The Poetry-Verse Distinction Reconsidered

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>   [Dublin: in the Stag's Head,
>   Dame Lane]
>
> O'Mahony – Haven't you that little priest that
>   writes poetry over there – Fr Russell?
> Joyce – O, yes. . .I hear he has written verses.
> O'Mahony – (*smiling adroitly*). . .Verses, yes. . .that's
>   the proper name for them. . . .[1]

In this 'epiphany', the name the young James Joyce gave to short prose observations of 'a sudden spiritual manifestation' that surfaces in everyday life,[2] the author and O'Mahony discuss a 'little priest', Fr Russell. Whilst Joyce initially corrects O'Mahony's description of the priest's verse writings, the epiphany subsequently shows them build up a shared connivance, embodied in O'Mahony's 'adroit' smile. The 'little priest' is continually, remorselessly belittled: his profession given the indignity of lower case, his person the object of aloof disinterest from

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[1] James Joyce, Epiphany no.10, in *Poems and shorter writings: including Epiphanies, Giacomo Joyce and 'A Portrait of the Artist'*, eds. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz and John Whittier-Ferguson (London: Faber, 1991), p. 170.
[2] Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1944), p. 211.

Joyce himself, his 'poetry' dismissed as mere 'verses'. In one highhanded gesture, Joyce asserts his own superiority over 'little' Fr Russell, and the archetypal superiority of artist over priest.

At the basis of this dismissal is the implication that the inferiority of 'verses' to 'poetry' is insurmountable. Not simply are verses insubstantial, flimsy, or 'little'; belonging to the 'priest', they are heteronomous—homilies with line endings, to be contrasted to the autonomy of the artwork Joyce would himself produce (an autonomy embodied here in the highhandedness of 'Joyce' the character within the epiphany). 'Verse', then, is a marker of much more than the generic fact of line endings; its 'littleness' in ever sense turns out to belong to its essence. And conversely, the depreciation of 'verses' is deployed both to enhance Joyce's own claim to 'poetry', and to flesh out what this poetry might be, this latter being of especial significance for Joyce given that the 'epiphany' is itself a prose form.[3] What is at issue here is a discrepancy between the verse/prose and poetry/non-poetry oppositions, a discrepancy that lies within the meaning of the term 'poetic' itself, which can either denote a genre category, or serve as an adjective for the 'quality' of a piece of writing. Yet the assertion of this adjectival sense also serves to endow 'poetry', ennobled, with a specifically philosophical value; the epiphany, Joyce tells us, will bring a thing's 'soul, its whatness, [to] leap[] to us from the vestment of its appearance'.[4] This is perhaps most famously embodied in Mallarmé's claim to have 'understood the intimate correlation of Poetry with the Universe'; the 'Book' he would write, which would contain all possible configurations of speech and therefore flesh out this correlation, would be impervious to distinctions between verse and prose.[5] And it is not simply poets

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[3] Indeed, Joyce's poetic prose builds on fifty years of 'prose poetry, dating back to French Symbolism (one thinks of Baudelaire's prose poems, or Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* and *Illuminations*, which fuse lines of verse with long prose experiments).

[4] Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 213.

[5] Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes* eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1945 ; 1992 reprinting), p. 368. Jacques Scherer describes Mallarmé's

who search in 'poetry' rather than 'verse' an ontological dimension, but philosophers.[6] Giorgio Agamben sees poetry as the privileged mode through which we come to hear 'language finally communicate itself',[7] and Martin Heidegger calls poetry 'the saying of the unconcealment of beings'.[8]

It is this philosophical, or, strictly speaking, ontological, dimension, that I will examine in the current essay; in particular, I want to ask what happens to the concept of 'verse', and the conceptual field that analyses of verse inhabit, when such lofty claims are made for 'poetry'. When Heidegger, for example, states that that 'pure prose is never prosaic. It is as poetic [*dichterisch*] as poesy [*Poesie*]',[9] it seems quite clear: the generic distinction between poesy and prose is irrelevant to the 'poetic' essence of 'pure' writing, whatever the genre. The distinction between *Dichtung*, the 'projective saying' that 'allows [the] open to happen in such a way … that now, for the first time, in the midst of beings, it brings them to shine and sound', and *Poesie*, 'the linguistic work … in the narrower sense',[10] would in this respect follow a second Heideggerian distinction: that between beings or entities [*Das Seiende*] and being [*Das Sein*], or the 'ontico-ontological difference'. However, as we shall see, such claims taken out of context are misleading, as Heidegger's thinking is continually engaged with how the 'ontological' dimension of a poem arises out of its treatment of its 'ontic' medium. Even when Joyce wants to assert

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account of the prose-verse distinction for Poetry thus: 'Provided there is "some secret pursuit of music", prose is nothing other than disguised verse' (Scherer (ed.), *Le Livre de Mallarmé*; Paris: Gallimard, 1957; p. 141, my translation).

[6] Even if it goes without saying that not all philosophers would adhere to this, and that one strain of the philosophy of language uses the name 'poetry' to describe any proposition without verifiable truth conditions, it is worth remembering this. The philosophical tradition with which I shall engage is that 'continental' variety which comes out of Husserlian phenomenology and passes through 'deconstruction'.

