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Slavery and its metrics

Lucy Terry (c. 1730–1821) has long been credited – not without good reason – as the first known African-American author, and her one surviving work, the poem “Bars Fight” (c. 1746), is widely anthologized as the earliest surviving poem by an American slave. The story of the poem’s survival – composed by Terry shortly after an Indian raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1746, and preserved and transmitted through memorization and recitation until its first known publication in 1855, over thirty years after her death – is a highly plausible, but by no means indisputable, combination of legend and painstaking scholarship. The relation of the 1855 text to the original composition and its subsequent iterations is not definitively known. Readers of “Bars Fight” have continued to pursue the poem back to its likely but obscure origins in the versifying practice of a teenaged slave who had been kidnapped from Africa to New England as a young child and who was remembered and praised down the generations as a witty storyteller and skilled poet.¹ It is the poem’s pursuit of Terry that interests me here.

I say “pursuit of” rather than “attribution to” because the latter term conventionalizes a relation between verse and subject that, in the history of the poetry of slavery (though not only there), exceeds and problematizes such typifications. For the most part, while there have of course been numerous controversies over the author-attribution of certain texts (Shakespeare’s plays, for example, and the Federalist Papers), as well as over specific stylistometric methods for making such attributions, the propriety of author-attribution itself is rarely questioned. If authorship can be known, it should be known. This imperative seems especially well-founded in relation to author-groups historically denied access to literacy, or to means of publication, or upon whom the requirement of anonymity or pseudonymity has been imposed. That the names of hitherto uncredited women and minority authors continue to be added to the canons of literature and the histories of culture is a triumph of modern scholarship.

Yet these hard-won attributions are also affirmations of a poetics of individuated authorship that many of us are inclined to look at with some skepticism – not only because we may want to distinguish between the producer of a text and the producers of the text’s meaning, but also because of what tracking down and naming an author may facilitate: for example, narcissistic forms of readerly identification that often go unexamined; underestimating or forgetting the racialization of authorship’s entitlements; misapprehension of individuation and self-possession as invariably empowering; and, not least, the fabulation of poetic language as personal voice.

Thus one reader might overlook or discount the fact that the personalization of poetic achievement through the attribution of an author’s name also renders that author open to charges of personal insufficiency or blameworthy inauthenticity. Such charges have pursued Phillis Wheatley from her day to ours. Another reader, straining to hear the author’s “own” voice, may engage in a powerfully motivated pursuit of what Herbert Tucker calls “intersubjective confirmation of the self” to the neglect of the poem’s highly conditional subjectivity – as figured, for example, in the normative pietism and complex citational practice of Jupiter Hammon’s “Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly” and in many other poems of slave addressivity.² Another reader, by stipulating individual authorship and practicing silent reading, may disable recognition of a history and ethos of strategic generality and collective performance. The reception history of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s poetry has tended to chase it away from the complex and often depersonalizing contexts of both print and political action.

To challenge and denaturalize such affirmations of individual authorship need not mean carelessly risking, as Meredith McGill puts it in relation to Harper, “the hard-won visibility of this African American woman poet.”³ One needn’t condemn any poet to subjectlessness, or deny subjectivity to any and all enactments of voice in poetry, in order to turn a less personalizing gaze – and ear – toward the figures of subjectivation in the poetry of slavery. McGill’s focus on the bibliographic concept of format as one such figure of subjectivation, for example, doesn’t mean she rejects the meaningfulness of biographical coherence and authorial intention. But she does seek to raise our reading practices up out of the valley of the shadow of complacently dematerialized and dematerializing ways of reading.

In her work on Harper, McGill adapts the bibliographic concept of format in order to provide new leverage on authorship as well as readership. Here, I attempt something similar by adapting the phenomenological concept of rhythm for a reading of the poetry of slavery – by which I mean not just poetry by slaves and former slaves, such as Terry, Hammon, Wheatley, Albery Allson Whitman, and George Moses Horton, but also poems of slave

subjectivity by whites and other freeborns – as a history of subjectivation through rhythm, that is, as a continuing history of both the subject's formation (agency) and its subordination (deprivation of agency).

This history of subjectivation through rhythm has been prone to caricature by sympathetic and unsympathetic readers alike. The crux is pretty obvious. To talk about the sophistication and ubiquity of slave rhythm's triumph over mindless kinesthesia is to veer toward one of slavery's most enduring racist caricatures – what the Jamaican-American critic Joel Rogers, writing in Alain Leroy Locke's foundational anthology *The New Negro*, himself referred to as “That elusive something, [that] for lack of a better name, I'll call Negro rhythm.”⁴ From Rogers to recent critics including Houston Baker, Eric Sundquist, and Jack Kerkering – who are more likely to speak of an “African” or “African-American” or “Pan-African” *sound* – the tension between the particularizing force of cultural and regional specificity and the generalizing, even transcendentalizing force of racial identity is perhaps an unresolvable tension.⁵ But just how that tension gets performed and analyzed metrically has never been a prominent feature in the critical history of African-American poetry or of American poetry more broadly construed – even in twentieth- and twenty-first-century studies. That is, the poetic history of subjectivation through rhythm has rarely if ever been told in relation to the prosodic history of the slavery era, in relation to the ways in which rhythm in poetry was understood, performed, and theorized during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The history and criticism of nineteenth-century American poetry in particular – the focus of this volume – remain largely uninformed by this prosodic history.

