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BEDLAM OR PARNASSUS: THE VERSE IDEA:

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Abstract: This essay considers some problems in philosophical approaches to poetry. Philosophers' accounts of what poetry is are often ill informed. They tend to select, as essential, features that can also characterize prose works: conspicuous metaphoricity, imagination, fictionality, and so on. This essay considers instead a humbler term: verse. It argues that the constraints on language implied by composing in verse are not only a handicap but can also be an engine for thinking. Even philosophy has sometimes been thought in verse, rather than thought first in prose and versified later. This argument is explored through a brief consideration of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*. The essay concludes by questioning a further way of distinguishing between poetry and philosophy, Peter Lamarque's claim that paraphrasability is essential to philosophy but fatal to poetry.

Keywords: poetics, Alexander Pope, philosophy and poetry, prosody, verse, versification.

There was a time when I wanted quite a lot to be a philosopher, and when much of my time was spent reading works of philosophy, mainly in the German tradition running from Kant to Adorno and others. I still spend a good deal of time reading work of this kind, but I no longer want to be a philosopher, in the narrow sense that I no longer cherish the wish or the delusion that I might ever be employed by a university department of philosophy. So what I am to say here cannot in that particular sense be a contribution to philosophy. It is at best a contribution to metaphilosophy, providing one understands metaphilosophy not as something that stands above philosophy, deciding on its nature, place, aims, and so on, but as something that stands after or in a peripheral relation to philosophy. I am a literary scholar, not a philosopher; above all, I am interested in metre, rhythm, and rhyme in verse; in the perplexing, yet to me endlessly arresting, question of why the tiniest little details of the sound patterning heard in the ear or in the mind's ear when attending to poetry, why the small change of metre and rhythm and rhyme and other forms of sound repetition, should make the slightest difference to what we feel—and, I would say, to what we think—when we read poetry.

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My interest in philosophy, then, stems today not from any misguided confidence that the study of poetry might have anything to teach philosophers but rather from two other things: first, from an uneasy sense that even though I am not and never will be a professional philosopher, I shall nevertheless be unable to avoid making claims whose nature will in the end be philosophical, and whose validity will therefore fall under the scrutiny of those better placed to judge it than I am; and, second, from an observation that philosophers themselves continue more or less valuably to pronounce on matters literary and poetical, and to feel that concepts such as the concept “poetry” are just the sort of large and ill-defined concepts whose practical utility is likely to require the assistance of professionals, that is, of professional philosophers.

This difficulty of defining poetry is the starting point of my argument here. “Poetry” is a notoriously vague concept. In practice, this has made it almost infinitely vulnerable to philosophers. An example can be found in a recent essay by the philosopher Peter Lamarque with the title “Poetry and Abstract Thought” (2009). After first renouncing the attempt to define poetry on the first page of his essay, Lamarque nevertheless goes on to rely, throughout, upon a series of assumptions about what defines poetry. Poetry is assumed, above all, to be the domain of “imagery,” of “metaphor,” and of “figuration,” but, of course, all these features can very easily characterize prose, too, and so the word “poetry” comes to amount to little more than a rather loose synonym for “imaginative literature.” Indeed, by the close of the essay, one is tempted to suggest that one definition of poetry alone remains open: poetry is that art which a philosopher can in principle know all about without actually needing to know anything particular about it. And this makes a move like Raymond Geuss’s, in his fierce essay “Poetry and Knowledge,” attractive. We should stop trying to define “poetry,” says Geuss, following Nietzsche. Yet this too has consequences. Geuss justly remarks that “[w]hat we call ‘poetry’ is a complex, historically changing body of performances, institutions and practices” (Geuss 2003, 24). One wants to applaud, but one also begins to remember that plenty of other things—philosophy, for example—are also complex, historically changing bodies of performances, institutions, and practices; and one begins to wonder why it should be the case that admitting poetry’s indefinability should be the precursor to saying many things about it, instead of the precursor to silence.