[7] Agamben, 'The End of the Poem', in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 115.

[8] Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' trans. Julian Young, in *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 46.

[9] Heidegger, 'Language', in *Poetry Language Thought* ed. and trans. Albert Hofstadter (2nd ed., New York: Harper and Row, 2001), p. 205, translation modified.

[10] Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 45.

that verses cannot become a poem, his own claims to write poetry depend on his mastery of verse technique.[11]

The question, for Heidegger and Agamben alike, is how features of 'verse' can open on to a 'poetic' truth. And this is not simply a question for philosophers. In his all-too-brief lecture notes on 'Poetry and Verse',[12] Gerard Manley Hopkins offers a salient distinction between 'spoken sound' and 'spoken words', which serves as the basis for his own verse-poetry distinction. If verse is characterised by a repeated figure of *sound*, poetry requires that, even as it is 'framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing', these sounds remain 'words'.[13] Yet how is it possible that a repeated figure of sound should communicate to us the words themselves, and how, inversely, these words should 'support and employ the [sonorous] shape which is contemplated for its own sake',[14] without thereby dissolving into meaninglessness? At this point again, the verse-poetry distinction involves properly philosophical stakes. Heidegger says, with great perspicacity: 'What we "first" hear is never noises or complexes of sound, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle' and never 'a multiplicity of tone-data';[15] yet 'verse' would appear to involve, precisely, the patterning of such 'complexes of sound'. The transition of 'verse' into 'poetry' would be a return, through the patterning of 'complexes of sound', to the originary meaningful texture of the world, which poem renders 'radiant', and brings 'to shine and sound'.

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[11] This is reminiscent of the shock with which Mallarmé criticism reacted to the discovery of notes for his 'Book', having previous imagined this an ideal, necessarily unrealisable project lying on a plane beyond any poetic practice. This response is recalled by Jacques Scherer in his *Avant-propos* to the second edition of Mallarmé's book (*Le Livre de Mallarmé*, p. viii-x.)

[12] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Poetry and Verse', in *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (ed. Humphry House, Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 289-90.

[13] Hopkins, 'Poetry and Verse', p. 289.

[14] Hopkins, 'Poetry and Verse', p. 289.

[15] Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 207.

This is not to say that philosophers' use of the poetry-verse distinction has not also been opportunistic and tendentious. It has, and the essay will first examine the strategic uses to which the distinction has been put, with Heidegger, along with Jacques Derrida, the most egregious offenders as they valorise their disregard for 'formal' features of poems and those literary critics who analyse them, philosophy's status as 'mother of the sciences' becoming a pretext for disciplinary colonisation.[16] The strategic dimension to the poetry-verse distinction is central to Joyce's 'Epiphany': depreciating the 'verses' of the 'little priest', Joyce dismisses a potential rival—dismisses, indeed, his very claim to constitute a rival.[17] Roman Jakobson, delineating a 'poetic function' of language in his discussion of 'Linguistics and Poetics', follows Hopkins in asking whether all verse is poetry, only to answer immediately that this question 'can be definitely answered as soon as poetic function ceases to be arbitrarily confined to the domain of poetry'.[18] If the scope of 'poetic function', 'poetic' as adjective, extends far beyond 'poetry' as a genre (to think that there is something specifically 'poetic' about poetry 'would be a delusive oversimplification'; 69), then so does the scope of 'poetics'. Approaching not poetry as art form but 'poetic' as function of language, poetics cuts its ties with aesthetics to become as 'that part of linguistics which treats the

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[16] Simon Jarvis, has noted that when one speaks the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, the notion of poetry at work is a philosophical concept: 'It is hard to know what poetry is. What poetry is, is, therefore, a philosophical question.' But what philosophy is, is not a 'poetic' question; hence the quarrel takes place on philosophy's terms ('For a Poetics of Verse', PMLA 125:4 (2010), pp. 931-935; p. 931).

[17] In *Stephen Hero*, the novel he was writing at the time, and which eventually became *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's alter-ego Stephen Daedalus finds himself in a competition with a young priest regarding the affections of a young girl, Emma Clery, although his feelings are once again articulated through a feigned patrician detachment: 'Stephen watching this young priest and Emma together usually worked himself into a state of unsettled rage. It was not so much that he suffered personally as that the spectacle seemed to him typical of Irish ineffectualness' (p. 69).