By the late seventeenth century, England had joined several other, more precocious European powers as a major player in the transatlantic slave trade. Not only direct involvement, but also general interest in and knowledge of slavery spread rapidly through the English-speaking world, just as the English language became more and more widely known among slave populations. For most of the eighteenth century, Great Britain was the world's biggest trader in slaves, and slavery was practiced throughout its colonies. Britain formally abolished the slave trade in 1807 and the practice of slavery in 1833; the USA followed with its own ban on the trade in 1808, but would not formally abolish slavery until 1865. For the first century of its existence, the USA ensured that slavery was a fundamental condition of the global economy and thus also a fundamental condition of cultural production and consumption.

The presence of Africa in the English poetic imagination, which had hitherto been negligible, by the late seventeenth century reached a kind of critical

mass that prompted a literary chain reaction, which in turn has recently prompted James Basker, in the Introduction to his monumental anthology of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poems about slavery, to call for renewed attention to “an Afrocentric poetics of the Enlightenment.”⁶ The thousands of lines of poetry Basker collects help initiate a reconstruction of that poetics. Yet while the prosodic theories and principles informing poetic practice are often implicit and sometimes manifest in the poems themselves, the vast prosodic literature of the period remains unrecuperated.

Fair enough, for a commercial anthology of poetry that already has to work hard to overcome twenty-first-century prejudices against pre-romantic conventions of meter and poetic form. Anthologies of nineteenth-century poetry, too, tend to rely on poems themselves to manifest the prosodic theory behind the practice, which they sometimes do, or often seem to do, in ways that could nevertheless benefit from being read in the context of the now much less familiar discourse of nineteenth-century prosody.⁷

One of the poets excerpted in Basker's anthology is the British anti-slavery radical John Thelwall, who, Basker notes, was a leader in the critique of household consumption of West Indian sugar. Basker excerpts a passage from one of the many untitled poems in Thelwall's massive, polygeneric work *The Peripatetic* (1793), a passage that mocks the tea-drinking “Daughters of Albion,” who “At morn, at eve, your sweeten'd beverage sup, / Nor see the blood of thousands in the cup.”⁸ The excerpt is powerful, but it omits the poem's narrative context as well as its opening fourteen lines, which are richly suggestive of the link between prosody and slavery, a link that defined the course of Thelwall's career.

The poem both emerges from and finds itself enclosed within the prose narration of the capture of a songbird witnessed by the narrator. It is a versified extension of his critique of the “powers of sympathy”:

to what cruelty or injustice will not some men submit to obtain the bread of idleness! What cruelty or injustice will not Pride and Luxury thoughtlessly encourage, if their senses may but be gratified with the fruits of inhumanity!
Go,

Daughters of Albion's gay enlighten'd hour!
Hail the sweet strains your captive warblers pour;
Their graceful forms and downy plumage prize,
And the gay luster of their varied dyes:
Nor ever think, while tremulous they sing,
Or flutt'ring spread the glossy-tinctur'd wing,
That fluttering wing, that tremulated strain
Of lingering griefs, and cruel bonds complain:

Nor ever think – that, for a sordid joy,
 Their hopes, their rights, affections ye destroy;
 Doom them the air's unbounded space to change,
 For the dull cage's loath'd, contracted range;
 There, every social throb condemn'd to mourn
 Which each sad summer bids in vain return.⁹

The poem takes form and takes flight in the course of an elaborate figuration of the slaves of the sugar islands as songbirds that have been trapped and caged in order to produce revenue for the trappers and music for Albion's tea-swilling ladies. There is, in the narrator's shift from prose to verse, a hint of his identification with the songbird's and thus with the slave's "tremulated strain" and more than a hint of his ambivalence toward "the heroic couplet of the smoothe, but cold and formal school of Pope."¹⁰ As Michael Scrivener has noted, "the political repression he struggled against in the 1790s can be renamed as a speech impediment or the condition of speechlessness, two problems Thelwall approached after 1801 as a speech therapist and scientist of language."¹¹

Indeed, Thelwall's career as a renowned speech therapist and theorist of rhetoric, elocution, and prosody is a fully politicized extension of his anti-slavery activism and his reaction to the sometimes violent suppression of his own speech (Thelwall was tried unsuccessfully for high treason in 1794). What is particularly striking in Thelwall's work and thought is the conjunction of the physiology of speech and its political/rhetorical uses. He opens his critique of previous English prosodists by faulting them for their reliance on formal rules, "instead of appealing to physical analysis, the primary principles of nature, and the physiological necessities resulting from the organization of vocal beings."¹² And these "vocal beings" are absolutely fundamental to Thelwall's conception of democratic society – not just vocal beings like poets (such as himself and his friends Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth), or elite polemicists (such as his antagonists Edmund Burke and William Godwin), but also, and especially, "the oppressed and injured labourer," whether in the English factory or on the American or Antillean plantation.¹³

With John Thelwall, nineteenth-century Anglo-American prosody began its agonized and fascinating inquiry into the relation between sound and work, and the poetry of slavery continued to be at the center of that inquiry. Paying closer, phenomenologically informed attention to this prosodic discourse should help us better appreciate what was going on when English-speakers sat down (or stood up) to read and write and sing and recite the poetry of slavery.