It is for this reason that I have become interested in a humbler and less resonant word than “poetry”: the word “verse.” “Poetry” is hard clearly to distinguish from “prose” because there can be “prose poetry.” There cannot be “prose verse.” The word “poetry,” moreover, is sometimes thought to carry evaluative implications. Thus one can speak of a particular composition as “true poetry,” whereas one might be less likely to think of describing it as “true verse,” precisely because “verse” is a more straightforwardly descriptive term: either a given composition is verse, or

it is not. Verse is language segmented, where the segmentations need not coincide with syntactical segmentations. It is worth noticing a number of things about this definition. Many things that are often taken to be essential to “poetry” are by no means essential to “verse.” It is no necessary part of verse that it be composed in “poetical language.” Wordsworth discovered this, exhilaratingly, for himself in 1797. Verse which counts as verse can be composed with a lexicon which in no way differs from that of prose. It is no necessary part of verse that it contain images, metaphors, or any of those things that have sometimes and by some people been thought essential to “poetry.” Nor, finally, is it essential to verse that it be imaginative or fictional. There is no necessary presumption implied by the mere segmentation of language that the language thus segmented must immediately renounce any aspiration to tell the truth.

At this point it is worth reminding ourselves that before philosophy was called philosophy, much of it was indeed composed in verse. This is not quite the same as what Geuss calls “didactic poetry,” where verse honies the rim of the prose cup. There is no evidence and no reason to suppose that Empedocles composed his *Katharmoi* in prose first of all, putting it into verse only later; on the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that it was composed first of all in verse; that it was, in fact, thought in verse, not thought first in prose and then dressed up later in verse. As the classicist Simon Goldhill has pointed out, prose was by no means, in archaic Greece, a default mode of communication but was, instead, a historical achievement: hence the title of his study *The Invention of Prose* (2002). Here we need to recall too the work of Marcel Detienne on the lyric poets of archaic Greece, who conceived of themselves as, in Detienne’s phrase, “les maîtres de la vérité.” For these poets and their patrons, Detienne has shown, *aletheia*—truth—was not, as it would be for Plato and for us, the opposite of lies or of error but the opposite of forgetting, *Lethe*; the poet would therefore be the one who by his or her poems could save the patron from oblivion, and truth was in such a ritual context understood not as the correspondence or the failure of correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs in the world but as something that the poet did to the patron, to save him or her from *Lethe* (Detienne 1996).

What composers of verse like Pindar, and what composers of verse like Empedocles, were doing certainly would not have counted for them as a subspecies of fiction (a concept that had not yet been invented). Nor, on the other hand, would it have counted as “didactic poetry,” the ornamental gussying-up in verse of a series of prearranged prose contents. It appears, rather, to have been the case that a figure like Empedocles or Parmenides would instead have been *thinking in verse*. That is to say, the metrical constraints would themselves have been a *compositional* factor, a further requirement, added at the moment of producing individual sentences to the requirements of argument and the requirements concomitant to argument, such as syntax, semantic precision, and so on.

In order to understand this, it may help to listen to the words of a much later poet-intellectual, the twentieth-century French poet Paul Valéry, also, like Peter Lamarque, the author of an essay entitled “Poetry and Abstract Thought.” Valéry describes with some care the beginning of the composition of some of his poems:

My poem *Le Cimetière marin* began in me by a rhythm, that of a French line . . . of ten syllables, divided into four and six. I had as yet no idea with which to fill out this form. Gradually a few hovering words settled in it, little by little determining the subject, and my labor (a very long labor) was before me. Another poem, *La Pythie*, first appeared as an eight-syllable line whose sound came of its own accord. But this line implied a sentence, of which it was part, and this sentence, if it existed, implied many other sentences. A problem of this kind has an infinite number of solutions. But with poetry the musical and metrical conditions greatly restrict the indefiniteness. Here is what happened: my fragment acted like a living fragment, since, plunged in the (no doubt nourishing) surroundings of my desire and waiting thought, it proliferated, and engendered all that was lacking: several lines before and a great many lines after. (Valéry 1957, 80–81)