[18] Jakobson, 'Closing statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), pp. 62-94; p. 72.

poetic function in its relationship to the other functions of language' (72-3). Herein lies the disciplinary stakes of Jakobson's 'function'.[19]

If Jakobson is contesting the a disciplinary battle for literary criticism and poetics, Heidegger's own employment of the poetry-verse distinction would do away with the disciplines of 'aesthetics', 'linguistics', and 'poetics' altogether, as can be seen from the laconic disdain with which he starts his discussion of Georg Trakl's poem 'A Winter Evening' [*Ein Winterabend*] in the lecture 'Language':

> The poem is made up of three stanzas. Their meter and rhyme pattern can be defined accurately according to the schemes of metrics and poetics. The poem's content is comprehensible.[20]

To restrict our discussion to 'the schemes of metrics and poetics', Heidegger warns, would leave us 'confined by the notion of language that has prevailed for thousands of years' (194), and thereby block us off from the real purpose of the lecture, which is to 'seek the speaking of language in the poem' (194), and from the real nature of the poem, as a privileged site in which such speaking of language can be sought. Heidegger, here as elsewhere, casts himself in the role of saving poetry from poetics and 'literary history': in a lecture series on Hölderlin's hymn 'Andenken', he flatly states that poetics 'cannot open any single door in the realm of Hölderlinian hymnal poetry',[21] and his own 'elucidations' or 'soundings' [*Erläuterungen*] of Hölderlin's poetry are not 'contributions to research in the history of literature or aesthetics' but rather 'spring from a necessity of thought'.[22]

In each instance, poetics is seen merely to furnish a metrical 'scheme', or to interpret 'images' and 'symbols' (the camel in Arabian epic being one preferred

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[19] Curiously, Jakobson's explanation of exactly how 'poetic function', as it were, functions, involves 'the focus on the message for its own sake' (69), so that the disavowal of aesthetics takes place by recourse to the aestheticist trope *par excellence.*

[20] Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought*, p. 193.

[21] Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne, 'Andenken'* (Stuttgart: V. Klostermann, 1982), p. 40.

[22] Heidegger, 'Preface', *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst N. Y.: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 21.

example), and such technical manipulation comes at great expense: poetics cannot 'think'. This leads literary history and poetics to misread poetry as mere 'literature'; indeed, its inability to think means that 'even when we are engaged in demonstrating by means of literary history that these works of poetry really are not literature', poetry cannot appear to 'literary history' except as 'literature'.[23] Literary criticism, in other words, might know and even demonstrate its own limits, but it cannot overcome them. The only way in which we can move from a determination of poetry as 'literature' to poetry itself, Heidegger says—the 'poetry' in which we will then be able to hear the 'speaking of language'—is if we 'release poetry into its essential place' [*der Dichtung ihren Wesensort freigeben*]; and this requires that poetry itself 'must first determine and reach this place'.[24]

To this there is one obvious riposte. How can Heidegger's own readings, valorising their disregard towards the poems' 'literary' features, to the metrical 'schemes' the poem employs, be so sure that it is they and not 'poetics' that allow poetry to determine and reach its 'essential place'? How, indeed, can he know when poetry has in fact determined and reached it? After all, if metrical schemes and recurrent tropes were entirely absent from poetry's 'essential place', it would seem strange that so many poems should employ them.

This is not, suffice to say, the question that concerns Heidegger, who approaches the privileged relation 'thinking' has to 'poetry' by sketching a singular relation between thinking and 'poetising' [*Dichten*] as modes of saying. On the one hand, he quite openly acknowledges that his conception of the *Dichtung* which 'allows th[e] open to happen in such a way, indeed, that now, for the first time, in the midst of beings, it brings them to shine and sound',[25] is remarkably similar to what 'thinking' itself is meant to achieve, going so far even to state: 'Thinking is

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[23] Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 134.
[24] *What is Called Thinking?*, p. 134, translation modified.
[25] Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 45.

the ur-poetry [*Urdichtung*] which precedes all poesy [*Poesie*]'.[26] Yet he insists that this is by no means to collapse poetry and thinking into one—far from it. The two 'modes of saying' are, it transpires, pervaded by a constitutive mutual otherness; they are:

> in virtue of their nature held apart by a delicate yet luminous difference, each held in its own darkness: two parallels, in Greek *para allelo*, by one another, against one another, transcending, surpassing one another each in its fashion (OL 90).

It further transpires that this 'delicate yet luminous difference' is intrinsic to Heidegger's claim that thinking frees the poem to reach and determine its 'essential place'; directed against 'literary history', we can say that it is only when we refrain from categorising, compartmentalising, or taxonomising the poem's prosodic texture or figural vocabulary that we can free the poem to reach and determine its 'essential place'. Instead of submitting it to pre-existing strictures of thought, 'thinking' submits itself to the poem, allows prosody and figure to transform the way in which beings enter into 'unconcealment'; it is thus that 'thinking' can claim to see beyond 'verse' to 'poetry' itself.

This submission is made possible precisely as poetry retains its 'otherness' to thinking. But there is a fine line between recognising that poetry is 'other' to thinking, and transforming poetry into thinking's 'other'. After all, it is thinking, not poetry, that identifies and analyses this 'delicate yet luminous difference', just as it is thinking and not poetry that conceives of this difference as a difference between two 'modes of saying'. In this, the otherness of poetry has been instrumentalised by thinking in advance: exposure to the otherness of poetry will render thinking 'other' to itself, and thereby bring it into contact with its own limits. As Heidegger might have put it, but (to my knowledge) didn't: poetry releases thinking to think its own unthought.

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[26] 'Heidegger, Anaximander's Saying', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 247.

