

# theory aside

jason potts and daniel stout, editors

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## chapter 5

### What Is Historical Poetics?

Simon Jarvis

Yopie Prins has recently recommended that the study of lyric poetry proceed as a “historical poetics.” The rubric concisely collides two familiar desiderata. But what is historical poetics?

Prins’s short piece, sensibly, does not attempt to settle the matter by a definition. It does, however, give some indications—albeit sometimes negative or indirect—as to how we might understand the phrase. The essay looks again at Sidney Lanier’s attempt at a *Science of English Verse* (1880). Prins does not expect to find there a guide to scansion: “Practical application is not the point of historical poetics.” Instead she seeks a stimulus to overlooked questions: “What were the political and philosophical stakes of thinking about prosody? . . . What kinds of knowledge or ways of knowing are implicit in Lanier’s claim to ‘science’?” These sorts of questions could help us, it is indicated, to displace what Prins considers still to be a dominant set of assumptions in the study of lyric: “A turn to historical poetics is one way to theorize as well as to historicize alternatives to the assumption of voice in lyric reading. Historical poetics could open up a reading of various experiments in prosody and dysprosody, challenging us to think again about poetic practices that now seem obscure, obsolete, even obtuse.”<sup>1</sup>

This is as close as the essay comes to a formal statement of the nature of historical poetics, and it is worth considering its terms closely. It is hard to specify what is meant by the phrase “the assumption of voice in lyric reading.” A very wide range of claims could be imagined as instances of “the assumption of voice in lyric reading,” some defensible, others not. It could refer to a very minimal claim indeed—as, for example, that poems can be, and often have been, read aloud, and that this may be something which it might be good to take into account when we are thinking about them. Or it could refer to a very large claim, as, for example, that the printed text of a poem is only the poor and inadequate bodily vessel of its ideally sonorous soul.

Clearly no essay consisting only of a few pages is going to have the space to discriminate among all these different kinds of claim. The result of the essay's not doing so, however, is that the concept of historical poetics itself must remain unspecified, because the most concrete idea of historical poetics that is given there is that it is going to help us to develop alternatives to this "assumption"—or rather, to this very broad range of quite various assumptions.

Yet perhaps it is clear what is envisaged, even if it is not quite spelt out. What is envisaged, surely, is a practice which might be able to treat the history of poetics as a better initial guide than, say, a theory of rhythm and meter grounded in the latest developments in phonology, to what is at stake in historically changing practices of verse composition, distribution, and reception. Documents from the history of poetics—treatises like Lanier's, evidently, but also letters, reviews, advertisements, printing history—are inevitably saturated with all sorts of cultural idioms which can help us to connect them to the culture of which they are part and in which the people who produced, distributed, and consumed verse texts and performances lived. They may therefore also help us to understand how the minute details, the organization of poetics texts and performances—and not only their paraphrasable content—resonated with larger-scale organizations of thinking and feeling in the societies in which they were made and circulated.

It is worth pausing to note that if the phrase "historical poetics" is not original with Prins (nor with the research group in which Prins participated under this rubric at the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers),<sup>2</sup> this way of understanding it is. The phrase has cropped up fleetingly in a number of contexts before Prins, but there have been few determined efforts to raise it as a standard. The film historian David Bordwell's attempt along these lines would no doubt appear simply formalist to many literary theorists. But what if "formalism" were already "historical poetics"? The earliest recorded appeal to the phrase *historical poetics* is one of the most significant: the *Istoricheskaia Poetika* of Aleksandr Veselovsky (1838–1906). The work first appeared as part of a collection of Veselovsky's writings in 1913 and was then reprinted in 1940 and 1989. Veselovsky's education was undertaken in Europe and especially in Germany, where he found it puzzling that, while there were departments of world history and specialists in that subject, there were no departments of world literature and no experts in the topic.<sup>3</sup> "Historical poetics" emerges from Veselovsky's idea of the comparative study of world literature. Igor Shaitanov has summarized its aim in the following fashion: "Historical poetics urges one to concentrate on the word and the text, but, unlike most

modern textual approaches, historical poetics historicizes its subject when it engages itself not with the word in the text (after the long-standing practices of new criticism) but with the word in the genre."<sup>4</sup> A recent champion of Veselovsky's, Boris Maslov, defines *historical poetics* as "the study of the evolution of constitutive forms of creative (ritual, poetic, literary) uses of language." As Maslov has recently pointed out, one striking feature of Veselovsky's approach to world literature was his insistence on what Maslov calls "an astonishingly broad definition of literary history, which he explicitly equates with cultural history (*Kulturgeschichte*)."<sup>5</sup> Veselovsky rejected the use of aesthetic criteria to separate objects proper to poetics from those outside its purview. In his report back from Berlin as one of those "sent abroad in preparation for professorship," Veselovsky warned that "as long as the historical and everyday aspect remains nothing but an appendix or an accessory, a *Beiwerk*, of literary enquiry . . . the history of literature will remain as it has been up until now: a bibliographic guide, an aesthetic excursus, a treatise on itinerant stories, or a political sermon. Until then, literary history cannot exist."<sup>6</sup>

Veselovsky's simultaneous demands for exhaustive global knowledge and minute formal specification might lead us to share René Wellek's verdict that "Veselovsky has assigned to scholarship a task which can hardly ever be solved."<sup>7</sup> But Wellek went on to say that "the Russian Formalists, however, have taken up his challenge." This may surprise us, because we are so used to thinking that precisely what the "formalists" left out was history. How could formalists be the inheritors of historical poetics? Shaitanov, however, confirms the connection: "The figure who is conspicuous for his absence in Western reconstructions of Russian theoretical thought is Aleksandr Veselovskii. Without him contemporary literary theory in Russia lacks its source, unity and continuity. No matter how distant the extremes to which Bakhtin and the formalists may have run, they were always aware that they worked within the field which bore the name given to it by Veselovskii—*historical poetics*."<sup>8</sup>

