

Historical Poetics,  
Dysprosody, and *The  
Science of English Verse*

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“THE SOUND OF POETRY, THE POETRY OF SOUND” RESONATED AS MARJORIE PERLOFF’S THEME FOR THE 2006 MLA CONVENTION, where one could hear about this topic at panels, poetry readings, and the Presidential Forum. Addressing a large audience at the forum, Charles Bernstein tapped the microphone and loudly intoned, “Is this working? Can you hear me?” The moment was a self-conscious performance, perhaps parody, of lyric utterance addressed to “you” from “me”: even before beginning his speech, Bernstein called our attention to the amplification of voice. Instead of addressing any particular you, singular or plural, he seemed to address the microphone, a mediating apparatus that makes possible but also interrupts the intimacy of address that lyric poetry (after John Stuart Mill) invites us to overhear.<sup>1</sup> Through the microphone, Bernstein gave new overtones to Mill’s definition of poetry as “overheard,” which could also mean hearing it too much, making it too loud, overworking the metaphor of the voice that we think is speaking directly to us. Although we tend to think of sound as immediate (is it?), the sound of poetry is never heard without mediation, and we should attend to the medium.

Following up on the forum, Perloff in her Presidential Address issued another call to poetry that came through loud and clear. She observed that new media are “generating a renewed interest in poetry,” as “[t]housands of writers, artists, students, professors, and just plain interested parties around the world are visiting these esoteric Web sites and blogs and reading or listening to difficult avant-garde texts.” She also made a plug for *PennSound*, a Web site where “you can, with a click, hear Gertrude Stein read” or hear “George Oppen read, in his quiet, sometimes breaking voice”; to facilitate our clicking, each poet has “his or her own page, giving us titles, sources, playing times” (“It” 659). Yet what is the sound of these voices reading aloud from their Web pages if not a product of print remediated by more recent audiovisual technologies? What is the relation between reading and listening when we encounter poetry on the (Web) page? How might

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we understand the idea—or ideal—of sound that underwrites Perloff's defense of poetry?

In returning us to the “discipline of poetics” or, in a less disciplinary mood, “poetic license,” Perloff's primary purpose has been to reimagine lyric through the practice of avant-garde poets. “*Poetry*, for these poets, has less to do with the Romantic conception of the lyric as ‘an intensely subjective and personal expression’ (Hegel), the ‘utterance that is not so much heard as overheard’ (John Stuart Mill), than with the original derivation of *lyric* as a composition directly related to its musical origins,” Perloff wrote in *Poetic License* almost two decades ago, already sounding her leitmotif: “How is it that in the late twentieth century we are once again foregrounding the *sound* of lyric poetry?” (14). Both then and now, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Perloff invokes Bernstein as one of “these poets” who unravel lyric utterance. For example, Bernstein writes that the title of his experimental text “Dysrhythmism” designates a “prosodic device” and has the same root as *rhapsody*. A rhapsode is “one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry,” but Bernstein also links his neologism to “‘dysprosody’ (sic): disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech” (qtd. in Perloff 12–13). Thus, Bernstein's “Dysrhythmism” disturbs the figure of voice, producing a prosody that we future rhapsodes could learn to read as something other than the speech of a speaker.

Such visions, or revisions, of the sound of poetry have a longer history before avant-garde poetics, and a turn to historical poetics is one way to theorize as well as historicize alternatives to the assumption of voice in lyric reading. Perloff's focus on modern and post-modern poetry tends to occlude a broader historical range of poets who disturb and disrupt lyric utterance through various kinds of metrical mediation. 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. My study of Victorian poetry has led me to a consideration of nineteenth-century poetics diverging from “the Romantic conception of the lyric” that Perloff critiques; I suggest we read Victorian verse not as an intensely subjective, personal utterance that is heard or overheard (*pace* Mill) but as the public performance of “voice inverse,” an inversion of the figure on which lyric reading is predicated (“Victorian Meters” and “Voice”). In addition to complicating our understanding of how lyric was read and thought about in the nineteenth century, this inversion would give us critical perspective on twentieth-century conventions of lyric reading that often still inform how we think we should read poetry today.<sup>2</sup>