As Valéry describes it, the initial moment of the genesis of “Le cimetière marin” was the discovery, or rather the arrival, of a rhythm. The sounding of this rhythm arrives first in the mind; later, words come to settle in it, determining the subject, and to fill it. The implications for the kind of thinking that goes on in verse are important. It may not, especially in the case of important poems and poets, necessarily be the case that the poet gets his or her ideas straight first and then looks around for the correct metrical clothes to dress them up in; it may be the case, that is, that metre and rhythm, that verse, are *generative* compositional factors. They produce, they bring on, ideas in the poet’s mind, and not necessarily ideas that would have been thought of in just the same way or have been the same ideas without them. And this can hold true even where it is the poet’s own explicit intention to “versify” some set of ideas produced in advance in prose: even where the poet wishes that versification be a merely technical or decorative process, it very often turns out that it, on the contrary, introduces new kinds of thinking unforeseen in the material to be versified.

From the standpoint of a professional philosopher, of course, it is likely that this just goes to show how little utility verse can be expected to have as a medium for philosophical argument. Instead of keeping his or her eye on the main business, the validity and valid connectedness of propositions in an argument, the poet who writes in verse is continually distracted by the need at the same time to make each of his or her sentences co-operate with the need to repeat an underlying tune—a metrical set. Worse still, this need may even, in the poet’s practice, become a dominant factor in the composition of verse and even in the composition of philosophical verse;

the words, syntax, and sequence of the propositions of which the verse is made up may even be primarily motivated by the need to produce a composition that feels right metrically and rhythmically, and their paraphrasable content may be a consideration of only secondary importance to the poet.

Yet I want to explore the possibility that precisely this double constraint—the constraint that makers of metrical verse face, of needing to make their sentences both to count as instances of grammatical sentences in whichever language they are using and to count as instances of metrical lines in whichever metrical set they are using—may, for all its extremely unpromising appearance, open up the possibility of new and unforeseen directions for thinking, including for philosophical thinking. This does not exactly make of verse compositions contributions to professional philosophy—a fate that few poets, surely, would be likely to welcome. And yet it may nevertheless represent an important contribution to philosophy in a wider sense: an exploration of the wider resonance of philosophical argument that results from paying a different kind of attention to, and operating a different set of constraints upon, the linguistic material of which both verse and philosophy are inevitably made up.

Let me illustrate this by an example—an example which is often mentioned by philosophers theorizing about poetry, but which is rarely considered by them at any length—the example of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*. Lamarque mentions this work, along with Lucretius's *De rerum natura* and Voltaire's *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, as an instance of “a mode of writing where poetic devices seem more incidental than essential” (2009, 37). In cases such as these, he writes, “it seems entirely possible—in some contexts even desirable—to ignore the surface poetic form altogether and focus on the ideas and arguments in their own right. It is likely that many contemporary readers did just that (albeit, in the case of Pope, admiring the epigrammatic ‘wit’ of the poet’s turns of phrase)” (2009, 37–38). In a footnote Lamarque qualifies this view, admitting that “the poems might indeed be read primarily ‘as poetry’ and quite what that means is partially the subject of this paper” (2009, 38n.). He then affirms that “Pope himself offers entirely pragmatic reasons for writing in verse: ‘I chose verse, and even rhyme, for two reasons. The one will appear obvious; that principles, maxims, or precepts, so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards: the other may seem odd, but it is true: I found I could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself; and nothing is more certain than that much of the force as well as grace of arguments or instructions depends on their conciseness’” (2009, 38n.).

Lamarque believes, it seems, that “pragmatic” reasons cannot be “poetic” ones, just as he has an idea that to read *An Essay on Man* “primarily ‘as poetry’” would be to give it a reading in which one would pay little or no attention to what it is arguing. But this distinction between

reading a poem “for the surface poetic form” and reading it “for the ideas and arguments in their own right” is not one that would have been intelligible to Pope. It relies on a notion of “form” that only became widely current in aesthetic theory from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, the notion that “form” is opposed to “content”; it presumes that the strictly poetic resides in this “form,” and then it reads this notion of the poetic back into Pope’s thinking, which, by contrast, sticks straightforwardly with the distinction between making an argument in prose and making it in verse. I can illustrate this in the simplest way possible: Pope did not think that he was writing “in the couplet form,” he thought that he was writing couplets. In other words, whether or not Pope’s reasons are “pragmatic,” they are also at the same time reasons precisely appropriate to *verse*, considered as a mode of argument.