If we think more closely about what is actually in the work of "the Russian Formalists," Shaitanov's claim that they were always aware that they were already working within the field of historical poetics may not seem so strange after all. Boris Eikhenbaum insisted, "We are not 'formalists,' but rather, if you like, specifiers." He repeated the point on the next page for good measure: "So we are not formalists and do not constitute a 'method.'"<sup>9</sup> Whether one considers Viktor Zhirmunsky's *The Composition of Lyric Poems*, Tynianov's *Archaists and Innovators* (Tynianov's own preferred title would have been *Archaist-Innovators*), or Eikhenbaum's *Melodies of Russian Lyric Verse*, what one

has is indeed historical poetics, in the sense of an attention to developing features of verse organization which these scholars themselves take to be intelligible not as a synchronic diagram but only as a historically changing dynamic. Form, says Tynianov, far from being some kind of fixed container for a changing content, the glass into which we pour the wine, owns a dynamic: the *continuous violation of automatism*.<sup>10</sup> It is, in this way, historical at its core. But the Russian poeticians contribute not to a history of the world conducted by means of poetry reading but to a history of how poems get made.

It is at this point that one needs to ask how the “historical poetics” envisaged by Prins would differ from the “neoformalism that . . . Cultural Studies might yet put to good use,” proposed by Herbert Tucker in his essay “The Fix of Form” and exemplified in Tucker’s own peerless *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790–1910*.<sup>11</sup> Superficially the two projects share much. Both critics have been especially interested in rhythm and meter; both want to try to get at some thicker sense of why meter matters, how we might specify the cultural and historical and affective significances deployed by metrical repertoires and by particular gestures within those repertoires. But I think there is one (under-articulated) belief in Prins’s idea of historical poetics which need not be implied in Tucker’s. This belief is that there is no part of poetics which does not stand in need of becoming historical or of being “historicized.” The implication, I believe, is that because our ways of reading, writing, hearing, and performing rhythm and meter themselves are historically variable, we may not separate the scansion of verse, for example, from historical inquiry. The implication is that, although Lanier’s science of verse can’t be our science of verse, it and other documents like it can help us to develop a historically nuanced way of hearing, reading, and scanning the metrical verse of the past.

I am a latecomer and an outsider in this debate among Victorianists as to historical poetics and (cultural) neoformalism. My own interest in the topic has developed out of my work on the German tradition of historical aesthetics from Hegel to Adorno, and especially from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, a work which still remains to be properly read by Anglophone poeticians, whose engagement with Adorno has too often been limited to a short radio talk he once gave about lyric poetry.<sup>12</sup> Two ideas developing from it have been especially important to the way in which I myself should want to formulate any historical poetics: (1) Historicism has not been taken to entail, for example, ethical or political relativism.<sup>13</sup> There is no reason why it should entail aesthetic relativism either. (2) Works of art are records of a historical process of

thinking-through-making. The Platonic and then scientific assumption that their artifactual character means that they have nothing to do with cognition and with truth is to be rejected.<sup>14</sup> The (historical) truth-content of works of art is to be sought precisely in their technical organization, which, far from being a transhistorical frame for the work of art, is instead its most intimately historical aspect, that which is most vulnerable to becoming obsolete or to missing its moment.<sup>15</sup>

There is no need to recapitulate here the arguments which I have already made at length elsewhere in support of these positions.<sup>16</sup> I want instead to explore what I take to be an especially critical case in the difficulties faced by historical poetics in its search for larger cultural resonance: the case of the intense delight once afforded by, and now perhaps rarely gleaned from, Alexander Pope’s verse technique. What the case study will show, I hope, is not only that verse, with all its continuous series of minute verbal, paralinguistic, and extralinguistic gestures, is itself an essential part of the historical record but that what happens in verse thinking is usually both more and less than what happens in the statements made about it by poets and readers. All is not representation. Gossip, correspondence, manuscripts, printing, editing, reviews, metrical theories: all these represent essential evidence about the historical meaning of verse-thinking. Yet they remain liable to be exceeded or corrected by what happens in that verse-thinking itself.

In fulfilling a commitment to participate in a collection of essays about theory by providing an essay about Pope’s versification, I am deliberately aligning myself with a particular conception of theory. With Adorno, I understand critical theory as “the rebellion of experience against empiricism.”<sup>17</sup> This essay is offered as exemplifying something of my own conception of a historical poetics, even as I acknowledge that it leaves many of the conceivable tasks of such a poetics unaddressed.

#### The Poet’s Hand

The first page of the manuscript of the second of Pope’s Pastorals, “Summer,”<sup>18</sup> places us vividly in front of some of the vital energies and contradictions of Pope’s verse art. A reader examining the document in Maynard Mack’s collection of Pope’s manuscripts will immediately recognize that one striking feature of the manuscript is the extraordinary care which the young poet has taken to make this page look like a printed book. The title matter is, almost to the point of *trompe l’oeil*, uncannily like the best early

eighteenth-century printed letter; the poet has also included an element whose function pertains entirely to printed books: the catchword at the foot of each page. The manuscript has been produced after an extensive course of circulations of the poem among men of taste and potential patrons; it represents the end point of an already very protracted sequence of blottings, cuttings, polishings, and refinements.<sup>19</sup> The calligraphic achievement of producing a near-facsimile of a contemporary printed letter is a strategy with clear advantages, but also with clear risks. It represents the poem as already worthy of that permanence which print affords; it is in this sense already a claim to deserve publication. Yet it might also remind us of a series of possibly even childish wishes in relation to authorship: of a fantasy preoccupation with the matter of print and with the fact of being printed, potentially at the expense of a concern with the underlying matter of the poem itself. Pope's friend, the painter Jonathan Richardson, wrote in his *Essay on the Theory of Painting* that "an Author must Think, but 'tis no matter how he Writes, he has no Care about that, 'tis sufficient if what he writes be legible: A curious Mechanick's hand must be exquisite, but his Thoughts are commonly pretty much at liberty, but a Painter is engaged in both respects."<sup>20</sup> If we credit this schema, Pope's exquisite hand risks turning him from author to artisan.