The discussion of the 'essential place' of poetry, then, is not only directed against literary criticism: poetry-as-other would fill a lack within philosophy itself. Indeed, the otherness-imbued kinship thinking has with poetry is deployed by Heidegger to distinguish 'thinking' from 'science' [*Wissenschaft*];[27] poetry's 'essential place' is assimilated into the battle for the future of philosophy as a discipline. This is also what is ultimately at stake in Derrida's response to the question *che cos'è la poesia?*. To ask what a poem is, Derrida argues, is to be confronted with the poem's continual evasion of the structure of that philosophical questioning which asks 'what is…?', and in so doing sets up boundaries between inside and outside, material and ideal, etc., and which extrapolates from the singular and particular into the absolute and universal.[28] The poem, by contrast, appears as 'an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality … from the body of the letter' (229). When a poem touches the 'heart',[29] then 'heart' itself 'no longer names only pure interiority, independent spontaneity, the freedom to affect oneself actively by reproducing the beloved trace' but rather 'a certain exteriority of the automaton, … the laws of mnemotechnics' (231). Rather, when the 'heart beats (within) you [*le coeur te bat*]' it provides 'the birth of rhythm, beyond oppositions, beyond inside and outside…' (231, translation modified). This does not draw Derrida to ask what this originary rhythm might be; what is crucial is that, 'beyond oppositions', it continually withdraws from philosophy itself, or twists philosophical conceptuality into the most flagrant contradictions, such as 'the nonabsolute absolute' (231). It is here, indeed, that poetry, just as it withdraws from philosophical questioning, allows Derrida to propose, tentatively as ever, a salvaged conception of philosophical questioning. Replacing the statement-form 'a poem is' by 'I call a poem', 'you call a poem', and 'we call a poem', each attempt at

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[27] Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, pp. 134-5.

[28] Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?' in *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 221-237.

[29] Throughout, Derrida plays on the idea of learning poetry 'by heart' [*par coeur*].

definition becomes avowedly and inescapably performative, and most openly so at those junctures when it seems to be dealing in propositional statements.

This is not to turn philosophy into some rarefied literary criticism, as the complaint often goes. Searching out 'the gift of the poem' which, 'cutting all ties with discursive and especially literary poetry' (235), embodies an excess over the economy of literary categories, Derrida too would suggest (albeit less polemically than Heidegger) that it is philosophy and not literary criticism which can grasp the poem's 'gift' (not unrelated to what Heidegger calls its 'projective' dimension). In this, literary criticism and poetics become incidental to the attempt to delineate this 'salvaged' philosophy that will open itself to the withdrawal that characterises this gift. When he too, in the last lines of the essay, invokes the distinction between poetry and 'prose'—'"What is…?" laments the disappearance of the poem. … By announcing that which is just as it is, a question salutes the birth of prose' (237)— 'prose' becomes a placeholder for, as it were, the wrong kind of philosophy.[30] Deployed as philosophy's other, poetry is subsequently assimilated into philosophy's auto-critique, precisely at the moment that it is supposedly returned to its 'essential place', or understood through the singularity of its 'gift'.

It is in its resistance to, and withdrawal from, philosophical definition that poetry galvanises Derrida's critique of philosophical questioning. But, by a sleight of hand, it would seem that Derrida has defined poetry after all, and not only negatively as that which eludes the 'what is…?'. When Derrida says of the poem's 'event' that it 'always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge, autotelic being in proximity to itself' (235), one is reminded of that other 'event' that reiterates itself throughout his work, and which he 'calls' *différance*. When he 'calls' poem 'a certain passion for the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the *logos*, ahuman, barely domestic, not reappropriable into the family of

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[30] This does, however, beg the question as to whether anything can be 'prose' in Derrida's sense, given that each 'what is…?' is fated to defer itself indefinitely as it founds itself, and in so doing founders, upon difference.

the subject…' (235, translation modified), we can note that all the motifs normally associated with *différance* are present and correct. Poetry's withdrawal from and resistance to philosophical questioning and vocabulary has become its characteristic trait; it too is now simply one more instance of 'deconstruction'.

What we have seen is a movement in which poetry ceases to be simply 'other' to philosophy (i.e. cannot be assimilated into philosophical discourse), and becomes 'the other' of philosophy (i.e. that which is by definition inassimilable into philosophical discourse). Yet, insofar as this otherness is to be grasped philosophically, it is not truly 'other' to philosophy at all but that redoubtable creature, an 'other' of the 'same'. But if poetry genuinely *were* 'other' to philosophy, however, surely it would furnish neither a philosophical nor an anti-philosophical concept, at it might be, once again, those alternative means of defining 'poetry' so as to grasp its generic and technical diversity, and which have been discounted in advance for being 'literary' and thus blind to the poem's 'gift', that could be genuinely 'other' to thinking, and therefore, ironically enough, the only way in which this 'gift' or 'projection' might first become thinkable.

Yet we can also find in both Heidegger and Derrida a more tempered line of argument, where what is at issue is less a poetic 'essence' or 'gift' far removed from poetry as 'literature', but the value of those features that we would term 'literary', and the kind of reading they would exact. When Derrida points to 'mnemotechnics', for example, he is hinting at the mnemonic function verse historically has held; similarly when he states that the poem's meaning is only an 'ideality' insofar as it remains incorporated, as it were, in 'the body of the letter', he is taking the significance with which the poem's 'body' is endowed through the poem's deployment of its medium as the basis not only for rethinking philosophical conceptuality, but also for subsequently offering a conceptual basis for reading such a body. When Heidegger speaks of 'pure prose' as being as 'poetic' as 'poesy', we should distinguish between two claims: one about what

characterises poetry's 'essential place', and one about how to read a poem so that this 'essential place' comes to show itself. In other words, Heidegger might be declaring war on metre as a feature of verse; but he might equally be declaring war on metricians.