Take, for example, the age-old question as to whether verse is a fetter to expression, like Thelwall's cage or the silken gyve on a songbird's leg, or whether it is, conversely, an enabling resistance, like the resistance of the air that makes possible the freed bird's flight. This question takes many different forms in different eras and suggests many different stakes for different questioners. But for a wide range of nineteenth-century prosodists, the question seemed especially to require a more fully developed, objective theory than it had hitherto generated: a new "science of English verse," as Johns Hopkins professor and ex-Confederate soldier Sidney Lanier called it.¹⁴ There was a broadly felt dilemma. On one hand, there was keen desire for comprehensiveness, quantification, precision, and, certainly not least, the prestige of a scientific discipline. Could there be a single system for marking rhythmic patterning based in quantifiable principles of what Coventry Patmore called "English metrical law"?¹⁵ On the other hand, there was grave concern for the perceived degradation and possible loss of individual agency and purpose, of what Matthew Campbell has called "the rhythm of will."¹⁶ The literal mechanization of poetic creation itself, in an age of rapid industrialization and the depersonalization of the laboring subject, was a very worrisome prospect.¹⁷ Was this the way the science of verse would tend?

As Yopie Prins has observed, the "formalization of metrical theory coincides with a general nineteenth-century tendency toward the codification of numerical modes of analysis."¹⁸ This included the precise and broadly synchronized measurement of time, which has its foundation not only in the design and proliferation of increasingly accurate mechanical clocks from the late seventeenth century onwards, but also – and anything but coincidentally – in the growing need for the precise measurement, control, and temporal coordination, on a massive scale, of the periodicity of labor. Slavery, and the rapid industrialization and imperial expansion of the English-speaking world that slavery helped enable, made this need both acute and extremely profitable. There is nowhere, perhaps, where this is better seen than in the plantation system of the antebellum South and in the Northern mills and factories where free-wage laborers kept time with their enslaved counterparts.¹⁹

Thus it should come as no surprise that nineteenth-century prosodic discourse is broadly inflected by the language of slavery. For example, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet is a "liberating god" who "unlocks our chains."²⁰ And Patmore writes of the necessary "shackles of artistic form," insisting that "language should always seem to *feel*, though not to *suffer from* the bonds of verse."²¹ Indeed no one in the nineteenth century could have failed to perceive, whether consciously or unconsciously, that slavery continued to transform the relation of time-keeping

to sound. It mediated and confounded pre-industrial and industrial workplaces and time-sensibilities. It reinforced the connections between time, sound, and pain, with its bells, with its whips and, not least, with its songs. Sounds both lyrical and unlyrical facilitated new and prodigious rhythms of work, and they also helped locate and keep track of ever-expanding populations of American slaves. Overseers were often great promoters of the singing and chanting of slaves; if you could hear them, you knew where they were. And this singing and chanting, long before its verses started to be systematically transcribed and published, had a pervasive influence on American popular song, particularly through blackface performance and minstrelsy.

Moreover, poetry – sung, chanted, or spoken – was perhaps the most important, often the only, resource slaves had for the palliation of monotony – the monotony of physical work – through cognitions and sensations of melody and harmony and the assertion of rhythmic complexity and forms of dissonance against the mechanistic regularity of repetitive coerced labor: a rhythmic protest, one could say, against the mechanization of time and movement, or a slave dysprosody – disturbances of intonation, stress, pause, etc. – to oppose slavery's violently enforced periodicity.²²

The psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham lends some phenomenological support to this notion of slave dysprosody. He writes in his essay on “Rhythmizing Intentionality,” not about the figure of the slave explicitly, but about the later, analogous figure of the assembly-line worker and his relation to the “object” or machine:

His effort to adhere to the object makes him a stranger to himself, an “alien.” Yet, this occurs precisely because he does not have a rhythmic experience of periodicity. Nonetheless, there is one condition that may sometimes enable the mechanized laborer to overcome this “alienation” and to affirm himself in the face of the machine: if he sings while working. Transported into the imaginary, he makes his gestures the incantatory rite of his demiurgic power. We are presented here with two distinct and irreducible phenomena: first, the execution of movements made in time with a perceived periodicity, and second, the rhythmization of this kinesthesia.

What does the rhythmizing act consist of? Objectively, nothing has changed: the same movements are executed with the same efficacy. The difference is that for the singer, the movements have received a new signification: no longer a means of adapting to the machine or of executing a task, they are now sighted with a view to something unreal and transcendent, whose imaginary presence they must represent. This something, which is nothing other than rhythm, is not itself the totality of these movements, but what, by means of these movements, we are able to intend beyond them: expectations, surprises, fulfillments – in short, a specific structure of temporality.²³

Does slave dysprosody make of its harmonies and melodies and melismas and syncopations a kind of enabling resistance to enforced labor's soul-killing periodicity? Or does it merely reinforce that periodicity as yet another one of slavery's dehumanizing technologies – bodies, like the brains of Robert Browning's slavish poet, “beat into rhythm”?²⁴

If we accept rhythm, as Abraham asks us to, as the object of phenomenological intentionality, then what of the assembly-line worker or the chattel-slave himself or herself being sighted (objectified) as a body “in respect to which ethical behavior has been suspended”?²⁵ This is a question for all revisions of Husserlian phenomenology, including Abraham's psychoanalytic revision. More specifically, we could ask: How does the phenomenological critique of scientific rationalism work in relation to the historical conditions of nineteenth-century slavery (and of nineteenth-century scientific prosody) as an outcome of such rationalism? Is the meaningfulness of the “rhythmizing intentionality” of the singing laborer as described by Abraham strictly limited to individual consciousness in and of a world in which, “[o]bjectively, nothing has changed”? Does “rhythmizing intentionality,” to paraphrase W. H. Auden, make nothing happen?