In my view, both of the ways of reading Pope’s *Essay on Man* that Lamarque mentions are not both possible alternatives but both impossible and both unintelligible. It is not possible to read the poem by “ignor[ing] the surface form altogether and focus[sing] on the ideas and arguments in their own right,” because that would demand an ability to know something that is not true, that there is a part of Pope’s poem which consists of its surface form and another part of it which consists of the ideas and arguments in their own right. Nor, on the contrary, is it intelligible to claim that the poem can be read “primarily ‘as poetry,’” not simply because Lamarque has not yet explained, nor ever does explain, what it would mean to read the poem “primarily ‘as poetry,’” but because such a thing cannot in principle be explained. To read the poem as poetry is to read it. The idea that there is a special way of reading poems which reads them as poetry, but which does not need to read or pay attention to the words and sentences of which they are actually made up, is nugatory. Lamarque is reading back into the entire history of verse production and verse thinking a sub-sub-Romantic conception of poetry and the poetic.

Yet our earlier difficulty still remains. Why write in verse? Is Pope right to imply that there is only gain, gain of concision and memorability, in his having written his *Essay* in verse? Is it not much more likely that there has also been loss, loss of precision in philosophical argument caused by the need to meet the whole exacting array of constraints on language that Pope’s verse procedures entail?

I should like briefly to suggest that there is both gain and loss. In order to do so, I shall have for a paragraph or so to ask you to bear with me whilst I doff that philosopher’s mantle which I have temporarily usurped, and don my prosodist’s anorak instead.

Pope’s verse style is marked by an unprecedented attention to the possibilities afforded by verse constraint. Pope establishes and deepens constraints upon many features of the verse line that had previously in English verse been treated with a great deal of licence, amongst them the placement of the pause, or caesura, the handling of monosyllabic and

polysyllabic words, the avoidance of hiatus (or the clashing of two open vowels at word boundaries), and the coincidence of syntactic with metrical boundaries. I don't have time to deal with all of these, but before I deal with one of them in some detail I need to make a general remark about the function of constraint in verse composition. It is often assumed that constraint and expressivity in verse are in inverse proportion to each other. The more constraint, the less expressive freedom. At Pope's verse-historical moment, the reverse is the case. Pope's recognition of constraints already prevailing in Edmund Waller's and John Dryden's verse and his dreaming up of new constraints for his own are in fact what make possible the development of the expressive resources of his prosodic art. The subjecting of every syllable in the verse line to an ever-ramifying series of constraints means that every syllable is impelled to carry out the double function characteristic of verse art: both to serve as a portion of an intelligible English sentence and to serve as a portion of an adequately or virtuosically rhythmic realization of a metrical constraint. So that, although readers today tend readily to yawn with incredulity at the news of Pope's youthful aspiration—to become the first *truly correct* English poet—what this aspiration really means is the saturation of every single part of the linguistic material with expressive force. The more constraint, the more expressive power.

Let me illustrate how this works in one key case, Pope's intensification and exacerbation of the preference, developed by Waller and Dryden, for the closed couplet—that is to say, the couplet in which units of sense, such as phrases and sentences, tend to coincide with, rather than be interrupted by, the metrical unit of the line. I'd like to quote two contrasting views of this kind of couplet, one by an enthusiast, Pope's friend Francis Atterbury, and another by a sceptic, the early nineteenth-century critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge. First Atterbury, praising Waller:

We are no less beholding to him [Waller] for the new turn of Verse, which he brought in, and the improvement he made in our Numbers. Before his time, men Rhym'd indeed, and that was all: as for the harmony of measure, and that dance of words, which good ears are so much pleas'd with, they knew nothing of it. Their *Poetry* then was made up almost entirely of monosyllables; which, when they come together in any cluster, are certainly the most harsh untunable things in the World. If any man doubts of this, let him read ten lines in *Donne*, and he'll be quickly convinc'd. Besides, their Verses ran all into one another, and hung together, throughout a whole Copy, like the *hook't Attoms*, that compose a Body in *Des Cartes*. There was no distinction of parts, no regular stops, nothing for the Ear to rest upon—But as soon as the Copy began, down it went, like a Larum, incessantly; and the Reader was sure to be out of Breath, before he got to the end of it. So that really Verse in those days was but down-right Prose, tagg'd with Rhymes. Mr. Waller remov'd all these faults, brought in more Polysyllables, and smoother measures; bound up his thoughts better, and in a cadence more agreeable to the