In this case, what is at issue is not the existence of technical or generic features of verse, and their importance to a given 'poem', but rather the broader philosophical value such features might have. In this, the recourse both Derrida and Heidegger have to 'prose', even if initially seeming a rather trite rhetorical gesture, hints at a far more sophisticated relation between poetry and verse. In brief, 'prose' becomes a limit concept for grasping the 'poetic' in terms of its transformative, projective dimension, through which (in Heidegger's vocabulary) it brings about an 'open' region in which beings, as it were for the first time, come to 'shine and sound'. This claim might seem to read against the grain of the declamatory certainty he demonstrates in 'Language'; yet this should be seen as the development of a meditation on 'prose' found in the introductory remarks to his lecture series on Hölderlin's hymns 'Germanien' and 'Der Rhein', the first lecture series he gave on poetry. Having observed that 'Germanien' does not follow any conventional metrical form, he continues:

> A poem without metre and rhyme is nevertheless not really a poem at all, not poetry, prose rather. […] and yet, [a] common, precise, prosaic 'for' [*Denn*], sounds, as though spoken for the first time, and this apparent prose of the whole poem is more poetic than the smoothest gambolling lines and jingling rhymes of any Goethesque Lieder or other singsong.[31]

What makes Hölderlin's 'poem' 'poetic', then, is the way in which this 'prosaic' word *Denn* comes to 'sound'. The poem enters is 'essential place' as *Dichtung*; prose marks the threshold between verse and poetry, and thus facilitates the transition from the one to the other. Yet what Heidegger has identified is not 'prose' itself,

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[31] Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'* (Stuttgart: V. Klostermann, 1980), p. 16.

but rather prose as it irrupts within verse, an 'apparent prose' that is nevertheless only 'apparent'. 'Prosaic', here, signifies a prosodic dissonance: not a euphonic singsong, perhaps, but prosodic nonetheless. Rather than prosody being expelled from the 'essential place' of *Dichtung*, the *dichterisch* 'sounding' is heard prosodically, and arises through the engagement with prosody taking place in the poem itself.

Read in this light, the insistence that poetry is distinct from 'verse' does not disregard but rather transforms what first appears as a metrical feature. In particular, this metrical feature is not abstracted to the level of sound patterning, but conceived of as the 'sounding' of a word, *Denn*, such that its significance and its sonority coincide. As with Hopkins's analysis of 'poetry', the sounding Heidegger identifies remains resolutely on the side of speech. It is here that we can start to understand his critique of a 'poetics' that would dwell exclusively on 'the formal features of the work, its qualities and intrinsic charms [*Reize an sich*]'.[32] The charms *an sich* might be 'intrinsic' to themselves, but they thus become extrinsic, ornamental to the actual work, and when we isolate such 'formal features' from the poem's capacity to transform the way we hear and understand a particular word in its 'sounding', we thereby render such 'sounding' impossible in advance. It would then be those literary critics that analyse and schematise these 'charms' in isolation that deny that they belong to the essence of poetry, and not Heidegger with his apparent disdain for such 'charms'.

To focus exclusively on 'form', to focus, that is, on spoken *sound* rather than spoken *words*, is to close oneself off from the 'sounding' that the poem effects. Even if we don't follow Heidegger's own 'ontological' focus, this remains a problem: a descriptive analysis of the poem's prosodic movement would not be able to account for how it shapes and transforms our own relation with language. Objectified, the poem is nullified. Yet this does not explain how Heidegger can be so sure that he hears, in this 'prosaic' *Denn*, such transformative 'sounding'; this

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[32] Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 42.

requires a far more detailed engagement with this prosodic movement than Heidegger's declamation allows. Once again, Joyce's epiphany is illustrative. As mentioned above, his denigration of 'verses' galvanises his own pretentions to poetry, and of the pretentions he holds for the short prose form of the epiphany itself. When the epiphany itself comes to constitute, and perform, its own claim to poetry, it embarks on an ostentatious display of virtuosity, in particular engaging the rhythmic and physical aspects of language over which, as segmented language, we might expect 'verse' to claim privilege.

We can note, for example, the way the irregularity of the dots serves to evoke and to concretise the time of the discussion, and in this these visual marks extend beyond their syntactical function; building up highly condensed meaning played around short, apparently anodyne words and phrases, Joyce can load the word 'yes' with myriad inflections, around which is organised the characters' ironic allusion and mutual recognition, whilst remaining within the apparently impersonal, reserved pub conversation. Indeed, the claim to 'poetry' takes place in the deployment of the word 'verse' itself, its long /ɜː/ vowel and elongated falling cadence playing against the taut frame not only of the snippet of conversation the epiphany captures, and indeed against the tautness that is the epiphany's formal principle. That is to say, Joyce's attempt to assert the verse-poetry distinction is not one that deems technique inessential by any means, but rather must reappropriate and refigure technique to accord with his broader artistic project.