It is because of this potential ambivalence in readers' responses to this manuscript—and it certainly is a manuscript designed for a readership—that the fact that it retains a visible change becomes so important. In a change Pope wrote into the last line on the second page of the "Summer" manuscript, the river Cam is deprived of its "Laurel Banks," perhaps on the grounds that it did not in reality have any, and is awarded some equally chimerical "winding Vales" instead. What is remarkable is less the change itself than the fact of its appearing on this page at all. The correction, with others like it in the whole body of the manuscript, crucially changes the meaning of the document, in a way which goes far beyond changing the content of one line of verse. It makes it clear that this document too can be mutilated, that even this elaborately worked mimesis of print can be hacked at, cut into, if anything whatever should appear amiss with any of the expressions in it. And with this gesture, the copy at once makes clear where the poet stands. However beautiful a print-like page of manuscript, it is only an instrument. It can and must be made ugly if the poem demands it. By writing this fine page, and by then defacing it, the poet has, in a way, taken and survived a serious risk. He has exposed to a small but critically important public how deeply and perhaps even childishly seduced he is by the literal artifact of printed

verse, by the thought of his becoming a printed poet; and he has at the same time conspicuously put away this childish thing, has overcome and sublated it, by proving himself willing to sacrifice it.

What we can glimpse here is not only a document in Pope's relationship to print culture, something which has been very thoroughly and illuminatingly explored in work of the last few decades on Pope.<sup>21</sup> We can, in addition, see in this page something of what we might call—in what I offer as a term of praise—the psychopathology of Pope's verse. Pope's verse concentrates and explores an ambivalence which is central to literate verse-art itself: an ambivalence about those aspects of verse which can seem susceptible of being classified under the heading of "mere" technique. Pope was already completely immersed in English and European verse when, at the age of fifteen, he was provided by his first and crucially important mentor, William Walsh, with what felt enough like a mission for the poet to remember it many years later and report it to Joseph Spence: "[When] about fifteen, I got acquainted with Mr. Walsh. He encouraged me much, and used to tell me that there was one way left of excelling, for though we had had several great poets, we never had any one great poet that was correct—and he desired me to make that my study and aim."<sup>22</sup> It is hard now for us to conceive just how exhilarating this possibility might have seemed to Pope. To write correctly does not here mean to close down the range of expressive possibilities but, rather, to constitute it. It means the opening up of every aspect of language to the possibility of a peculiarly prosodic expressiveness, to admit no feature of language which could not now become a source of this specifically prosodic cutting, marking, handling, and working over. Pope greatly extends the repertoire of such possible constraints, not only in those he explicitly mentions in his well-known early letter to Cromwell or in the *Essay on Criticism*—the avoidance of hiatus, of completely monosyllabic lines, of cliché-rhymes, of repetitively placed caesuras, and so on—but also in those he never mentions but observably creates: the avoidance of clusters of piled-up consonants and of excessively marked alliteration, the provision of elaborated patterns of assonance, the domestication of complex polysyllables within the English verse line, and many other such features.<sup>23</sup> Every prohibition creates an expressive possibility because its transgression now bears significance, can be seen as a transgression. What we do when we insist that this significance must always be local mimesis of the semantic content can, in the event, become a drastic abridgement of the repertoire of Pope's prosodic virtuosity.

"Mere Vocals"

Pope's *Pastorals* focus the question of attitudes to mere technique especially sharply. They show too how persistently the embarrassment about verse virtuosity has embedded itself in critical thinking. The editors of the still standard text of these poems note that "criticism of the *Pastorals* has tended from the beginning to prize the craftsmanship revealed in their verse and to minimize the worth of their substance. Thus Johnson said that 'To charge these *Pastorals* with want of invention is to require what was never intended. . . . It is surely sufficient for an author of sixteen . . . to have obtained sufficient power of language and skill in metre to exhibit a series of versification, which had in English poetry no precedent, nor has since had an imitation.' Praise such as this, generous though it is, tends to reduce Pope's achievement to something approaching the level of mere technical virtuosity."<sup>24</sup> Johnson is making an astonishingly large claim for Pope here, but his twentieth-century editors still find it slightly demeaning to him because it concerns technique. Although the "mereness" of "mere" technical virtuosity is a chimera imagined by Pope's editors rather than supplied by Johnson's judgment, it nevertheless provokes their energetic resistance, a resistance which inevitably decants into an entirely unconvincing attempt to show that what we might equally call the mere content of the *Pastorals* in some way represents some profound and enduring set of human truths. Where Pope's later editors stumble, Johnson is instead right on the money: the *Pastorals* are remarkable above all for their astonishing virtuosity in versification. But the Twickenham editors' dissatisfaction with "mere" technique has very deep roots. Indeed the period at which Pope himself was securing his position as England's most brilliant poet—the period in which, all contemporaries agreed, unprecedented and unrepeatable advances had been made in verse technique—may well also have been the canonical epoch of the depreciation of verse technique.