The antebellum American poet and prosodist, William Cullen Bryant, arguing against imitation of the school of Pope, wrote of the need for a more liberal, variegated style of versification in American poetry that would keep pace with and do justice to contemporary American life.²⁶ Bryant's own experiments with a looser sort of blank verse were important but tentative. Far more exciting, noted James Kennard, Jr. (with a sarcastic edge), was the improvisatory syncretism of slaves, animadverting at the end of an essay called “Who Are Our National Poets?” that Bryant's own name – along with those of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Fitz-Greene Halleck, and John Greenleaf Whittier – would be a better answer to that question if he were to “consult the taste of your fair countrywomen; write no more English poems; write negro songs, and Yankee songs in Negro style; take lessons in dancing of the celebrated Thomas Rice...”²⁷

The popularity of Thomas Rice and many other white antebellum minstrel performers helped ensure cultural saturation by the rhythms of the black vernacular, as did many black performers themselves. One of the first and most famous African Americans to perform regularly both for and with whites, William Henry Lane, was known as Master Juba or, after the publication of Charles Dickens's sketch of him in *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842), as Boz's Juba. The novelty and complexity of the rhythms of Juba's performance not only spurred the emergence of later styles of American dance and music but also quickly appealed to the era's

poets and prosodists in relation to their own efforts to measure and to modify the pace of nineteenth-century poetry. In 1835, author and Virginian Nathaniel Beverly Tucker wrote to Edgar Allan Poe of his efforts as a poet to cultivate the beauty, not of faultless versification, but of "rugged" rhythms that would be "the more graceful for a little awkwardness":

I do not know to what to liken those occasional departures from regular metre which are so fascinating. They are more to my ear like that marvelous performance – "clapping Juba," than any thing else. The beat is capriciously irregular; there is no attempt to keep time to all the notes, but then it comes so pat & so distinct that the cadence is never lost.²⁸

Thus an aspiring white poet writing to the United States' first major poetic theorist comparing his struggle to reconcile accentual and syllabic imperatives with the more successful rhythms of minstrel dance steps, derived in part from the rhythmic accompaniments of plantation labor and slave-quarter recreation.

Rhythms also worked their way back from parlor to field. Sometimes this seems to have happened directly, as when Poe's friend, the Georgia poet Thomas Holley Chivers, wrote a song "to be sung by my father's Negroes at a Corn Shucking."²⁹ More often, these rhythms moved promiscuously among sites of slave- and wage-labor, public entertainment, collective composition and performance, and private reading and writing – as when the so-called Negro Spirituals were, beginning in the 1860s, transcribed, printed, and thus not only disseminated among white readers but also "returned" in a more durable and conventionally literary form to African Americans. The topos or sub-genre of the corn-song itself reverberates through nineteenth-century American poetry, in a multiplicity of rhythms and at all levels of cultural prestige: in the anonymizing profusion and variation of plantation songs;³⁰ in relatively straightforward imitations like Chivers's; in their countless minstrel-show adaptations and lampoons by both black and white artists; in popular adaptations by white authors including Joel Chandler Harris's "Corn-Shucking Song" and by African-American performers like the Fisk Jubilee Singers; in African-American dialect poems such as James Edwin Campbell's "Song of the Corn" and Paul Laurence Dunbar's "A Corn-Song"; and in standard English lyrics such as Dunbar's "The Corn-Stalk Fiddle," John Greenleaf Whittier's "The Corn Song," S. C. Cromwell's "Corn-Shucking Song," Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Corn Fields," William T. Dumas's "Corn-Shucking," and Sidney Lanier's "Corn."

As in "Corn" and his other experimental verses, so too in his prosodic theory did Lanier draw on the common faculty he calls, anticipating Nicolas Abraham, "rhythmic intention," in order to underscore his point that the

most complex rhythms in English poetry are to be found as much if not more in "the rhythmic perceptions of the people" as in elite poets and composers. His chief examples are Mother Goose nursery songs and the "patting Juba" of the Southern plantation, both in his view fully qualifying as expressions of a type of freedom whose moral justification is the same enlarged perception and exalted love of the beautiful cultivated in the rhythmic perception of Shakespeare, or Milton, or Hayden.³¹

In both Milton and Master Juba, Lanier implies, there is a meaningful relation between unorthodox or experimental prosody and political liberty – not a direct analogy, in which the slave's chains would be exactly "like" the constraints of conventional meter, but an overdetermined relation whose excess of context includes the more recent theories of the rhythmic foundation of subjectivity to be found in the work of phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Abraham and in the work of literary theorists such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Henri Meschonnic, as well as in the work of other nineteenth-century prosodists who, like Lanier, were directly confronted with the rhythmic conditioning of slave subjectivity.