Heidegger's assertion of the 'sounding' of language in Hölderlin's verse engages only fleetingly with the prosodic movement that effects it. Hölderlin himself, by contrast, gives serious thought to how a metrical feature can reach beyond its local metrical value. In his 'Notes on Oedipus', he tries to elaborate a 'law' of tragic drama, according to which 'representation, sensation and reason', although appearing through a 'rhythmic sequence of the representations', exist 'in tragedy

more as a state of balance than as mere succession'.[33] This 'state of balance', however, is no stasis; decisive for the tragedy is the irreversible movement to a tragic fate. Irreversibility in this sense describes not simply the fact that the events cannot be undone, but rather an asymmetry at the heart of the narrative: the story, as it were, cannot be reconstructed retrospectively. The 'law' of tragedy must be able to account for the disjuncture, and for how it guides and structures the tragic 'transport', and must become manifest within the tragedy itself so that 'there does not appear the change of representation but the representation itself' (102). In order to outline such a moment, he continues, 'there becomes necessary *what in poetic metre is called caesura*, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic interruption (102, translation modified); as it cuts against the rhythmic succession and accumulation, the law governing such succession and accumulation first becomes discernable.

Extracted from a specific metrical context, caesura becomes the lever on which the tragic structure is held in balance, what Hegel would call its 'Archimedian point', and the law comes to show itself as such. If this means that tragic drama follows a 'logic of caesura', might it not be possible to extrapolate out of the logic of caesura a further philosophical import? First of all, Hölderlin's thinking of temporality here would show how the equilibrium that structures all temporal experience is itself marked by discordance, its rhythmic continuity structurally dependent on counter-rhythms. Time as such is thus given over to finitude.[34] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe develops this train of thought further, remarking Hölderlin identifies that the moment of 'caesura' for both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* in Tiresias's speeches, moments which Hölderlin calls 'empty'. The finitude implicitly governing tragic temporality only surfaces within the tragedy as a

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[33] in Thomas Pfau (trans. and ed.), *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters on Theory*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 101.

[34] See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art, et la politique* (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1988; pp. 41-5), and 'La césure du spéculatif', in *L'imitation des modernes : Typographies II* (Paris: Aubier, 1985; pp. 39-69, pp. 65ff.).

'withdrawal' or a 'nothing'.[35] In 'Caesura of the Speculative', he suggests that speculative philosophy repeats the tragic moment of catharsis; if the law of narration and tragic fate leading to the cathartic moment is dependent on caesura, then we find that the whole project of speculative philosophy, with its dialectical alternation between representations is grounded on an 'empty articulation or lack of all articulation'.[36] And in *La Fiction du politique* he takes this thought beyond the tragic experience of time to discuss history as such: 'if fate within history is nothing other than the erratic accomplishment of the Law of finitude', then 'it is perhaps not impossible to raise caesura to the level of a, if not the, concept of historicity' (44).[37]

One might wonder, however, how much is left of caesura as a specifically *metrical* device, or whether its deployment of temporal continuity and disjunction, identity and difference, has not simply transformed it into one more example of *différance*. This is most striking in a more recent analysis of Hölderlin's 'Notes on Oedipus', given by William S. Allen, who states: 'the caesura cannot be marked, but can only be recalled as that which has occurred without appearing, thereby leaving a trace of absence, a re-(mark), which neither is nor is not, for it renders such a distinction impossible; rather it is indistinct, inapparent'.[38] Yet we might hesitate before extrapolating from a verse feature to an ontological movement that is 'inapparent', not least as a caesura in a poem must necessarily 'appear' if it is to effect its 'counter-rhythmic interruption'. In being rendered 'inapparent', it seems that caesura has ceased to have a metrical function, and now merely has a hermeneutic, or more properly an anti-hermeneutic, one. One of the virtues, but also difficulties, of Allen's book is that he attempts to return this philosophically

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[35] Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 45.

[36] Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation des modernes*, p. 67.

[37] Lacoue-Labarthe then relates caesura to the pure gift of being that Heidegger tries to grasp as *Ereignis* (p. 46).

[38] Allen, *Ellipsis: Poetry and the Experience of Language after Hölderlin, Heidegger and Blanchot* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), pp. 151-2.

broadened thinking of caesura to the reading of individual poems, yet at one point this leads him to see a 'caesura' in a colon at the ending of the penultimate line of Stefan George's 'Das Wort'. This is, of course, not metrically a caesura at all; indeed, insofar as the colon precedes a final epigraph, its 'interruption' would, on a formal level, seem far from 'counter-rhythmic'. It is easy to lampoon Allen for allowing ontology to ride roughshod over scansion; yet this moment in fact points to an exceptionally important difficulty for any philosophical poetics that wants to justify its claims both to be 'philosophical' and to constitute 'poetics'. That is, if we wish to read a wider philosophical significance into a term like 'caesura', or alternatively to see how caesurae more generally employ and deploy relations of difference and identity, presence and absence, which themselves require philosophical questioning,[39] then it can become increasingly difficulty to relate philosophy's caesura to caesurae as they appear in verse, or alternatively to understand these caesurae philosophically, even at those junctures at which they explicitly exact a philosophical reading.