Distrust of mere technical virtuosity, of the kind we have just been considering, is everywhere in early eighteenth-century criticism, anecdote, received wisdom, and gossip about verse. The editor of a 1718 text of Samuel Daniel represented his wares as old-fashioned value for money: "If they have not that Turn of Versification," the editor wrote of Daniel and others among the good old poets, "which is the Pride of our modern Attempters, yet they bring us instead of that false Beauty, solid Sense, proper Language, and beautiful Figures."<sup>25</sup> Charles Gildon's *Complete Art of Poetry* considered this "Smoothness of Versification" to have become a permanent collective techno-

logical acquisition: Gildon considered such smoothness as "now so common, that it has swallow'd up all the more substantial Graces of Poetry; and it is as difficult now to find the meanest Scribbler of the Times, without this Quality, as to meet in them the Genius and Essence of Poesy." Gildon strongly censures the scholar Vossius for having considered meter as a defining feature of poetry and argues that Aristotle's definition from mimesis is the product of a politer age and people than the Dutch scholar's.<sup>26</sup> These critical commonplaces, of which the period affords literally hundreds of examples, were swiftly codified in reference works such as Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, whose entry for "Versification" insists that the word "is properly applied to what the poet does more by labour, art, and rule, than by invention, and the genius of furor poeticus. The matter of versification, is long and short syllables, and feet composed of them; and its form, the arrangement of them, in correct, and numerous, and harmonious verses; but this is no more than what a mere translator may pretend to, and which the Catilinarian war, put in verse, might merit. . . . It is with reason, therefore, that these simple matters are distinguished from the grand poetry, and called by the name versification. See POETRY."<sup>27</sup> In all these instances, of course, what is at work is the application of a certain kind of metaphysics to the production of art, a kind of metaphysics which is put into the service of a particular kind of argument about the kinds of work that artists do. The artist's genius is, in the encyclopaedist's diagram, a matter of ideas. Execution is for artisans.

Pope himself attracted more of these sorts of attacks than any other poet in the century. Few even of his enemies tried to claim that he was an unskillful writer of verse. This itself, in the event, made the series of assaults on Pope into a kind of inadvertent advertising in his favor. The more he was assailed by his enemies as a poet of mere sound, of mere virtuosity, the more he came to sound like a poet one really ought to read. A representative instance is provided by William Bond's *The Progress of Dulness*, published under the name "Henry Stanhope":

'Tis true! if finest Notes alone could show,  
Tun'd justly high, or regularly low,  
That we should Fame to these mere Vocals give,  
POPE more, than we can offer, should receive.  
For, when some gliding River is his Theme,  
His Lines run smoother, than the smoothest Stream;  
Not so, when thro' the Trees fierce Boreas blows,  
The Period blustering with the Tempest grows.

But what Fools Periods read, for Periods sake?  
Such Chimes improve not Heads, but make 'em Ach;  
Tho' strict in Cadence on the Numbers rub,  
Their frothy Substance is Whip-Syllabub;  
With most Seraphic Emptiness they roll,  
Sound without Sense, and Body without Soul.<sup>28</sup>

Bond finds it hard to decide whether Pope is a sergeant-major or a sweet trolley. The numbers rub along in strict cadence like a military formation, but what is produced is considered mere froth. Even so, it is curious to find one of Pope's *enemies* comparing his versification to a delicious luxury treat. (As a way of dissuading the reader from rushing out to buy Pope's *Dunciad*, this approach has its limitations.) Bond's ambivalence is representative. Johnson believed that there was an element of self-deception in this kind of attitude to the melodiousness of Pope's verse: remarking of Pope that "his poetry has been censured as too uniformly musical, and as glutting the ear with unvaried sweetness," Johnson commented, "I suspect this to be the cant of those who judge by principles rather than perception: and who would even themselves have less pleasure in his works, if he had tried to relieve attention by studied discords, or affected to break his lines and vary his pauses."<sup>29</sup> "Cant," as often in Johnson, carries the sense here of hypocritical disavowal of pleasure.

#### "Correctness" as Expressive Saturation

It is at this point that I want to turn to Pope's own thinking. Far from being impervious to the kinds of suspicion of technical virtuosity which I have outlined, I want to suggest, Pope himself is likely to have internalized them. We find repeatedly in Pope's writings assaults on mere technical virtuosity, of a kind which are not so far from those leveled at Pope by his opponents. In the course of one of the most extended single statements of his poetics, *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope remarks:

But most by Numbers judge a Poet's Song,  
And smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong;  
In the bright Muse tho' thousand Charms conspire,  
Her Voice is all these tuneful Fools admire,  
Who haunt Parnassus but to please their Ear,  
Not mend their Minds; as some to Church repair,  
Not for the Doctrine, but the Musick there.<sup>30</sup>

The passage, of course, does not suggest that smoothness or musicality are not desirable in verse, but rather, in accordance with a venerable logic, that these ornaments are valuable only insofar as they are in the service of something more important still. The lines do not suggest that it is improper to enjoy music in church but that it is culpable to go to church for the sake of music rather than for the sake of doctrine. The music must be in the service of doctrine, just as, so the passage implies, sound must be in the service of sense. The passage is part of the preparation, of course, for the much more celebrated sequence setting out Pope's prescription of prosodic echoing.

I want to set that passage to one side for the moment, however, not only because iconicity has recently been well written about by Tom Jones and Simon Alderson, among others,<sup>31</sup> but because I think it has come so completely to dominate discussion of Pope's versification as to diminish the entire topic. Instead I want to think briefly about the question of the status which we can accord poets' own poetics when we think about their verse practice. Verse always involves at least two kinds of thinking at once: a semantic and syntactical thinking and a metrical-rhythmic kind of thinking. Both these kinds of thinking involve both sound and sense. There are not two kinds of sound involved, one kind doing semantic and syntactical jobs and the other doing metrical and rhythmic ones. Instead there are (at least) two kinds of colliding constraints: the constraint of making sense in English and the constraints selected by the poet's metrical art. Both these sets of pressures are legible and audible in a single line of verse and in its performances, silent or vocalized: stress has a critical role in the intelligibility of spoken English, not merely a prosodic role in the rule-following of metrical verse.