nature of the Verse he wrote in: So that where-ever the natural stops of that were, he contriv'd the little breakings of his sense so as to fall in with 'em. And for that reason, since the stress of our Verse lies commonly upon the last Syllable, you'll hardly ever find him using a word of no force there. I would say if I were not afraid the Reader would think me too nice, that he commonly closes with Verbs, in which we know the Life of Language consists. (Atterbury 1690, n.p.)

And now Coleridge, depreciating the closed couplet:

In the days of Chaucer and Gower our language might . . . be compared to a wilderness of vocal reeds, from which the favourites only of Pan or Apollo could construct even the rude Syrinx; and from this the constructors alone could elicit strains of music. But now, partly by the labours of successive poets and in part by the more artificial state of society and social intercourse, language, mechanized as it were into a barrel-organ, supplies at once both instrument and tune. . . . I have attempted to illustrate the present state of our language in its relation to literature by a press-room of larger and smaller stereotype pieces which, in the present Anglo-Gallican fashion of unconnected epigrammatic periods, it requires but an ordinary portion of ingenuity to vary indefinitely and yet still to produce something which, if not sense, will be so like it as to do as well. Perhaps better: for it spares the reader the trouble of thinking; prevents vacancy while it indulges indolence; and secures the memory from all danger of an intellectual plethora. Hence of all trades literature at present demands the least talent or information; and of all modes of literature, the manufacturing of poems. (Coleridge 1975, 21)

What Atterbury thinks of as necessary for the coherence of the line, Coleridge thinks of as inimical to the coherence of the poem. Pope's closed couplets, Coleridge thinks, take epigrammatic pointedness to a place at which the order and flow of a larger argument becomes almost impossible.

Now this is where I should like to return to Pope's *Essay on Man*. Although Lamarque, as I said, suggests that this is one of those poems where what he calls "poetic devices" "seem more incidental than essential," I consider the reverse to be the case. If one reads the prose "arguments" prefixed to each of the poem's four books, one is reading a document that is very likely rapidly to induce sleep, a kind of compendium of dead metaphysics, dead natural theology and cosmology, and dead moral philosophy, not reanimated but further entombed by Pope's prose summary. But the poem itself is a completely different matter, and this, I want to suggest, is precisely because of Pope's prosodic intelligence, his obsession with creating individual lines and couplets of intense compression, luminous clarity, and powerful melody. Instead of tamely mimicking, exemplifying, or illustrating the paraphrasable content, Pope's verse

addiction everywhere interferes with and interrupts it. Consider Epistle I, section VIII:

See, thro' this air, this ocean, and this earth,
All matter quick, and bursting into birth.
Above, how high progressive life may go!
Around, how wide! how deep extend below!
Vast chain of being, which from God began,
Natures aethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect! what no eye can see,
No glass can reach! from Infinite to thee,
From thee to Nothing!—On superior pow'rs
Were we to press, inferior might on ours:
Or in the great creation leave a void,
Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroy'd:
From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike. (Pope 1958, 44–45)