We should, then, be wary of offering an easy analogy between the prosodic disjunction of 'caesura' and an ontological disjunction, or indeed of endowing any one feature of verse with an absolute ontological import. But might it be possible to identify ontological significance in a verse feature without extracting it from the context in which it attains its specific significance, and thereby losing the specificity and diversity of this feature itself—without, that is, reifying verse technique? It is this problem that Giorgio Agamben confronts in his 'The End of the Poem'. If Lacoue-Labarthe and Allen focus on caesura, Agamben looks to that other mode of interrupting the sameness of rhythm in metrical poetry: enjambment. Starting with an 'ontic' analysis of this technical feature of verse, Agamben will eventually

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[39] As well as Hölderlin's discussion of caesura's 'counter-rhythmic interruption' that serves to 'balance' the metrical line, Hopkins observes how 'the various means of breaking the sameness of rhythm and especially caesura do not break the unity of the verse but the contrary; they make it organic and what is organic is one' (Rhythm and other Structural Parts of Rhetoric', p. 283).

make an 'ontological' claim about 'poetry', and indeed *for* 'poetry', as that mode of writing that will 'let language finally communicate itself'.[40] The echo of Heidegger's own description of 'the speaking of language' is by no means coincidental; yet Agamben, unlike Heidegger, wants to show in detail just how such a speaking might arise out of a specific poem's engagement with its own verse medium.

Agamben takes as his starting point the observation that 'poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere' (109), and notes that consequently 'the possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose' (109). Here we see Agamben ostensibly defining 'poetry' generically, rather than adjectivally or ontologically: it is writing with line endings, verse as opposed to prose. It also implies a style of verse: the line endings belong to a 'semiotic sphere' whose prosodic movement conflicts with the contours of a semantic or syntactic line. As with Hölderlin's caesura, this metrical rhythm is conceived of as a 'counter-rhythmic interruption'; moreover, we can not that a semantically, rather than prosodically, motivated line ending in free verse would not constitute the kind of enjambment Agamben envisages, as here the tension and difference between semiotic and semantic spheres would be annulled. Agamben's focus is on 'the end of the poem' because, as 'there can be no enjambment in the last line', each poem faces the ultimate dissolution of the tension and difference in which it 'lives' (112). At this point, the impossibility of enjambment implies an impossibility of poetry as such: each poem must continually confront and negotiate the spectre of its own impending impossibility.

At its 'end', the poem, Agamben suggests, is left with two options: sound and sense can be reconciled in a 'mystical marriage' in which the poem itself would be dismantled, or alternatively the last line can give on to an 'empty place in which,

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[40] Agamben, 'The End of the Poem', p. 115.

according to Mallarmé's phrase, truly *rien n'aura lieu que le lieu*' (114),[41] and Agamben develops this either-or into a brief reading of the final five lines of Dante's 'Cosí nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro':

> The double intensity animating language does not die away in a final comprehension; instead it collapses into silence, so to speak, in an endless falling. The poem thus reveals the goal of its proud strategy: to let language finally communicate itself, without remaining unsaid in what is said (115).

This is the moment at which Agamben's analysis shifts from an ontic to an ontological plane, where the poem ceases to be 'verse' and becomes 'poetry', and it is striking that it should do so not through a statement about poetry as such, but rather through a particular reading of a particular poem that continually experiences the particularities of its medium. Indeed, it is only through the poem's negotiation of a formal predicament, the extinguishing of enjambment in the final line, that the poem can attain its ontological 'goal' of bringing language finally to communicate itself.

There is, however, something unclear in Agamben's exposition of the poem's revelation of its 'proud strategy'. In collapsing into 'an endless falling', does the poem follow the second of the two possibilities Agamben has suggested, in which nothing takes place except the place itself, or does it serve to suspend this either-or indefinitely? This latter would constitute a negativity or suspension anterior to Mallarmé's *rien*; and indeed, as an endless *falling*, would refuse ever to 'place' itself. Language communicates itself through a double negativity: the endless falling that refuses to enter into an empty place. If poetry brings language to communicate itself, it is only insofar as language itself is negative—and indeed, in *Language and Death* Agamben had described the transcendence afforded by language as a 'place'

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[41] Mallarmé's phrase, from *Un coup de dés*, is in fact: *rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu*.

of negativity, and linguistic enunciation itself as a 'negative ontological foundation'.[42]

In this, the salient feature of language's negative transcendence is primarily not that linguistic representation implies the absence of what it represents, but the meaningful structure of 'Voice'. Each vocal utterance is permeated by the 'animal voice', brute sound that is not yet meaning, and the 'removal of voice' that takes place in the self-effacement of the phoneme into signification, and which is no longer vocal. The poem, hesitating between sound and sense, performs this not-yet/no-longer structure indefinitely, and insofar as this structure is experienced as a *temporal* displacement, it is embodied in a poem's 'metrical-musical element' (76). When Agamben calls the poem 'a place of memory and repetition', he is not simply alluding to the mnemonic function of verse; rather, both memory and repetition confront the principle of absence which inflects the present and pervades the 'place' of language. If 'poetic language commemorates its own inaccessible originary place and it says the unspeakability of the event of language (*it attains*, that is, *the unattainable*)' (78; as with Derrida, the ontological significance of poetry ultimately lies in its disclosing an originary negativity that is otherwise beyond the scope of philosophy), this is because, unlike the language of philosophy or 'thinking', it is employing the patterns of spoken sound in such a way as to render tangible the relations between presence and absence as they found linguistic transcendence.