Recently I joined a discussion group on historical poetics, with colleagues specializing in nineteenth-century British and American poetry, all committed to new ways of thinking about lyric studies. Our first reading assignment was *The Science of English Verse*, published in 1880 by Sidney Lanier: a little-known treatise composed by a lesser-known nineteenth-century American poet, yet of interest to anyone tracking the history of debates about the sound of poetry and the poetry of sound.<sup>3</sup> A virtuoso flutist and composer of instrumental and vocal works, Lanier dedicated his life to exploring the relation between poetry and music. His musical performances were considered poetic by his contemporaries: in Macon, Georgia (where he was born), his recitals were praised because “the poetical utterances of his flute address themselves to every sentimental nature,” and in Baltimore (where he played in the Peabody Orchestra) his conductor praised how “in his hands the flute . . . was transformed into a voice,” and “its tone developed colors, warmth, and a low sweetness of unspeakable poetry” (qtd. in Gabin 14, 24). Conversely, his poetry was praised for its musicality, both thematical and formal, as in his sonnets to

Beethoven and Wagner and his long meditative poem “The Symphony.”

In *The Science of English Verse*, Lanier is determined to develop a musical system of notation for the effects of sound in poetry. He announces his ambition to understand poetry in musical terms at the beginning of his first chapter (“Investigation of Sound as Artistic Material”): when a poem “is repeated aloud, it impresses itself upon the ear as verse only by means of certain relations existing among its component words considered purely as sounds, without reference to their associated ideas” (21). Only through sound can poetry be defined as poetry, according to Lanier, who maintains that “recognizing verse as a phenomenon of sound is the basis of a science of verse” (23). Our group observed, however, that this phenomenology of sound is complicated by Lanier’s assertion that sounds may be not only “impress[e]d upon the ear” but also imprinted on the eye. According to Lanier, written words are “signs of sounds; and although originally received by the eye, they are handed over to the ear, are interpreted by the auditory sense, and take their final lodgement, not at all as conceptions of sight, but as conceptions of hearing” (21). Since such “conceptions of hearing” do not depend exclusively on direct auditory perception, it becomes possible for Lanier to ponder “those perceptions which come to exist in the mind, not by virtual or actual vibratory impact upon the tympanum . . . but by virtue of indirect causes (such as the characters of print and writing) which in any way amount to practical equivalents of such impact” (22). Increasingly he allows for the imagination of sound as an abstract pattern, so that “when we hear verse, we *hear* a set of relations between sounds; when we silently read verse, we *see* that which brings to us a set of relations between sounds; when we imagine verse, we *imagine* a set of relations between sound” (23).

But what is a sound that can’t be heard, and why does Lanier imagine this? The ab-

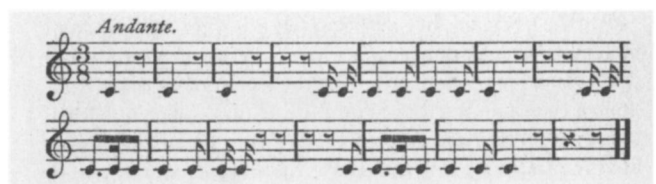
straction of sound enables Lanier to introduce his musical notation for scansion, as “an attempt to explain certain effects upon the ear by showing exactly parallel effects upon the eye” (41). Representing the rhythms of English verse with notes grouped in equal measures and divided by bars, Lanier circumvents nineteenth-century debates about accentual versus quantitative verse by positing musical time as the basis of poetic rhythm. Both accent and duration can be represented as independent structures in his system, which, in addition, can give us a graphic notation of silence. As an example, Lanier transposes Tennyson’s famous lyric “Break, Break, Break” into his musical notation, demonstrating how its rhythm is “clearly dependent upon silences” and “clearly independent of accents” (101; fig. 1).

