantly dispelled, and the speaker reveals himself, abrupt and arrogant. By fiddling with rhythmic adjustments—increasing the volume-level of the first syllable and strengthening the caesura—Tennyson reverses the mood. And yet, what is remarkable is how little Tennyson has to do to change the poem's feeling from idle musing to maniacal self-assertion. Tennyson in no way believed in Absolute Rhythm: a single rhythm, with slight modifications, was able to project the whole gamut of human feeling. Just as Franz Liszt's tone poems take a single theme, and make it seem sorrowful, angry, abject, triumphant, so Tennyson could make a single rhythm plastic to any feeling.

There are passages in Pound's Cantos that also attempt narrative in a quasi-Tennysonian fashion. In Canto 29 (1930), Pound tells the story of a young lout, "Lusty

Juventus," caught like the hero of "Locksley Hall" between depression and mania, though of a far more tepid sort:

> Past the house of the three retired clergymen
> Who were too cultured to keep their jobs.
> Languor has cried unto languor
> > about the marshmallow-roast
> (Let us speak of the osmosis of persons)
> The wail of the phonograph has penetrated their marrow
> (Let us...
> The wail of the pornograph...)
> > The cicadas continue uninterrupted.
> With a vain emptiness the virgins return to their homes
> With a vain exasperation
> The ephèbe has gone back to his dwelling,
> The djassban has hammered and hammered . . .
>
> > Drift of weed in the bay . . .
> He aspires to a career with honour
> To step in the tracks of his elders . . .
> Sea weed dried now, and now floated,
> > mind drifts, weed, slow youth, drifts,
> Stretched on the rock, bleached and now floated;
> Wein, Weib, TAN AOIDAN
> Chiefest of these the second, the female
> Is an element, the female
> Is a chaos
> An octopus
> A biological process . . . (29/143-44)

Like Tennyson, Pound was profoundly attracted to Homer's story of the Lotos-Eaters: throughout the Cantos Pound keeps returning to some state of torpor, sloth, some heat-sink into which all emotion drains. Here the rhythms of enervation are precisely stated—the rifted elliptical texture, the *précieux* technical vocabulary, soft and drawling (osmosis, ephèbe), the repetition made not to emphasize but only because you can't be bothered to think of a synonym or variation of term ("Languor has cried unto languor / about the marshmallow-roast")—everywhere there is a trailing-off into the inane.

But the rhythm changes radically at certain points: the pointless slosh of slush is interrupted by the much stronger line "The djassban has hammered and hammered"—here the repetition isn't *languoroso* but *martellato*. Even the thin whining of the pornograph can introduce into the acedia and vapidity a more striking melody—possibly something along the lines of the rabid-jazz *There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town to-night*. Soon the record changer drops a new 78 onto the machine, and the melos changes again: "Wein, Weib, TAN AOIDAN." Perhaps we're now hearing Johann Strauss II's waltz *Wein, Weib und Gesang*, wine, woman, and song, though by shifting from the German to the Greek word for *song*, Pound reminds us of the sirens who beckon to the well-behaved Juventus, a pre-foundered young man, so to speak. The verse movement starts emitting tentacles that reach out to clutch: "Is a chaos / An octopus / A biological

process"—though the tentacles are so short that the female seems more sea-anemone than octopus.

Pound's continual alertness to shifts of mood and tenor, and his continual invention of new rhythmic forms to accommodate these shifts, are reminiscent of the methods of certain opera composers. At the dawn of opera, Claudio Monteverdi told composers to pay attention not to the sentence but to the individual word: and Monteverdi regularly devised a new melodic form for every short phrase of his text. In this passage from Ariadne's lament (1611), we first hear a great vocal drumbeat of outrage at Theseus's abandonment; then the mood changes into an abject chromatic swooning as she thinks that her cries are all in vain:

> Son queste le corone
> Onde m'adorni il crine?
> Questi gli scettri sono,
> Queste le gemme e gl'ori?
> Lasciarmi in abbandono
> A fera che mi strazi e mi divori?
> Ah Teseo, ah Teseo mio,
> Lascierai tu morire
> Invan piangendo, invan gridando 'aita,
> La misera Arianna …'
>
> Are these, these the crowns
> With which you adorn my hair?
> And you give me these for scepters,
> These for jewels and goldwork?
> You leave me here abandoned
> To beasts, to be torn apart and eaten?
> Ah Theseus, my Theseus,
> You leave me here to die
> Weeping in vain, in vain crying 'help,
> Help poor Ariadne…'

Arnold Schoenberg, Pound's contemporary, paid a similarly fanatical attention to minute details, in operas such as *Erwartung* (1909; 1924). Even in relatively smooth narrative passages, such as the Juventus story, Pound keeps trying to discover a new *kind* of poem at every moment of focal adjustment: the doctrine of absolute rhythm places an immense burden on his faculty of invention, because every change of feeling-shade entails a re-thinking of every element of poetic style.

It could be argued that the doctrine of absolute rhythm reduces to absurdity the very concept of imitative form. Imitative form has traditionally been considered as at best an incidental grace—not the main matter of a poem. One of the best-known examples in the eighteenth century is a passage from Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711):

> When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
> The line too labours, and the words move slow:
> Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,
> Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main …

Not only does Pope expand the last line to a hexameter, but he contracts four syllables (over the un-) to two in order to suggest how Camilla's gossamer foot barely grazes the ground. Samuel Johnson quoted this passage in his *Life* of Pope (1781), commenting, sourly, "Beauties of this kind are commonly fancied, and, when real, are technical and nugatory, not to he rejected and not to be solicited." But for Pound, such technicalities are almost the whole basis for his art: verse movement is enslaved to motion in the physical world and to emotion in the mind's world.

  Pound was a rationalist—I know the term sounds odd when applied to a man long kept in an insane asylum—and he disliked the irrationality of poetry, its arbitrary stanza-forms, the way it prefers the memorable to the true. Most of his reforms, like those of Schoenberg in music, have to do with rethinking poetry as an art that can be vindicated easily, without appealing to fancy aesthetic mumbo-jumbo: if I write about a basket of fish, watch how the poem burbles and and writhes and glitters. But I think that poetry must always be complicit with the irrational, the nonsensical, the fortuitous, and to try to rid it of these elements has elements of folly as well as of heroism.

  My old teacher William Wimsatt once wrote that "It would be only an exaggeration, not a distortion, of principle to say that the difference between prose and verse is the difference between homoeoteleuton and rhyme" (*The Verbal Icon* [New York: Noonday, 1954], pp. 153-54). *Homoeoteleuton* means like word-endings: communication, reverberation, vivification, exploration, all have the same termination; such words chime with one another because each of them is the same kind of Latinate noun, occupies the same syntactic slot, fits into the same part of a sentence. A poem in which the rhyme-words were all homoeoteleuta can feel somewhat flat: it tends to be boring to hear the same syntactic unit over and over again in the same place in the line. (It is a measure of the genius of Whitman that in "Patroling Barnegat" he could do exactly that, with those incessant present participles, and yet make the poem exciting.) We tend to like poems that rhyme different parts of speech. A test case for Wimsatt's argument can be found in two passages from Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1832):

> The little isle is all inrail'd
> With a rose-fence, and overtrail'd
> With roses: by the marge unhail'd
> The shallop flitteth silken sail'd,
>   Skimming down to Camelot. …
>
> The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,
> Like to some branch of stars we see
> Hung in the golden Galaxy.
> The bridle bells rang merrily
>   As he rode down from Camelot …