Among these other prosodists, Haverford professor Francis Gummere insisted that rhythm was "the essential fact of poetry." Nor were he and Lanier alone in drawing from their understanding of the rhythmizing collectives of Southern plantation life the conclusion that rhythm, as Gummere put it, "is an affair of instinctive perception transformed into a social act as the expression of social consent."³² Gummere himself launches broad imperatives from his ethnography of rhythm: "Poetry, like music, is social; like its main factor, rhythm, it is the outcome of communal consent, a *faculté d'ensemble*; and this should be writ large over every treatise on poetry, in order to draw the mind of the reader from that warped and baffling habit which looks upon all poetry as a solitary performance." He abhors what he takes to be the passivity of contemporary readers and auditors of poetry, and urges a reeducation of listening, in which the "muscular sense" would take precedence over the "sense of hearing."³³ Listening itself is, in other words, a type of physical labor, not just something you do passively while others are (singing and) laboring.

Around the same time, W. E. B. Du Bois, too, was writing about having derived a sense of the possible cultural outcome of communal consent in a context of labor from what he called the Sorrow Songs. And, as John Kerkerling has observed, Du Bois imagined this outcome as being based in a rhythmic consent to a post-national, Pan-Negroist racial identification.³⁴ "If," Du Bois wrote in his essay "The Conservation of Races," "among the gaily-colored banners that deck the broad ramparts of civilizations is to hang one uncompromising black, then it must be placed there

by black hands, fashioned by black heads and hallowed by the travail of 200,000,000 black hearts beating in one glad song of jubilee.”³⁵ In a way that is phenomenologically compelling, Du Bois here resists the temptation to draw sharp distinctions between physical and intellectual labor. He does so, for example, by attributing the work of “fashion[ing]” to “black heads” rather than “black hands,” and by characterizing song as the synchronized “travail” of hearts. Performed in the awful shadow cast by the phrase “to hang one uncompromising black,” Du Bois’s unsettlement of dualism hails something beyond a transcendental, Husserlian phenomenology of rhythm (i.e. rhythm as something external to consciousness and therefore subject to pure description) to one that is existential (pace Martin Heidegger) in the manner of Merleau-Ponty – that is, with an orientation toward the body and its experience in the concrete world. The poetry of slavery gives special point to Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of rhythm as a “body schema” [*schéma corporel*]³⁶ – that is, as a kind of habit that we acquire precognitively, but that we may also learn, at least partially, to understand in relation to both the formation and the subordination of subjectivity and to its bodily structures of perception.

In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on corporeity – on *being* rather than *having* a body – pushes past Husserl’s stickier attachment to a conceptual dualism in which the consciousness of perception has a clear inside (Husserl’s “consciousness”) and outside (Husserl’s “reality”). But it also harkens back to the much earlier anthropologies of rhythm through and with which Romantic prosody emerged, for example in August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s writings on the primordial and ongoing linguistic enterprise of the constitution of consciousness through rhythm. Along with many others, Emerson drew from Schlegel the idea that conventional language was a fossilization – a Pompeian freezing – of the dynamic human interactions that give rise to metaphor: “language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer.”³⁷ The relation between “speaker” and “hearer,” in Emerson as in Schlegel, is not merely or necessarily that of an active speaker and a passive hearer. “One must,” as Emerson puts it elsewhere, “be an inventor to read well.”³⁸ Thus his “first speaker” and “hearer” exist to one another in a dynamic structure of balanced reciprocation rather than a relationship of dominance and submission – less like the Hegelian relationship between master and slave and more like the freely associative activity of Novalis’s “first signifier” and “second signifier.”³⁹

The relation of anthropology and linguistics is strained in romantic poetics precisely because, while the general tendency is to understand language as a relational semiotics, the nature of that relation – its structure, its temporality, its phenomenology – remained in dispute, and would continue to do so, latently or manifestly, throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. Is it a relation of authority imposed by one upon another – by father upon child, by institutionalized tradition upon subsequent generations, by master upon slave? Or is it a freely willed and reciprocally renewed relation between equal subjects? These questions frame not only the poetry of slavery, but also the broader history of poetic rhythm, and the attempts at its theorization, from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth.

But the poetry of slavery dramatically underscores and amplifies these questions. Its thematizations include the acquisition of literacy and ownership of cultural heritage as forms of liberation – but liberation, one wants to ask, into what regulatory mechanisms of rhythmic experience? Its techniques incorporate neo-classical precision, romantic variation, and folk improvisation – but with what degrees of authority and submission? Its circulation and publication as poetry help objectify and disseminate the pulse of experiences often horrifying and sometimes seemingly ineffable – but, in doing so, do they also compound and advertise a structuring attachment to subjection? It encompasses a brutal history of forced labor – but whose work do poems themselves objectify?

No single poem can provide all the answers. But in the remainder of this chapter I’d like to demonstrate how the reading of a particular poem can engage these questions in the context of the prosodic history I’ve begun to open up.

“Jefferson’s Daughter” (1839) is a short poem on a hot topic: the sale of a female slave supposed to be the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Jefferson. The poem represents the latest episode in a history of rumors about Jefferson’s sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemings – rumors that began circulating widely and provocatively in the transatlantic press in 1802, often in the form of poems by such well-known American and British authors as Joseph Dennie, John Quincy Adams, Thomas Fessenden, and Thomas Moore. The identity of the author of “Jefferson’s Daughter” is less certain. It may be the work of William Wells Brown, as Marcus Wood asserts.⁴⁰ It was, in any case, one of the poems that Brown, a fugitive slave, compiled in his 1848 anthology of anti-slavery poetry, and he later spun the incident into his well-known novel, *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853). Here is the poem as it initially appeared in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, where it is signed only “E.”:

JEFFERSON'S DAUGHTER.