After printing these sixteen bars of notes and suggesting they “be played on the piano,” Lanier claims that “upon hearing this strain, every ear will accept it as a substantial reproduction of the voice in reciting the following stanza”:

Break, break, break,  
On thy cold gray stones, O sea:  
And I would that my tongue could utter  
The thoughts that arise in me.

Lanier’s notation has already helped us to imagine, by an appeal to the eye, how the stanza should be recited as an appeal to the ear. Is his system a production or a reproduction of the voice? And how do we read voice into a lyric that also marks a disturbance of voice? If we were “hearing this strain” on the piano, as Lanier suggests, it would be the strain of a voice trying to speak in verse.

Fig. 1



Lanier notates the stanza's first line as three measures in 3/8 time, each measure a quarter note followed by an eighth-note rest, graphically marking the metrical breaks after the word "break." As a representation of silence, the breaking rhythm corresponds, both formally and thematically, to the stuttering of the tongue that cannot "utter / The thoughts that arise in me." The lyric apostrophe ("O sea") is undone and the voice of "me" broken up into a different musical melody, no longer speaking, if it ever was.

Lanier returns to this provocative example several times in *The Science of English Verse*, firm in his conviction that "the scheme of *Break, break, break*, should be required to be written from memory on blackboard" and "each bar should be taken up in succession and the student caused to add the time-values of its separate sounds and silences" (140). Yet the pedagogical value of this exercise seems to be that the scheme of the verse keeps changing according to the reader's imagination of how it could, would, or should sound. Even Lanier changes his mind about how to hear the stanza; ten years earlier he had composed his own musical setting of Tennyson's lyric in 4/4 meter, but in *The Science of English Verse* his musical notation of the lyric is in 3/8 meter.<sup>4</sup> The change from four to three beats per measure corresponds to Lanier's more recent theory of triple meter as the basic unit of English versification, but Lanier further imagines different ways to notate the same poem in 3/8 meter.

FIG. 2 In contrast to the previous notation, where the first three measures end with a rest



to represent each caesura after "break, break, break," Lanier imagines each measure beginning with a rest (138; fig. 2). By marking a silent downbeat in the first three measures, Lanier now imagines the poem beginning in silence. In addition, he inserts a silent measure at the end of each line, a graphic notation for the conception rather than perception of sound: these beats are not voiced but rather mark the absence of voicing, like a silent echo beyond speech. Thus, Lanier's musical notation anticipates where Tennyson's famous poem will end, with longing for "the sound of a voice that is still" and "will never come back to me."

Lanier's musical system proved controversial among other prosodists, who were busy debating the priority of accent or duration, the principles of phonetics, and other hot topics of the day. In his survey of English metrists, T. S. Omond declared Lanier "sound in principle" because of his insistence on temporal relations in verse (qtd. in Saintsbury 493). But the abstraction of this principle provoked disdain from practical critics like George Saintsbury. "On no terms can I accept Mr. Lanier," Saintsbury wrote in his *History of English Prosody*; "however keen his musical ear may have been, his prosodic one must have been pretty dull; for his individual scansion are often atrocious" (493).

Nevertheless, in trying to read Lanier on his own terms, our group agreed that there is something productive about his dysprosody, which conceives of poetry without a speaker. For Lanier, the voice does not really belong to a person but is better understood as a musical instrument: "The human voice is practically a reed-instrument of the hautboy class, the vocal chords being the two thin vibrating reeds, and the mouth and the throat (the buccal cavity) constituting the tube," he claims (31). If the human vocal apparatus is an oboe, then reading poetry aloud becomes a performance of voice inverse, a melody played out by a double-reed instrument that requires double

reading because it is simultaneously vocal and instrumental. “For all purposes of verse, words are unquestionably musical sounds produced by a reed-instrument—the human voice,” Lanier repeats, concluding, “The terms ‘vocal’ and ‘instrumental’ are not satisfactory, because they hide one of the most important facts to be kept in view in all such investigations as the present, namely, the purely instrumental character of the speaking-voice and of its tones (words). ‘Vocal’ here *is* instrumental” (49–50)—a remarkable inversion of voice in which lyric reading is alienated from, rather than attached to, the speaking voice. Just as Lanier’s flute seemed to utter “unspeakable poetry” to its listeners, the music of poetry can be heard and yet not spoken.