The first passage is all homoeoteleuton, the second is without homoeoteleuton: the first rhymes all past participles, the second rhymes an adjective, a verb, a noun, and an adverb. As for excellence of rhyming, I see little to choose between them: in the first passage, Tennyson skillfully avoids monotony by breaking the clauses in the middle of the lines, not at the rhyme-end. Homoeoteleuton is only bothersome or amusing when the syntax-unit corresponds with the line-unit, as (sometimes, as Wimsatt points out) in Chaucer:

> Oure fourneys eek of calcinacioun,

> And of watres albificacioun…
> And of oure silver citrinacioun,
> Our cementyng and fermentacioun …
> For bothe two, by my savacioun,
> Concluden in multiplicacioun …
> And of bodies mollificacioun,
> And also of hire induracioun … ("The Canon's Yeoman's Tale")

But, as we've seen, in Modernist art obedient to the rule that form follows function, the line-unit and the syntax-unit *must* coincide: rhythm and syntax must be inextricable.

But here another strain of Modernism, represented by Paul Valéry and other post-Symbolists, intrudes to make the opposite case: form is delightful for form's sake, utterly independent of content:

> all these arbitrary rules, the prescribed measure, the rhymes, the fixed form, once they have been adopted, and at complete variance with ourselves, have a sort of philosophic beauty of their own. Chains, tightening with every movement of our genius …
>
> classical art is an art oriented toward the ideals of games… (*Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 140, 145)

Valéry's belief seems to me more liberating than that of Pound: better to try to embrace the arbitrary or irrational aspects of versification than to try to eliminate them. I agree with Wimsatt that poetry, as it is usually known in English, consists of the careful pinning of logical syntax onto an alogical grid of metrical or stanzaic form. Music too, as Christopher Hasty points out, consists of melodies and rhythms that continually spill out of the meters that try to contain them, hold them in place. Pound's melodies are most engaging when we hear some ghost of an old form (or a ghost of a new form, such as the spondee-pyrrhus-spondee line) against which they tug. In 1917 Eliot put it this way:

> *Vers libre* does not exist … the most interesting verse … has been done either by taking a very simple form … and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse. (*To Criticize the Critic* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1965), pp. 183, 185)

I would not go so far as to say that *vers libre* does not exist, but I think it tends to be tuneful to the degree that it behaves in the way that Eliot describes.

An undergirding of fixed form tends to be felt as a kind of bass line beneath the free flight of the poem's words: in this sense the poetry of Tennyson, or Eliot himself, has a vertical, harmonic aspect that is often missing in Pound's. Whitman's contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins classified certain poems as contrapuntal: for example, he scanned his line "The wórld | is chárged |wíth the | grándeur | of Gód" as a counterpoint, since the two trochees in the third and fourth foot are heard clashing against the expected iambs. But most passages of the Cantos are not contrapuntal—a counterpoint is an assault against the notion of absolute rhythm, since it superimposes one rhythm on another. There is a sense in which the staggered array of the words on the page invites us to think of the melodies of the individual lines in combination with one another, but this is at best a sort of virtual counterpoint, since we have no clear guide for vertical

organization. Pound's method is monody, one absolute rhythm followed by another. Pound composed several pieces for violin, and his Canto 75 consists of a transcription for solo violin (arranged by Gerhard Münch) of Janequin's old polyphonic chanson *Le chant des oyseaulx*; and there's a sense in which Pound's music is all pure solo melody. The whole of the Cantos, for all its interminable fury and splotchiness, could be played on one violin.