"It is asserted, on the authority of an American newspaper, that the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, late President of the United States, was sold at New Orleans for 1000 dollars." – *Morning Chronicle*.

Can the blood that at Lexington poured o'er the plain,
When thy sons warred with tyrants their rights to uphold –
Can the tide of Niagara wipe out the stain?
No! Jefferson's child has been bartered for gold!

Do ye boast of your freedom? Peace, babblers, be still!
Prate not of the goddess who scarce deigns to hear.
Have ye *power* to unbind? Are ye wanting in *will*?
Must the groan of your bondsmen still torture the ear?

The daughter of Jefferson sold for a slave!
The child of a freeman, for dollars and francs!
The roar of applause when your orators rave
Is lost in the sound of her chain as it clanks.

Peace, then, ye blasphemers of Liberty's name!
Though red was the blood by your forefathers spilt;
Still redder your cheeks should be mantled with shame,
Till the spirit of freedom shall cancel the guilt.

But the brand of the slave is the tint of his skin,
Though his heart may beat loyal and true underneath;
While the soul of the tyrant is rotten within,
And his white the mere cloak to the blackness of death.

Are ye deaf to the plaints that each moment arise?
Is it thus ye forget the mild precepts of Penn –
Unheeding the clamour that "maddens the skies,"
As ye trample the rights of your dark fellow-men?

When the incense that glows before Liberty's shrine
Is unmix'd with the blood of the gall'd and oppress'd –
Oh! then, and *then* only, the boast may be thine,
That the stripes and stars wave o'er a land of the blest.

E.41

Many readers of nineteenth-century poetry will associate these rhymed anapestic tetrameter quatrains with memorable popular verses such as Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" (1815) and Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (1823) and, more broadly, with the genre of the limerick. But how would readers *in* the nineteenth century have experienced the poem's anapestic meter?

According to the author of the first major American statement on prosody written after the Revolution, they would, or at least should, have experienced it as an accentual rhythm and not as a quantitative one. That is, according to Thomas Jefferson (the very same) they would ideally already have developed a conscious sense of English-language poetry, pace Samuel Johnson, as being organized and experienced chiefly as patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables – not, as in classical prosody, by the perceived duration of those syllables. For Jefferson, the modernization and simplification of prosody for the study and appreciation of poetry in English is a matter of political significance, occupying his attention during long walks in the Bois de Boulogne in 1786 when he might have been thinking instead about establishing a lasting peace with England, quashing North African piracy, or repaying America's debt to France. Prosody matters to Jefferson because of the linguistic and cultural authority to which it gives access. The English language and the canon of English poetry are the birthright of native speakers of English, regardless of nationality. Moreover, he insists, democratically, that the rules of prosody do not exhaust the limits of rhythmic variation. There is a liberty that co-exists with formal constraint – a political principle of which Jefferson was one of the great exponents. "No two persons," he wrote, "will accent the same passage alike. No person but a real adept would accent it twice alike. Perhaps two real adepts who should utter the same passage with infinite perfection yet by throwing the energy into different words might produce very different effects."⁴² In other words, equality is not monotony.

Thus, at least some nineteenth-century readers of the poem "Jefferson's Daughter" would have appreciated and undertaken the challenge, not to submit unthinkingly and unquestioningly to its anapestic meter, but rather to pursue meaningful rhythmic variation through multiple, experimental readings. The poem lays down many gauntlets simultaneously, asking hard questions about the history and nature of American freedom while also refusing to let the lines scan too neatly, as in line 5, where the anapestic meter, which plots "Peace" as an unaccented syllable, jars with the heavy accent that sense, as well as the strong medial caesura, would place on that word. One might well feel like a bit of a "babbling" here, temporarily caught up in the rhythmic turbulence of such a line.

In nineteenth-century poetics, the anapest is frequently associated with shifting, accelerating movement. Bryant argues that the insertion of an anapest in a line of iambic measure "quickens the numbers, and gives additional liveliness."⁴³ And Poe's use of anapestic meter in the poem "Annabel Lee" prompted the great historian of English prosody, George Saintsbury, to write archly that "the miraculous power of the anapaest [has] gathered itself into something superhuman here ... the swiftness rises, and doubles right through

the poem, till, in the last stanza, you cannot keep up with it. It leaves you panting far behind.”⁴⁴ More soberly, Saintsbury dates the “tragicalising” of the anapest (i.e. its use in poems on serious subjects) only a generation or two earlier than “Jefferson’s Daughter.”⁴⁵ Many contemporary readers of that poem would have noted, as Saintsbury did half a century later, that anapestic meter still carried with it a ready if not exclusive association with song and other light verse. In other words, the poem’s anapestic meter would have generated conceptual and tonal as well as rhythmic turbulence.