What does all this imply about the reliability of poets' statements about verse art? Making verse involves the collision of a conscious and an unconscious or half-conscious kind of thinking, or, or also, between an explicit and an implicit kind of thinking. But poetics is not itself part of that making. When, and insofar as, the poet does poetics, he or she is thinking explicitly. The poet's poetics is therefore very likely to be a kind of traducing or abridgement of poetic thinking, which betrays it as it legitimates it—which ends, for example, in the unsustainable distinction made by the *Pastorals'* twentieth-century editors between mere "craftsmanship" on the one hand and "substance" on the other. The metaphysics which divides art into art proper and craft has failed: technique is the way art thinks. But in an epoch undergoing the elevation of art into a liberal vocation, this technical thinking becomes a source of intense ambivalence, and becomes therefore the subject of a series of disavowals. Its uncomfortably para-intentional and para-rational thinking

must be represented as sheer making, a skill which must heteronomously be subordinated to a directing intention.

This, then, is the obvious convenience of the argument from verbal mimesis. It provides a systematic rationale for this troublingly liminal mode of prosodic thinking; it puts this thinking through technique in its proper, subordinate place. I cannot address here the still controverted question of “sound symbolism” in language;<sup>32</sup> I want only to consider the damage done by organizing the discussion of the prosodic intelligence primarily around this topic. It is worth exploring the possibility, that is, that Pope’s poetic or verbal echo does not at all represent the key to the significance of his verse technique but rather an instance of an attempt to contain and explain its worryingly para-rational energies. There is another point of entry available: to consider verse as a process of cutting, marking, and working over language. Pope’s verse art, I want to suggest, is continuously preoccupied with ornamentation in this sense. The multiplication of constraints in Pope’s verse style is precisely the condition of the possibility of its expressivity. The more constraints, the more expressive resources. What we conceive of only negatively—the notion of “correctness” in verse—is, for Pope, an exhilarating, perhaps even dangerous program of the continual saturation of language with the idioms, experiments, flourishes, and melodies of verse virtuosity.

#### “Overpowering Pleasure”

It is time to turn to practice. We can indicate what might be involved here by considering some aspects of the melodics of a single passage from that poem by Pope which was perhaps more read and admired throughout Europe than any other in his century and which, by contrast, has, for many readers, become among the most difficult to read and admire today, his *Essay on Man*. Samuel Johnson’s judgments on the poem well capture the reasons for both kinds of response: “The vigorous contraction of some thoughts, the luxuriant amplification of others, the incidental illustrations, and sometimes the dignity, sometimes the softness of the verse, enchain philosophy, suspend criticism, and oppress judgment by overpowering pleasure.”<sup>33</sup> These remarks testify to a lost world of prosodic experience. Johnson’s verse experience is close to Wordsworth’s, the experience of a bewitching melody,<sup>34</sup> but it is further, perhaps, from what readers today experience or fail to experience. We may know what Johnson means by “the vigorous contraction of some thoughts,” but can we so readily imagine a verse culture in which “amplification” could be qualified as, and could feel, “luxuriant”? Or in

which verse melody might produce pleasure sufficiently “overpowering” to “suspend criticism” and “oppress judgment”? Although I have selected the most favorable of Johnson’s remarks, their ambivalence is acute. Most of him thinks that it must be a good thing for a poet to produce “overpowering pleasure.” When writing of Akenside’s *Pleasures of the Imagination*, Johnson was capable of the flat declaration that, “With the philosophical or religious tenets of the author I have nothing to do; my business is with his poetry.”<sup>35</sup> But here each word is weighted to bring out the cost of Pope’s melody in a way which anticipates Wordsworth’s complaints about Pope’s black arts; that Pope’s verse art “enchains” and “oppresses” suggests that the pleasures of being overpowered by his melody must be at least partly masochistic. And certainly in Johnson’s broader judgment, the ambivalence tends toward outright rejection: “Never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised.”<sup>36</sup>

Many readers today, perhaps, simply and honestly do not understand what is meant by the kind of claim Johnson is making, the claim that Pope’s verse melody overpowers and suspends criticism. I want to try to indicate now what kind of thing I think Johnson might have meant, not in the least in the spirit of attempting to reason anyone into accepting against his or her will the brilliance of Pope’s versification but rather in the hope of opening up an arena of virtuosity which time and poetics have closed. Part of my larger point will be to show how the perversity of Pope’s verse virtuosity—a pleasure, that is, in virtuosity for its own sake, just that kind of virtuosity which the poet himself has earlier stigmatized as potentially idolatrous—does not at all echo, illustrate, or reinforce but rather runs counter to some of the main lines of the poem’s design.

When in the first Epistle Pope is developing his physico-theological argument about the universal fitness of the creation, he proceeds in part by countenancing possible objections to it. If everything in this world has been so wondrously designed, he imagines a skeptical reader asking, why could it not have been made even better, made, that is, even more advantageously to human beings?

Why has not Man a microscopic eye?  
For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly.  
Say what the use, were finer optics giv’n,  
T’inspect a mite, not comprehend the heav’n?  
Or touch, if tremblingly alive all o’er,  
To smart and agonize at ev’ry pore?