But, of course, I'm exaggerating. There is a kind of counterpoint prevalent in the Cantos, not local and prosodic but general and thematic: Pound likes to create a sort of huge overlay of his poem against the whole previous canon of the world's poetry. A passage in Canto 64 (1940) will show what I mean. It is written partly in the voice of the American President John Adams; during the dark days of the beginning of the Second World War, when Pound thought America had betrayed its old values, he took Adams as a model of American virtue. In the first line the phrase "John's bro, the sheriff" refers to Adams' brother Peter Boylston Adams, whom John Adams got appointed deputy sheriff (1761) of Suffolk County; in the second line Adams is remembering a judgment on Oliver Cromwell expressed to Adams by the Rev. Anthony Wibird, Braintree Congregational minister (10 Sept 1761):

> To John's bro, the sheriff, we lay a kind word in passing
> Cromwell was not prudent
> > nor honest
> > > Nor laudable.
>
> Prayer: hands uplifted
> Solitude: a person, a NURSE
> plumes: is she angel or bird, is she a bird or an angel?
> ruffled, rumpled, rugged....wings
> Looks down
> > and pities those who wear a crown
> meaning (query) George, Louis, or Frederick? (Canto 64/355, 1940)

The last line refers to the great kings of Adams' time: George III of England, Louis XV of France, Frederick II of Prussia.

This passage is more melodically intense than it may first seem. For one thing, Pound teases a sort of music out of the Rev. Wibird's prose line "Cromwell was not prudent, nor honest, nor laudable" by the simple device of isolating the phrases on separate, staggered lines. (Again verse rhythm and syntax are made to coincide.) But more important is the odd business about solitude, nurse, angel, and wings—words that have a certain old-fashioned poetical look to them, but are tossed around in a bizarre, offhand manner.

Canto 64 imagines John Adams in old age, decayed but still fierce, thinking back to the events of his youth in the 1760s and 1770s. He of course was himself a sort of Cromwell, defying a monarchy, but he is determined to avoid the errors of Cromwell's republic, more tyrannical than the tyranny it overthrew. Adams also seems to be pondering a passage from Pope's versification of Donne's fourth satire:

> Bear me, some god! oh, quickly bear me hence
> To wholesome solitude, the nurse of sense:
> Where Contemplation plumes her ruffled wings,
> And the free soul looks down to pity kings!

Why did Pound splice a mangled version of Pope's lines into this canto? Partly because anyone who has led a country might find the delights of retirement preferable to weight of responsibility; but mostly because Pope's lines were favorites of the real John Adams. In July 1774 he wrote to his wife Abigail:

> I never enjoyed better Health in any of my journeys, but this has been the most tedious, the most irksome, the most gloomy and mancholly I ever made.
>
> I cannot with all my Phylosophy and christian Resignation keep up my Spirits. The dismal Prospect before me, my Family, and my Country, are too much, for my Fortitude.
>
> > Snatch me some God, Oh quickly bear me hence
> > To wholesome Solitude the Nurse of Sense
> > Where Contemplation prunes her ruffled Wings
> > And the free Soul looks down to pity Kings.
>
> > (John Adams to Abigail Adams, 9 July 1774)

The chief fascination of Pound's use of Pope's lines in Canto 64 is his way of modernizing them, assimilating them into the disrupted melos of twentieth-century poetry. Where Pope speaks of Contemplation's "ruffled wings," Pound starts to ask questions: do the wings belong to a bird or an angel? And is "ruffled" the best possible description?–might not the wings be better described as rumpled or rugged? This intimate, almost proctological examination of a figure of speech–a casual personification that Pope tosses out without any fuss–leads us into an age in which poetry performs all sort of violence on the poems of the past. Pound has special fun with the second of Pope's couplets: after splitting open, cubifying the first couplet, Pound rewrites Pope's second couplet in Pope's own language, but with a lot fewer syllables, and altering the rhyme: no longer

> Where Contemplation prunes her ruffled wings,
> And the free soul looks down to pity kings.

but

> Looks down
> and pities those who wear a crown

It is as if Pound were saying, What the eighteenth century can do in a leisurely fashion, I can do much more quickly and efficiently, and toss in an allusion to Shakespeare as well: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (*2 Henry IV* 3.1.31). Behind Pound's music you can hear him fiddling whisper music from Pope, from Donne, from Shakespeare.