The choice of anapestic meter for such a vehement poem on such a grave topic could be deliberately ironic or merely untutored – possibilities that contribute to the general ambiguity of authorship and voice. The passive voice of the epigraph (“It is asserted”) immediately alerts us to the potential difficulty of tracing speech back to an identifiable speaker, even as the authority of newsprint (of “an American newspaper,” of the London *Morning Chronicle* that cites it, and of *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* which publishes the poem along with its epigraph) lends an air of credibility and objectivity to what otherwise might be dismissed as groundless partisan rumor. The poem is signed by a mere cipher, though the authorial voice that one is tempted by the conventions of lyric reading to infer is aggressively insistent, judgmental, hortatory; is at least somewhat familiar with American history, geography, and iconography; alludes to the Psalms; and seeks to differentiate himself or herself sharply from a nevertheless indeterminate cohort of Americans. To whom is this poem addressed? To slaveholding Americans? To white Americans? To women as well as men? To recent immigrants as well as to the descendants of the Revolutionary generation? And by whom is this audience being addressed? A slave? A former or escaped slave, like William Wells Brown? A free African American? A white abolitionist?

If it can be determined that this poem is by William Wells Brown, or by any other known author, students of American poetry will rightly applaud the attribution. But what if the poem’s ability to elude conventional attribution is one of its most meaningful features? Perhaps that is why Brown and William Lloyd Garrison both chose to reprint it. They both omit the signature “E.” in their reprintings, suggesting perhaps an inclination to move away from personal attribution, away from treating such a poem as an objectification of the labor of a particular individual – not because that person is not known (perhaps it *was* written by Brown), but because they want to interfere with, rather than reinforce, what readers think they can know about an author’s work (that is, both the activity and the artifact of labor) and about their own work of reading.

One can read “Jefferson’s Daughter” as the rhythmizing intentionality of an inferred speaker that emanates from a place of inaccessibility the poem

itself only vaguely approximates. It is not exactly “the plain” at Lexington, or the falls of Niagara, or the lecture hall where the “orators rave,” or the auction block in New Orleans, or even the fantasmatic national space “before Liberty’s shrine” over which “the stripes and stars wave.” It could be the speaker’s psyche, or perhaps a physical hiding place, such as Brown and many others occupied as fugitive slaves. In other words, the inaccessibility of place in the poem could represent the trauma of slavery as yet to be coordinated with conscious experience (“Oh! then, and *then* only”). Or it could represent the illocality of slave subjectivity – the displacement of expressive agency from the site of the slave’s subjugation to the products of the mechanized rhythms of coerced labor.

It’s no accident that “Jefferson’s Daughter” shares its page in *Tait’s* with a poem entitled “Ode to Labour,” a poem that was reprinted a few months later in Glasgow’s *Chartist Circular*. The transatlantic working-class labor movement initiated by the Chartists inspired many with the conviction that the relation between chattel slavery and wage slavery transcended analogy. And it made absolutely untenable, once and for all, the notion that the industrialized economies of Great Britain and the Northern USA weren’t fully complicit with and in many ways themselves modeled on the slave economies of the Southern USA, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Wherever you are, as Emerson put it, “there is complicity.”⁴⁶

It is there in the poetry of slavery, if the rhythms proper to capital can be said to have anything at all in common with the rhythms proper to poetry. In his book on rhythm, Henri Lefebvre writes that capital “constructs and erects itself on a contempt for life and from this foundation: the body, the time of living. Which does not cease to amaze: that a society, a *civilisation*, a culture is able to construct itself from such disdain [*dédain*].”⁴⁷ This disdain is by no means inherent in conventional meters such as the anapestic tetrameter of “Jefferson’s Daughter.” But disdain can marshal the capacity of writers and readers alike to accept as natural or inevitable somatic registrations of alienation akin to that of Abraham’s “mechanized laborer,” and to steer clear of sensations of profound disturbance that would exceed the consoling but hardly revolutionary dysprosody of that laborer’s “rhythmizing intentionality.” In a sense, the authors of both “Jefferson’s Daughter” and “Ode to Labour” are poets of a revolution they can’t imagine taking place. Both poems end not in violent upheaval but with images of peaceful transition, forgiveness, and mercy – in the former, “the mild precepts of Penn” brought back into practice in a post-slavery society under the same billowing national flag, and in the latter an exhortation to peaceful regime change. Metrical conventions don’t in and of themselves inhibit revolutionary struggle. But they can sometimes lend the inhibition itself an air of artfulness and invention. By the same token,

metrical iconoclasm can't take the place of revolutionary action, but it can sometimes lend the revolutionary imagination a somatic experience of lasting estrangement. It's to these extremes of inhibition and estrangement that a fuller prosodic history of the poetry of slavery, and the subjects it dogs, might turn.