Agamben's thinking of enjambment, then, fits quite straightforwardly into this schism between animal voice and voiceless signification. But this means that enjambment, and the 'metrical-musical element' of which it is one feature, attain ontological significance as they deploy the animal voice alone: 'spoken sound' irrespective of the words these sounds articulate. Indeed, according to his reading

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[42] Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* trans. Karen Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 36.

of Dante, the poem's meditation of its predicament starts when he finishes the first line of the five-line *envoi* with an unrelated rhyme, *donna* (woman), which also happens to be the 'supreme poetic intention' (115), comprising subject matter, figure of conventional love lyric, and addressee. If this implies that sound and sense will be drawn into union, Dante finishes the *envoi* with two rhyming couplets, which seem by contrast to insist upon the schism of sound and sense and to refuse the union the opening line had hinted at. Here we see the threatened (but avoided) union of sound and sense is the union of phoneme on the one hand and static signification on the other. This model of language at once provides the basis for his insights into the philosophical significance of verse, and yet closes him off from hearing the patterning of spoken sounds as 'spoken words'. Instead of making the transition from verse to poetry, in other words, it appears that Agamben has placed the ontological weight on verse itself—but does so only because the abstraction verse knowingly makes of speech to spoken sound is equated by Agamben with linguistic transcendence. It is this abstraction, ultimately, that is communicated when language finally communicates itself.

As a result, Agamben has closed himself off in advance to the way in which this predicament can be taken up into the meaningful texture of the poem as a whole—not just its sound and its sense as they coincide and interfere, but less quantifiable and yet inalienable features of the poem: its address, its register, its tonality, the voice's meditation on itself. Agamben's problem is ostensibly one of ontology rather than metrics. Language is grasped in terms of a sound-sense dichotomy that it continually exceeds, and this leads him not to rethink the relation between sound and sense, but rather to grasp language *as excess*. The missing moment in Agamben's analysis, which would also be the transition from verse to poetry, is the moment at which he starts to read the poem beyond the patterning of individual words that contain their specific phonemes and their specific significations. This would be precisely the moment where, in what both Hopkins

and Heidegger call 'poetry', what we hear is not phonemes that give way to significations, but 'spoken words', or where language 'speaks' only as it 'sounds'. In other words, if for Agamben, as for Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Allen, the basis of poetry's ontological claim lies in its negativity, it might be this negativity which is the problem, as it simply reflects an abstraction of the sounds and rhythms of language from its modes of meaning in which 'poetry' has already been lost.

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To finish, I would like to return, once more, to Joyce's Epiphany. In *Stephen Hero*, Joyce's alter-ego Stephen Daedalus explains to his friend Cranly the aesthetics, and epistemology, lying behind the notion of 'epiphany'. Daedalus grounds his theory on the Thomist claim that 'the three things requisite for beauty are, integrity, a wholeness, symmetry, and radiance'.[43] Once, he claims, we have recognised that an object is one integral thing, and we have recognised it to be 'an organised composite structure, a *thing* in fact' (213), we come to its *claritas*, which, Stephen suggests, is at the same time its *quidditas*. He continues:

> Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany (213).

Even if this radiance initially leaps to 'us', it is the object itself which 'achieves its epiphany', and this endows the literary form of the epiphany, which is itself a 'poetic' object, with a peculiar exigency. The purpose of the epiphany as a literary form, Joyce tells us, is to capture the radiance of the object it describes, to 'record these epiphanies with extreme care, as they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments' (211); yet to record epiphany, and thus become an 'epiphany', requires that it become itself radiant, that it too 'achieve[] its epiphany'.

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[43] *Stephen Hero*, p. 212.

When the epiphany extends a cadence, when it loads different inflections on to one word, when it presses upon one phoneme, these techniques are designed both to evoke this particular moment that it records, but also to give to this cadence, this word, this phoneme, a radiance through which it 'sounds, as if for the first time', as Heidegger would put it. In the dismissal of the priest's verses, and of 'verse' as a genre, it is precisely this 'sounding' that Joyce attempts to grasp—and to achieve. And this would provide something of an allegory for 'theory' itself. If its attempts to appropriate the features of 'verse' too often show up both a blindness to, and dependence on, the specificities of verse technique, then it also, both through its difficulties and through its moments of insight, offers a way of revaluing the importance of these specificities, and what is at stake—philosophically, aesthetically, linguistically—in each instance of verse, and in particular in its attending to the way verse can, through an engagement with its own medium, transform the way we hear not just the sounds of phonetic data, but the sounding of language as such.

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