Or quick effluvia darting thro' the brain,  
Die of a rose in aromatic pain?  
If nature thunder'd in his op'ning ears,  
And stunn'd him with the music of the spheres,  
How would he wish that Heav'n had left him still  
The whis'pring Zephyr, and the purling rill?  
Who finds not Providence all good and wise,  
Alike in what it gives, and what denies?<sup>37</sup>

When, in his *Essay on Criticism*, Pope introduced a depreciation of lines consisting entirely of monosyllables—"And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line"<sup>38</sup>—he added a further expressive resource to the arsenal of his verse thinking. Syllabicity, from this point onward, becomes a further marked feature of verse-handling. One may (I have) count the number of entirely monosyllabic lines over entire poems and long stretches of couplet-writing for other poets of this period and find that no poet has so few of them as Pope. At the same time one needs to note that Pope's line is not actually a prohibition on monosyllabics, only on a certain kind of monosyllabic: the relative lack of importance of the words, their "lowness," is not only an issue of diction but also of rhythm, because, as Marina Tarlinskaja's analysis has shown, the semantic weight of monosyllables is a critical factor in determining their stress value.<sup>39</sup> Many English monosyllables, especially monosyllabic prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs, are almost completely metrically ambiguous, and so a line which contains a great many of them is likely to be rhythmically sluggish in that its metrico-rhythmic contour is difficult to decipher. Pope's line of warning is an exemplary creep: Only two of its syllables, *and* and *in*, are certainly unstressed, while the stress value of many others is ambiguous.

My claim for Pope doesn't entail believing that his poems are better than others of the period because they contain fewer monosyllabics. It is rather an attempt to interpret the significance of Pope's having marked this previously less attended to feature of the verse segmentation of linguistic material. Monosyllabicity and polysyllabicity henceforth become an expressive resource, as they are here. The opening line performs in this respect a violent yoking of two different kinds of handling. "Why has not Man" is a hemistich typical of many of Pope's opening half-lines. If you try to push too violent an iambic grid down on top of it—"Why has not Man"—you will not be reading but chanting. If you begin with the stress, "Why has not Man," you produce a rather ugly scurry or lurch across your two unstressed syllables. The phrase

in fact seems to push toward a solution which holds metrical and semantico-syntactic criteria against each other, granting evenly at least a secondary degree of emphasis to each of the first four words in the line: "Why has not Man." The effect is deliberative but also tense because it produces a kind of pile-up of emphasis, a need for release which is then powerfully gratified in the second half of the line: "a microscopic eye." Polysyllables introduce a different kind of melodic opportunity. They are readily legible rhythmically, for the reason that their stress values are less subject to syntactical alterations. They bear their tune inside them as word-stress. Now put this line with its answering pair: "For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly." Here the stress on *plain* is the immediately striking feature, because it falls at a place, the third, which is much less often stressed in Pope than its neighbors, two and four. (The demands of fitting English syntax to Pope's heroic line mean that, on the relatively rare occasions when this position is occupied by a stressed word, it is almost always an adjective. One can in fact construct a kind of miniature lexicon for each of Pope's poems, made exclusively out of the stressed adjectives which appear in this position; such a lexicon gives, for each poem, a kind of epitome of its evaluative substructure.) "For this plain reason," in its marked sequence of emphases, is a kind of rhythmic rhyme to the first hemistich of the previous line: "Why has not Man." But this time there is no polysyllabic release. Instead there is just this blunt sequence of monosyllables: "Man is not a Fly." The couplet is a compressed act of virtuosity, an effect which while we are reading, and following Pope's packed sense, will have gone past us, and which is meant to go past us, well before we can notice it. Yet in another sense we must notice it, even in order to be able to read the poem. Verse reading requires of the human brain a barely credible complexity of attention: we are always and everywhere making language do two jobs at once, to make sense and to hold a tune. For this reason the verse somersault I have just turned into slow motion cannot in fact not be registered, at some level, as we read. These evanescent, these fleeting effects are part of what Johnson called the "overpowering" and Wordsworth the "bewitching" quality of Pope's verse. Their efficacy is dependent on the poet's finding the cognitive target perfectly: too marked, and the poet will seem to be looking over our shoulder, as he does in his *Cecilia's Day* ode, inviting us to admire the mimetic decorum of his word-painting; too recessive, and the verse will feel what Pope's contemporaries called "harsh." Pope's instrumentations receive their force from being always just out of reach, always on the borders of perceptibility, and hence, evidently, of demonstrability.

What this brings out, I hope, is the dependence of every local effect upon the poet's development and refinement of repertoire. Naturalistic theories of verse aesthetics have a kind of hocus-pocus about them: it sounds as though a story is being told in which these sounds necessarily and magically (or eucharistically, if we remember the origins of the phrase *hocus-pocus in hoc est corpus*) have these effects on all rational readers. The relation between poet and reader posited here is not one of natural compulsion, in which the poem "has effects on" readers, but rather of seduction. The poet does things with tunes by being a person who has come to invest, perversely and perhaps irrationally, extremely powerful affects in the wrappings and trimmings of paralanguage. He invites the reader to share this fixation with him: the virtuosically fantasized significances of art-verse prosody entice answeringly virtuosic performances of fantasy from their readers. Reading Pope means developing a peculiar competence in Pope-reading: prosodic gestures, since they have no fixed or natural value, take on a value which we learn to hear through a whole authorship. So (to return to the present passage) the extremely striking line "Or touch, if tremblingly alive all o'er" works its effects largely because of the repertoire behind it. The line's syntax demands emphasis on *all*; without that stress, the line would not sound like spoken English. Only around one in forty times does this place in one of Pope's lines receive a stress. So the metrical mind, which is patiently and silently logging all this as it learns how to read Pope, receives a powerful poke in the sensorium at this point. The adverb *tremblingly* quivers out to us because it is in Pope's verse lexicon a nonce; this is its only outing in his whole verse authorship. And then there is the succession of four *r* sounds in the three words *tremblingly alive all*. This is a miniature deployment of an instrumentational idiom which Pope exploits and perhaps invents in *The Rape of the Lock*, in the passage in which Belinda sets out on the Thames:

But now secure the painted Vessel glides,  
The Sun-beams trembling on the floating Tydes,  
While melting Musick steals upon the Sky,  
And soften'd Sounds along the Waters die.<sup>40</sup>

From this point onward in the authorship—but then, from this point onward in English poetry—there is always the possibility of reverting to the set of associations among water, light, and fleetingness established and pinned on to the letter *r* by this passage. But none of these "effects," which make up what makes this line in some way feel alive, is something that it just does to

us or must just do to anyone. They are effects which we can learn to recognize, yet without recognizing that we recognize them.