When Pound described his intentions for the Cantos, he thought of counterpoint. Yeats wrote in *A Vision* that Pound compared the whole project to a "Bach fugue":

> There will be no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse, but two themes, the Descent into Hades from Homer, a Metamorphosis from Ovid, and, mixed with these, mediaeval or modern historical characters. . . . He has scribbled on the back of an envelope certain sets of letters that represent emotions or archetypal events—I cannot find any adequate definition—A B C D and then J K L M, and then each set of letters repeated, and then A B C D inverted and this repeated, and then a new element X Y Z, then certain letters that never recur . . . and all set whirling together. (*A Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 3-5)

But to me Pound's big book of Cantos feels more like an interminable rondo than like a fugue: a descent to hell interrupts a metamorphosis, a metamorphosis interrupts a

historical evocation, and so forth: no matter how balled up the three elements become, they still tend to seem sequential rather than simultaneous. Just as Pound's counterpoints in the music of his opera *Le testament* are often timid or illusory, so the counterpoints in the Cantos tend to be more notional than actual. The real counterpoint of the Cantos lies in the ways that the presence of Dante, Ovid, Homer can be felt, often through a thick layer of intermediaries—imitators, translators, and so forth. The poetic canon sounds beneath Pound's text, sometimes a light drone, occasionally a deep polyphloisboian roar. And often we hear the unaccompanied music of the "letters that never recur"—the unique historical event—the music of things that are simply themselves and not something else.

A fragile distinction can be made among the Modernist poets who are melodists, like Pound or William Carlos Williams, and those who, like T. S. Eliot, are harmonists. The melodists are concerned with imitative form, the dance of a belly-dancer at the marriage of Cana, the dance of a naked poet in his bedroom, the dance of carousers in a Brueghel painting; the harmonists are concerned with word-resonances, word-reverberations. As Eliot wrote in 1942,

> The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of associations. (*On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), p. 25)

This is an explanation and a paraphrase of a passage from his recent poem "The Dry Salvages":

>   to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation for the saint …
> For most of us, there is only the unattended
> Moment, the moment in and out of time,
> The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
> The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
> Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
> That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
> While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
> Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
> Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
> The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Incarnation has a capital I because of its harmonic intensity: it embodies the whole overtone series, since it represents a shivery swoop of vertical God onto the horizontal axis of time. The whole poem has labored to make a great Brucknerian chord out of that single word *Incarnation*.

The melodists, on the other hand, have a different relation to language. For a harmonists (and symbolists) like Eliot, a single word can mean, potentially, everything: meaning, like the sun itself, casts its rays in every direction to the farthest verges of space. But for a melodist, a given word should be restricted in its range of meanings, confined to a specific physical or intellectual phenomenon: large meaning exists in

rhythmic combinations of words, feeling-out the arrays of external objects around us. For the melodist, poetic form isn't invented, but discovered: poetic forms are all around us, in the physical world—we simply have to transcribe them in language as best we can. In 1912 Pound wrote in his diary of Provence, as was walking through the terrain of his beloved medieval poet-musicians, whose songs were his tutors:

> The r[oa]d. to Celles is indeed a sort of sestina, of cusp & hills, of prospects opened & shut, or round trees & poplars aligned.
>
> sestina vs. recurrence in nature. (*A Walking Tour in Southern France: Ezra Pound among the Troubadours,* ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 15)

A sestina is a poem in which the same six words, falling at the line-ends of each six-line stanza, reappear in a different order in the subsequent stanzas. The route's varied monotony—hills alternating with valleys, round trees alternating with tall thin poplars—made Pound conceive the road to Celles as a kind of landscape-projection of the sestina: the even recurrence of trees and hills seemed a kind of prosody of objects, rising and falling like the stressed and unstressed syllables of a line of poetry. Wallace Stevens made a similar observation about the thesis and arsis of a distant mountain-range in "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1922):

> Sepulchral señors, bibbling pale mescal . . .
> Should make the intricate Sierra scan. (*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 38)

Sometimes the melodist makes the line of verse correspond to nature's own flow-patterns; sometimes nature's own flow-patterns seem to correspond to pre-existing forms of verse. How well the external world is fitted to the mind.