NOTES

- 1 For the most recent and reliable account of Terry's life, see Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Move out of Slavery and into Legend* (New York: Amistad/Harper Collins, 2008).
- 2 Herbert F. Tucker, "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 242.
- 3 Meredith L. McGill, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry" (paper presented at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, Philadelphia, PA, July 15, 2010).
- 4 J. A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1925; New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 220.
- 5 For an historical atlas of African-American rhythm, see Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. pp. 230-77.
- 6 James G. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. xlv-xlvii.
- 7 See, for example, Marcus Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764-1865* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 8 Basker, *Amazing Grace*, p. 482.
- 9 John Thelwall, *The Peripatetic*, ed. Judith Thompson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), p. 91.
- 10 John Thelwall, *Selections for the Illustration of a Course of Instructions on the Rhythmus and Utterance of the English Language* (London: J. M'Creery, 1812), p. xviii.
- 11 Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 191-92.
- 12 Thelwall, *Selections*, pp. i-ii.
- 13 John Thelwall, *Sober Reflections on the Seditious and Inflammatory Letter of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, to a Noble Lord, Addresses to the Serious Consideration of His Fellow Citizens* (London: H. D. Symonds, 1796), p. 32.
- 14 Sidney Lanier, *The Science of English Verse* (New York: Scribners, 1880).
- 15 Coventry Patmore, *Essay on English Metrical Law: A Critical Edition with a Commentary*, ed. Mary Augustine Roth (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1961).
- 16 See Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 17 See Jason Hall's essay on John Clark's *Eureka* machine, a mid-century mechanical device for producing Latin hexameters ("Popular Prosody: Spectacle and the Politics of Victorian Versification," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 62.2 [2007], 222-29).
- 18 Yopie Prins, "Victorian Meters," in Joseph Bristow, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 106.
- 19 See Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
- 20 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *Essays and Poems*, ed. Joel Porte, Harold Bloom, and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1996), pp. 462, 463.
- 21 Patmore, *Essay*, p. 8.
- 22 For the literary-critical riff on the medical term "dysprosody," see Yopie Prins, "Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *The Science of English Verse*," *PMLA*, 123.1 (January 2008), 229-34.
- 23 Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand (Stanford University Press, 1995), 76.
- 24 Robert Browning, "The Last Ride Together," in *Robert Browning: The Poems*, 2 vols., ed. John Peggrew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 1:610.
- 25 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 226.
- 26 William Cullen Bryant, "On Trisyllabic Feet in Iambic Measure" (1819), in *Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant*, vol. 1, ed. Parke Godwin (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), pp. 57-67.
- 27 [James K. Kennard, Jr.], "Who Are Our National Poets?" *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* (October 1845), 341.
- 28 [Nathaniel Beverly Tucker], letter to Edgar Allan Poe, in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. xvii, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902), p. 22.
- 29 Emma Lester Chase and Lois Ferry Parks, eds., *The Complete Works of Thomas Holley Chivers*, vol. 1 (Providence: Brown University Press, 1957), p. 197.
- 30 A selection of these songs appears in the corn-shucking accounts and ex-slave interviews appended to Roger D. Abrahams's *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York: Penguin, 1992), pp. 203-328.
- 31 Lanier, *Science of English Verse*, pp. 186, 315.
- 32 Francis B. Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), p. 99.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 34 John D. Kerker, *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 134-38.
- 35 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), p. 820.
- 36 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002). Smith translates "schéma corporel" as "body image" rather than "body schema."
- 37 Emerson, "The Poet," p. 457.
- 38 Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Essays and Poems*, p. 59.
- 39 Novalis, "Fichte Studies," in Jochen Schulte-Sasse, ed., *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 93-95.
- 40 Wood, ed., *Poetry of Slavery*, p. 571.

- 41 The poem is reproduced in William Wells Brown, ed., *The Anti-Slavery Harp; A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), pp. 23–24. It also appeared that year, without the epigraph from the London *Morning Chronicle*, in *The Liberator*, 18.21 (May 26, 1848), 84.
- 42 Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp. 611–12.
- 43 Bryant, “On Trisyllabic Feet,” p. 66.
- 44 George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*, 3 vols. (1906–1910; New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), III: 485.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 46 Emerson, “Fate,” in *Essays and Poems*, p. 771.
- 47 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 51–52.

6

ELIZA RICHARDS

Weathering the news in US
Civil War poetry

The outpouring of poetry in newspapers and magazines, North and South, during the Civil War period, served the wartime work of calling men to arms, offering solace for those who lost loved ones in battle, and justifying blood sacrifice in the name of patriotism. Precisely when the constitution of nations was at stake, writers and readers believed that poetry’s communicative powers could both express and shape national beliefs and sentiments.¹ Poetry’s communicative powers depended not just on its internal formal and rhetorical properties, but also on the vast informational network that served the conflict and helped determine its outcomes; especially in the North, telegraph, railroad, newspapers, and magazines consolidated into a mass media system that drew its energy from the war. The hunger for information fueled a new profession: the eyewitness reporter sent in sketches or stories composed at the site of events unfolding. Railroad and telegraph transmission enabled people far away from the action to receive reports with an astonishing rapidity that caused a newly intense addiction to the news; people needed only “bread and newspaper,” according to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. Newspapers like *Harper’s Illustrated Weekly*, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly*, and *Southern Illustrated Weekly* fed that addiction, carrying poetry alongside journalistic reportage and illustrations. These communicative modes or genres were by no means separate; each informed the other.²

Poetry adapted to this new environment by responding rapidly to war events gleaned from newspaper coverage and finding ways to shape, motivate, rationalize, and analyze war efforts. Many poets of the period – John Greenleaf Whittier, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Julia Ward Howe among them – expressed an urgent need to remake poetry in a way that gave it relevance in a period of national crisis.³ If they were not going to trade their pens for guns, as many of their peers were doing, then they needed to make poetry more than an indulgent form of entertainment and self-expression, which is how their earlier efforts seemed to them once the war broke out. Some poets, particularly at the beginning of the conflict, chose to address