Let me take one more line, perhaps the zenith of the "overpowering pleasure" which Johnson believed this poem could afford: "Die of a rose in aromatic pain." The whole line is a rhythmic half-rhyme with the line I began with, "Why has not Man a microscopic eye." Each line arranges six monosyllables around a quadrisyllable, and each puts its polysyllable in just the same metrical place in the line. Additionally *aromatic* is itself a half-rhyme with *microscopic*, and *Die* rhymes in answer to *Why*. If you doubt whether Pope could possibly have intended this, I concede that there is doubt and only insist in my turn that it is not certain, in the case of so immedicable a verse-junkie as Pope, that he did not intend it either. The entire sphere of thinking I am trying to open up, the sphere of the prosodic intelligence, is a para-intentional sphere, in which the most interesting and powerful effects are always those just at the edge of the poet's superveningly explicit intelligence. So here the intensely compressed semantic thinking of this line, in which a *rose* is wrested round to become the name of a medical complaint, and in which this is yoked together with the super-Petrarchan oxymoron of *aromatic pain*, by the differential repetition of the cluster *ro*, now stressed, now unstressed, is accompanied and interfered with by a no less compressed achievement of verse thinking.

5

I have deliberately inverted in this account the usual order of exegesis, in which consideration of technique comes only after paraphrase, with the result that the former is made redundantly to confirm and to intensify whatever has happened in the latter. Instead, I have tried to begin with what is apparently a question of mere melody and to show how it is already and also a form of thinking. So, to return to our couplet, the tune, which we of course receive at just the same time as the paraphrasable content rather than as its echo, inducts us into the explicit thinking going on here. The reason given is in fact a parody of reason-giving: "Why has not Man a microscopic eye? / For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly." Translation? Stop asking stupid questions. The tone here is that of an exasperated parent, faced with the child's inexhaustible "Why?" The reader is being invited to put away a childish fantasy, the fantasy that it would be better if human beings had super X-ray vision and ultra-enhanced powers of hearing. But the verse is not inviting us to put away that fantasy at all. The verse is encouraging us to explore it, to

relish it, to—as Johnson might say—*luxuriate* in it, just as though the perversity of verse itself, its fixations upon the supposed sheer stuff of paralinguage, its “mere vocals,” were also what we were being explicitly invited to grow out of and implicitly invited to develop and ramify. The end of this verse paragraph performs an experience very frequently met with in this poem. A delicious and tempting series of surmises are not merely reported to us but are used to operate upon us, to seduce us, and then the rhetorical question brings us back to the poem’s subject-position, its argument: “Who finds not Providence all good and wise / Alike in what it gives, and what denies?” But with a rhetorical question there is always the risk that the reader may give the wrong answer. “Who wants to be a millionaire?” “I do.” “Who finds not Providence all good and wise?”

It is here, perhaps, that we can begin to conjecture something of the historical meaning of Pope’s unprecedented and unrepeatable mastery of verse melody. Many of its most sublime achievements—“Die of a rose in aromatic pain”; “Dismiss my soul, where no carnation fades”; “The sick’ning stars fade off th’etherial plain”<sup>41</sup>—are offered to us under a kind of crossing-out. They come crossed out because they come as the voice of the possibility we are to delete: the childish wish which needs to learn how partial evil is universal good, the flower-fancier, unable to imagine heaven except as a celestial garden center. The exception, of course, is the last of these lines, which comes at the lowering of the *Dunciad*’s curtain and at that point at which Pope’s poem comes out as the serious grand poem of the deletion of the possibility of grandeur. Johnson, as a delighted reader, could measure the powers of Pope’s verse melody more candidly than, perhaps, Pope could afford to do himself. His brief remarks capture in a few sentences the deep ambivalence about verse thinking which runs through Pope’s whole corpus. What was almost Pope’s first literary aspiration, to be the first truly correct English poet, was an infinitely more perilous wish than has been appreciated. It announced the lifelong civil warfare of his verse. Refinement, polish, correctness: these were universally admitted by contemporary readers to be the distinguishing surface of modern verse. There is a close, if subterranean connection between the polishing of verse and the polishing of the person proposed by Shaftesbury, those amicable collisions of sociability in which our rust is rubbed off. Yet in Pope’s hands, correctness, as we have seen, is by no means a mere privative. It constitutes the means by which, potentially, every feature of language and paralinguage becomes a site for the pararational or even for the perverse investment of feeling. Pope’s correctness is a survival capsule for poetry, a way in which verse thinking might be able

both to have its cake and eat it. It is the apotropaic and propitiatory mimesis of a modernity which the poet hopes at once to delight, to ward off, and to survive. It is a periapt whose image is the manuscript of *Summer*, held out in an immaculate facsimile of print which the poet has nevertheless found it necessary to deface.

None of this provides an exhaustive answer to the question which I have taken for my title. But it does suggest some caveats. The relationship between thinking about verse and thinking in verse is not necessarily a cooperative one. It may instead be a powerfully antagonistic, repressive, or deceptive one. It is certainly true, as Prins insists, that “the sound of poetry is never heard without mediation.”<sup>42</sup> Yet it is equally true that no talk of anything’s being “mediated” can be meaningful without positing that there is something to mediate.<sup>43</sup> Historical poetics needs above all to be wary of thinking that it can exit from the painful difficulty of specifying the history of verse technique by filling that space up with representations, with the way in which verse has been talked about, mediated, and distributed. If historical poetics is not to assume the role of a clumsy patron—“one who looks with unconcern on a Man struggling for life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help”—it needs to keep an ear out for everything in the practice of verse thinking that resists, rather than merely confirming, the available representations of that practice.