It is worth imagining how, if one really wished to create a verbal mimesis in verse of the great chain of being, one might go about it. One would presumably choose some form of verse sentence in which an overarching coherence could nevertheless embrace all the hierarchically distinct levels of being to be detailed within the chain, from the highest to the lowest: one thinks, perhaps, of Milton's blank verse sentences, often stretching across a number of lines even into double figures, and yet tightly controlled by their hypotactic structure and our consequent tense expectation of the arrival of the main verb. Perhaps the last verse sentence one would choose might be the epigrammatic couplet. What this mode produces is a series of little detonations of wit and rhetoric. These small explosions leave holes in the great chain of being. They leave it feeling, not like an august, divinely ordered, and unbreakable hierarchy, but, instead, like something extraordinarily vulnerable. Right from the start, the poet is cramming the whole world into a single couplet: "this air, this ocean and this earth." Then, despite the supposed immensity and grandeur of the chain, Pope runs up and down it at top speed: "Vast chain of being, which from God began, / Natures aethereal, human, angel, man, / Beast, bird, fish, insect!" Vast as it may be, it has taken the poet only a line and a half to traverse it, following which he skips from largest to smallest again in a two-flip manoeuvre: "From Infinite to thee, / From thee to nothing." And at last, the great chain of being is left in fragments for the sake of an epigram: "From Nature's chain whatever link you strike, / Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike." The rhetorical pleasure of the little intercalated echo in "tenth or ten thousandth" is allowed in practice completely to trump the notion that the great chain of being represents an immovable hierarchy, since it turns out that the removal of one of the tiniest and least elements in it will collapse it just as readily as the destruction of one of the

big players. Pope's virtuosic epigram making has left the great chain of being looking like something ready to fall apart at a moment's notice.

And so, of course, it was. It was, precisely, a piece of widely disbelieved yet widely inculcated metaphysics ready to collapse (where not already collapsed) at any moment. Pope's verse thinking tells the truth against the prose paraphrase with which he himself has prefaced the poem.

Pope too, then, like Empedocles, is thinking in verse. In so far as *Essay on Man* thinks anything interesting, it thinks it in verse. It does not first think it in prose and then dress it up in verse, despite what Pope himself sometimes said about this kind of matter. Geuss remarks, attractively, that cases like Lucretius's and like Pope's do "not seem to give much real comfort to those who wish to claim that poetry is a 'form of knowledge.'" They presumably wish to say that there are some truths to which access can be had *only* through poetry" (Geuss 2003, 4). The point is well made. I do not think we can claim, nor should I wish to claim, that there are some truths to which access can be had *only* through poetry. I am claiming, instead, that there have historically been some verse compositions that can be shown to have opened up new topics and questions for thinking and new ways of thinking about existing ones; and that the fact of these compositions having been in verse has been essential, rather than accidental, to their ability to do this. To have opened up new topics and questions for thinking, or to have opened up old topics in a new way, is, in my view, fully to have established the possibility that poetry can have real philosophical significance, because if we awarded the title "philosopher" only to the author who has assembled a series of propositions universally admitted to be true, every department of philosophy in the land should stand empty, nor should we be able to consider Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant to have been philosophers.

And this is where it is possible that our questions have some wider relevance to thinking about how philosophy in general gets written, gets made up, even when it is composed in prose. The question of paraphrasability is central to Lamarque's distinction between poetry and philosophy: "It should not be forgotten," he writes, "that if paraphrase is impossible in poetry it is obligatory in philosophy. There could not be a serious philosophical thesis that could only be expressed in one way or indeed an argument that demanded unique phrasing" (Lamarque 2009, 46). Lamarque treats this assertion as though it were quite uncontroversial and needed no further discussion, but I am not so certain that it is true. It can be argued that the way in which a thesis is put is itself an essential part of its being a thesis. If one puts that thesis in a different way, one has a different thesis. Even though it would be possible to imagine a claim that in some way the content of the two theses is identical, they are nevertheless different theses. As I began by saying, I am not a philosopher; I know this question to have been argued over a great deal by others who have looked into it more deeply than I have; and I await instruction. But poets, for

their part, have often believed the relationship between ideas and words to be more intimate than Lamarque suggests. When Edgar Degas expressed to Stéphane Mallarmé his surprise at the difficulty of making poems, given how many excellent ideas he had, the poet replied: “My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words” (Valéry 1957, 63). The idea, however, is also pertinent to the writing of books and articles of philosophy. As William Blake wrote, “Ideas cannot be Given but in their Minutely Appropriate Words” (Blake 1982, 576). Perhaps one consequence of serious attention to the phenomenon of verse thinking might even be that, in certain circumstances, ideas cannot be given but in their minutely appropriate tunes (Jarvis 2010). At any rate, now that all Bedlam or Parnassus has at last been let out, I call a halt.

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