In the work of a later poet, A. R. Ammons, we can see the struggle to adjust the melodies of language to the melodies of geology—and perhaps vice versa, too. Ammons is famous for his radical enjambment—his habit of ending a line with words such as *the*, if it suits him—as if the poet wishes to go to any length not to falsify the rhythm of the natural world by cramming it into forms convenient to the English language. But occasionally the natural world seems willing to try to accommodate, to some degree, the poet and his ways of talking:

> Are all these stones
> yours
> I said
> and the mountain
> pleased
>
> but reluctant to
> admit my praise could move it much
>
> shook a little
> and rained a windrow ring of stones
> to show
> that it was so
>
> Stonefelled I got

up addled with dust … ("Close-up," from *Expressions of Sea Level* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1963), p. 57)

The mountains said they were
    tired of lying down
and wanted to know what
    I could do about
getting them off the ground

Well close your eyes I said
    and I'll see if I can
by seeing into your nature
    tell where you've been wronged
What do you think you want to do
    They said Oh fly

My hands are old
    and crippled keep no lyre
but if that is your true desire
    and conforms roughly
with your nature I said
    I don't see why
we shouldn't try
    to see something along that line … ("Mountain Liar," from *Expressions of Sea Level*, p. 59)

Ammons is experimenting—almost trifling, though trifling with a serious intent—with all sorts of antique poetical devices, such as personification, rhyme, insistence through repetition, even archaism: I doubt that Ammons, versatile though he was, spent a great deal of time playing the lyre, but this Orphic instrument is appropriate when a mountain asks you to help it get off its duff and dance—and *lyre* rhymes nicely with *desire*. These faint touches of the old music of Tennyson—like a distant accordion making a pleasant wheeze somewhere off stage—intensify the charms of the more up-to-date, rigorously unmetronomic melodies. It's a little like the way Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* heightens its atonal eeriness by contriving to end in something like the key of E major.

Now that I've discussed some of the ways in which modernist poetry engages with the concept of melody, I will conclude this essay by turning that around: to talk about the ways in which modernist melody engages with the concept of versification.

At the same time that Pound was breaking the pentameter and smashing the metronome, there was a composer who was promoting the metronome as the central device of his art. Igor Stravinsky's first opera, *The Nightingale*, concerns a song contest between a mechanical nightingale and a real one, and it's clear from the music that Stravinsky far preferred the mechanical nightingale, a toy that is little more than a metronome taught to warble. The world of the ruled, the number-bound, was dear to Stravinsky; his art is above all mensural. But the measure-system that most interested

him was not that of music, but that of poetry. In this way Stravinsky is Pound's twin, his anti-self, his intimate enemy: Pound was a poet who wanted to replace the rules of poetry with the rules of music; Stravinsky was a composer who wanted to replace the rules of music with the rules of poetry.

In 1914, the year in which he finished *The Nightingale,* Stravinsky decided to compose music setting texts from a book of humorous and nonsensical Russian verse called *Koz'ma Prutkov*; this project never came to fruition, but some sketches survive, with examples in musical notation of trochaics, dactyls, and anapests (Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 133). But his period of complete obsession with prosody came in the late 1920s, when he was fascinated by the possibilities of a sort of surrealism—a way of bending the art of music to accommodate the aesthetic of a different medium. *Oedipus Rex* (1927) is a good example: Stravinsky wrote "All of my 'ideas' for *Oedipus Rex* were in one sense derived from what I call the versification" (Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 28), in other words, from the metrical patterns of Greek poetry. Now one of the basic Greek meters is the dactyl, long-short-short; and Stravinsky's music for the choral passages shows a strong tendency to meters such as 6/8, in which the groups of three eighth-notes seems a sort of continual allusion to the meters of classical poetry, even though Stravinsky pays no attention to the actual scansion of the words, which he misconstrues in every way possible; for example in the second soft part of the opening, the chorus sings OE-DI-pus, oe-DI-pus, casually shifting the syllable-length and the accent. Perhaps the most metrically intense passage in the chorus is the chorus's prayer to Apollo, *Delie exspectamus* [We await you, Delian]: there is a sort of fatal dactylic underrhythm beneath every choral plea: their desires are everywhere constrained by hard metrical facts that can't be evaded, no matter how strong their pleas for leniency:

Why should a composer obsessed with prosody disregard the actual prosodic values of the words before him? He seems to have felt that any given word makes a botch of its own rhythm, just as it makes a botch of its meaning. Beneath a verbal phrase, there is a push, a division, an inflection; but if the syllables must be finagled to make explicit this subsistent rhythm, Stravinsky did not object to finagling them. Stravinsky admired the famous phonograph record of Yeats reading his verse:

> Yeats pauses at the end of each line, he dwells a precise time on and in between each word—one could as easily notate his verses in musical rhythm as scan them in poetic metres. (Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 120)

Stravinsky was quite correct—perhaps he did not know that, in collaboration with Florence Farr, Yeats had in fact converted some of his poems to musical notation, to be chanted to a psaltery. But Yeats's strange, neo-quantitative reading style—he pretended that English syllables, like Latin, must be either half-notes or quarter-notes—was as much a willful imposition of scansion as any passage of *Oedipus Rex*. Prosody exists at the place where music and poetry join together, where they display their pure arbitrariness unimpeded by expression, or meaning, or even particular sounds: the daDAdaDA without da or DA.

The study of prosody informed Stravinsky's instrumental compositions as well as his vocal. His first important work after *Oedipus Rex* was the ballet *Apollon musagète*

(1928), which begins with the birth of Apollo and offers a pageant of the Muses, displaying their arts to the new-born god:

> The real subject of Apollo . . . is versification, which implies something arbitrary and artificial to most people, though to me art is arbitrary and must be artificial. The basic rhythmic patterns are iambic, and the individual dances may be thought of as variations of the reversible dotted-rhythm iamb idea. . . . I cannot say whether the idea of the Alexandrines, that supremely arbitrary set of prosodic rules, was pre-compositional or not . . . (*Dialogues,* p. 33)

The ballet is a sort of poem without words, a delicate string-filigree of intersecting meters, as if the pattern of macrons and breves written out above some lines of verse were looped over a musical staff.

Behind *Oedipus Rex* is Sophocles. Behind *Apollon musagète* is the seventeenth-century French poet Boileau, one of whose couplets is used as an epigraph to the *Variation of Calliope*:

> Que toujours dans vos vers le sens, coupant les mots,
> Suspende l'hémistiche, en marque le repos. (*L'Art poétique* I 105-6)

> Always make sure to cut the verse in two
> In just the place the meaning tells you to.

Boileau was not the greatest poet of his time, but he was the greatest legislator of poets—he sought to give order and symmetry, propriety to verse. In the quoted couplet Boileau asked poets to devise alexandrines that fall sensibly into two equal six-syllabled half-lines. Stravinsky designed the *Variation of Calliope* to be a musical exposition of this motto (*Dialogues,* p. 33). The score is a meditation on the theme of making up rules—indefensible rules, unnatural rules, arbitrary rules, but rules without which art is impossible. Apollo is born, not in a sunburst or a clang of the spheres, but quietly, a little god in the costume of Boileau or Alexander Pope, with a powdered wig.

> In this way the great poet and the great composer traded places: the poet sacrificing many traditional pleasures of poetry for the sake of melody; the composer sacrificing many of the traditional pleasures of music in order to worship at the altars of iamb and dactyl.