#### Notes

1. Prins, “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and the Science of English Verse,” 233, 230.
2. Prins, “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and the Science of English Verse,” 234.
3. Veselovsky, “Envisioning World Literature in 1863,” 9.
4. Shaitanov, “Aleksandr Veselovskii’s Historical Poetics,” 441.
5. Maslov, “The Semantics of *Aoidos* and Related Compounds,” 4, 2.
6. Maslov, “The Semantics of *Aoidos* and Related Compounds,” 1; Veselovsky, “Envisioning World Literature in 1863,” 13.
7. Wellek, 279, quoted in Maslov, “The Semantics of *Aoidos* and Related Compounds,” 1.
8. Shaitanov, “Aleksandr Veselovskii’s Historical Poetics,” 441.
9. Eikhenbaum, “Concerning the Question of the Formalists,” 51, 52. I thank David Duff for drawing my attention to the term *specifiers* and for directing me to this source for it.
10. Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, 47. See also Duff, “Maximal Tensions and Minimal Conditions,” 559–61.
11. Tucker, “The Fix of Form”; see also Rudy, “On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad.”
12. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, 49–68.
13. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 179–205.

14. Pace Geuss, "Is Poetry a Form of Knowledge?" See Jarvis, "Bedlam or Parnassus."
15. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 74–97.
16. See especially Jarvis, Adorno; "Bedlam or Parnassus"; Wordsworth's *Philosophic Song*.
17. Adorno, *Vorlesung zur Einleitung in die Soziologie*, 56.
18. Mack, *The Last and Greatest Art*, 29.
19. A note on the cover leaf explains, "This Copy is that weh past thro ye / hands of Mr Walsh, Mr Congreve, Mr Main- / waring, Dr Garth, Mr Granville, Mr / Southern, Sr H. Sheers, Sr W. Trumbull, / Ld. Halifax, Ld. Wharton, Marq. of Dorchestr., / D. of Bucks. &c." (Mack, *The Last and Greatest Art*, 19).
20. Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, 28.
21. McLaverty, *Pope, Print and Meaning*; Foxon, *Pope and the Early Eighteenth-Century Book Trade*.
22. Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, 1: 32.
23. Sherburn, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, 1: 105–8; Audra and Williams, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 276–84, 11. 337–83. Pope later seems to have used the letter as the basis of a fabricated letter he represented as having been sent to the better known William Walsh (Sherburn, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, 1: 22).
24. Audra and Williams, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 50; Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, 4: 66.
25. Daniel, *The Works of Mr. Samuel Daniel*, ix–x.
26. Gildon, *The Complete Art of Poetry*, 1: 83, 76.
27. Chambers, "Versification," *Cyclopaedia*.
28. Barnard, *Pope*, 92.
29. Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, 4: 78–79.
30. Audra and Williams, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 276–77.
31. Alderson, "Alexander Pope and the Nature of Language" and "Iconic Forms in English Poetry of the Time of Dryden and Pope"; Jones, "Plato's *Cratylus*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and the Correctness of Names in Pope's *Homer*."
32. See Hinton, Nichols and Ohala, *Sound Symbolism*.
33. Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, 4: 77.
34. Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," 649.
35. Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, 4: 173.
36. Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, 4: 76.
37. Mack, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*.
38. Audra and Williams, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 278, 1. 347.
39. Tarlinskaia, *English Verse*, 63–69.
40. Tillotson, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 162, ii. 47–50.
41. Rumbold, *The Dunciad in Four Books*, 326, iv. 418; 356, iv. 636.
42. Prins, "Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and the Science of English Verse," 229.
43. "The universality of mediation does not confer on us the right to level everything in heaven and earth to mediation. . . . The mediation of immediacy is a determination of reflection, meaningful only in relation to what is set over against it, the immediate" (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 173).

## chapter 6

### The Biopolitics of Recognition: Making Female Subjects of Globalization

Pheng Cheah

In the past fifteen years, the concept of recognition has emerged as an important analytical category in critical theory for understanding the normative grounds of social and political struggles in the contemporary world. The resurrection of this dusty Hegelian term, first popularized in the mid-twentieth century by Alexandre Kojève, to the position of discursive hegemony has become so complete that in an exchange published in 2003, Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth could blithely assert that "'recognition' has become a keyword of our time," that its "salience is now indisputable," especially in contemporary globalization. "Hegel's old figure of 'the struggle for recognition' finds new purchase as a rapidly globalizing capitalism accelerates transcultural contacts, fracturing interpretive schemata, pluralizing value horizons, and politicizing identities and differences."<sup>1</sup> According to this view, the exercise of power is essentially reducible to the conferring or withholding of recognition in social relations, a gesture or action that is registered at the level of experience as an edifying affirmation (in the case of empowerment) or a hurtful diminishment or injurious exclusion (in the case of oppression and coercion).

The normative claims of the recognition paradigm, however, gain an entirely different meaning in view of the ascendancy of the practical discourse of human capital in contemporary global capitalism. Not all proponents of human capital development are of the same political persuasion as the neo-liberal economists of the Chicago School who coined and elaborated the concept. As Robert Reich puts it in a recent newspaper article, "Over the long term, the only way to improve the living standards of most Americans is to invest in our people—especially their educations, skills and the communications and transportation systems linking them together and with the rest of the world. In the global economy, the only 'asset' that's unique to any nation—and that determines its living standards—is the people who make it