While Lanier’s deconstruction and musical reconstruction of English meter might fail as a practical approach to scansion, practical application is not the point of historical poetics. There are other, more interesting questions. What response did Lanier get from his contemporaries, and can we read his ideas about sound in relation to nineteenth-century theories of acoustics and music or alongside other essays on prosody, like Edgar Allan Poe’s “Rationale of Verse” or Coventry Patmore’s “Essay on English Metrical Law”? How did these metrical debates contribute to Anglo-American literary culture, and what were the political and philosophical stakes of thinking about prosody? Although a *New York Times* review of *The Science of English Verse* complained that “we are somewhat in danger of being ‘scienced’ to death” (Gabin 150), what kinds of knowledge or ways of knowing are implicit in Lanier’s claim to “science”?

Lanier’s treatise may not be a very scientific way to think about prosody, but its ambition is to make prosody itself into a form of thinking: by using music as a sounding board for his poetic theories, Lanier affirms the musicality of thought. A related idea is developed, more recently, by Simon Jarvis in essays such as “Prosody as Tradition,” “Pros-

ody as Cognition,” and “Musical Thinking,” where he refutes the scientism of prosodists in order to pursue a critical philosophy of prosody as a way to think in verse. But for Jarvis the cognitive and corporeal character of prosody is discovered (by way of material phenomenology) in the rhythms of the subjective body and the particularity of individual experience, whereas for Lanier, writing in nineteenth-century America, the project of rethinking prosody takes a different turn: Lanier returns to English verse not to measure the rhythmic experience of a subjective body but to imagine a national body.<sup>5</sup> Idiosyncratic as his treatise may be, Lanier is less interested in individual poetic thinking than in poetry as collective thought: prosody as recognition rather than prosody as cognition. This is an important historical difference, demonstrating the difference that history must make when we undertake historical poetics.

Coming to the end of our discussion, the historical poetics group did not propose a conversion to Lanier’s science; we could not make sense of his methods for sounding out English verse, and, we also agreed, some of his own verse should never be read out loud. But my sampling (sound bites) of Lanier’s pseudoscientific, sometimes rhapsodic prose may serve to provoke greater curiosity about his dysprosody as an alternative to twentieth-century conventions of lyric reading. Why are we still hearing voices, or longing for the sound of a voice that is still? Lanier gives us another way to read poetry in print, and he is not the only one: many nineteenth-century poets and prosodists call into question the phenomenology of voice, and we could turn to poetic genres from various periods. Of course, critics working in historical poetics would need to develop different approaches to different centuries, taking into account generic shifts in the production and circulation of poetry and insisting on the cultural specificity of poetic genres rather than assuming the continuity of “the lyric” as a transhistorical,



transcultural phenomenon. To encourage new lyric studies, let us think of historical poetics as a labor for many critics to undertake, a collaborative enterprise that will approach lyric reading differently, differentially, for dissonance as well as resonance.

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## NOTES

1. Mill 348. For a discussion of Mill's "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" as "the most influentially misread essay in the history of Anglo-American poetics," see Jackson 9, 129–33.

2. Consider, for example, Terry Eagleton's uncritical return to the conventions of practical criticism in *How to Read a Poem*, cited by Marjorie Perloff in her Presidential Address and singled out as her choice for book of the year in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2006.

3. Many thanks to Max Cavitch, Virginia Jackson, Meredith Martin, Meredith McGill, Eliza Richards, Jason Rudy, Carolyn Williams, and Ivy Wilson for our conversation about Lanier at the meeting of the Historical Poetics Group in May 2007, sponsored by the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University. I am also grateful to Adela Pinch for feedback on drafts of this essay.

4. Gabin 155. On Lanier's musical settings of Tennyson, see Gabin 53–55.

5. For further elaboration of this argument, see Kerkering 113–30.

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