Reading Habits

ROSS WILSON

Interpretation and Dismemberment

In 'The Function of Criticism' T.S. Eliot posits a distinction between two kinds of critical enterprise: 'Comparison and analysis,' he remarks, 'need only the cadavers on the table; but interpretation is always producing parts of the body from its pockets, and fixing them in place.'[1] Eliot returns to the helplessly splayed body throughout his work, as, for example, in the opening three lines of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' ('Let us go then, you and I, | When the evening is spread out against the sky | Like a patient etherised upon a table') and in his doctoral dissertation, where he seems to express a degree of doubt in the explanatory power of spreading and tabulating: 'We can never, I mean, wholly explain the practical world from a theoretical point of view, because this world is what it is by reason of the practical point of view and the world which we try to explain is a world spread out upon a table—simply *there*!'[2]

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[1] 'The Function of Criticism' (1923), in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999; first publ. 1932), pp. 23-34 (p. 33).

[2] 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', from *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969; repr. 1978), p. 13; *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 136. In *From Philosophy to Poetry: T.S. Eliot's Study of Knowledge and Experience* (London: Athlone, 2001), Donald J. Childs traces the metaphor of spreading in the 'The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock' to Eliot's reading of Henri Bergson (pp. 69-71) and also usefully discusses its appearance in the doctoral dissertation (pp. 128-29). In 'The Patient Etherised Upon a Table: A New Source', *Yeats-Eliot Review*, 5 (1978), 9-13, Hans Borchers argues for the pertinence to Eliot's image of Jules Laforgue's 'Complainte sur certains temps déplacés' (1885) – 'Le couchant de sang est taché |

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To be sure, the insistence that criticism choose between dissection and body-snatching may seem peculiarly macabre: Eliot is elsewhere willing to imagine the object of literary study not as a corpse (whether entire or furtively dismembered), but rather, as in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', as a still living organic whole. Nevertheless, the repeated reversion of his mind to the prone body does suggest the importance of this figure to his imagination of the critical task as it is variably carried out. 'Comparison and analysis'—an echo of 'comparative anatomy'?—need only the bodies in front of them, and their working is displayed for all to see; contrastingly, despite its 'fixing them in place' in a kind of gruesome collage, the body parts that 'interpretation' handles are at once grotesquely and almost magically produced from the pockets in which they are guiltily concealed from sight. But how much difference, in the end, is there between '[c]omparison and analysis', on the one hand, and 'interpretation', on the other (and I am aware that my own interpretative production of the discursive figure of 'one hand and another' at this moment is perhaps a little unfortunate)? For whether it is set about with a scalpel in the anatomy theatre of 'comparison and analysis' or with a hatchet in the robbed tomb of 'interpretation', the body in question will hardly end up as it began. Wordsworth once suggested that murder was the regrettable condition of the perhaps otherwise understandable desire to dissect and thus learn, but Eliot's

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Comme un tablier de boucher; | Oh! Qui veut m'écorcher!' (*Poésies complètes*, ed. by Pascal Pia, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), I: *Les Complaintes*, p. 113) – and, especially, via critical essays by Arthur Symons, of William Ernest Henley's *In Hospital: Rhymes and Rhythms*, including the opening stanza of the fifth poem, 'Operation': 'You are carried in a basket, | Like a carcase from the shambles, | To the theatre, a cockpit | Where they stretch you on a table.' (*A Book of Verses* (London: David Nutt, 1888), p. 8.) I am very grateful to Jim McCue for helping me track down these sources for Eliot's image. On the experimentations with free verse in Henley's *In Hospital* see, incidentally, Clive Scott, *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 42-46. We may note that 'Operation' itself is not in free verse, but in stanzas of four unrhymed octosyllabic lines. Nevertheless, it is certainly rhythmically notable, with two strong stresses per line (on carried and basket in the opening line, for instance) pulling against or across the more straightforward trochaic tendency. And the opening quatrain, at least, hints at rhyme in the acoustic resonance of *basket/cockpit* and *shambles/table*. That this hint at rhyme should come right at the start of the poem—are we supposed to think this poem is going to rhyme, then, or not?—is, of course, significant. Compare, in this connection, my comments elsewhere on the opening lines of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*: 'Browning's Balancing Acts', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 337-50 (p. 346)

maudlin imagination brings to the fore the fact that dissection is itself already quite grisly enough.

'Comparison and analysis' may be scientifically creditable but the text subject to its scrutiny is still the passive object out of which knowledge is to be drawn. The analyst-anatomist is too studiedly professional—professorial, even—to contemplate that her or his critical demonstration might ever take the form, instead, of 'a medical examination undertaken by an erotic partner.'[3] This image, in its combination of diagnostic rigour, bodily pleasure, and playful flouting of established codes of expected behaviour, captures well what is characteristic in Clive Scott's literary criticism and the theory of reading that it propounds. While we might find ourselves, in a final gruesome twist, compelled to feed the body parts we have pocketed through 'this particular sausage-machine, critical discourse', Clive Scott can be seen beckoning us beyond the factory walls.

I want, in this essay, to pay tribute to Scott's immense critical contribution by, first, examining his view of the results of interpretation against which he, especially in *The Poetics of French Verse*, juxtaposes the activity of reading. In particular, I argue that Scott offers us vital resources—both by means of theoretical statement and metaphorical figures for criticism—for rethinking reading habits: for rethinking, that is, first how and why we might need to return to what we read, but also how our reading inhabits us and we, it. And finally, I want to trace the consequences of some of these reflections by examining the verbal material of a poem of Shelley's that I have commented on before, but wish to return to here. It is perhaps worth saying, incidentally, that the centrality of Scott's work on French verse to my own literary critical work—which focuses on late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British poetry—is testament to its significance and reach.

The Living and the Read

If the text that '[c]omparison and analysis' examines is finally as dead as that which 'interpretation' produces from its pockets, then it is an object well-suited to the dispassion of its manipulator. In offering up her wares as the finished product, the

[3] Clive Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 5. Hereafter *PFV*.

critic presents herself as a salesperson rather than as inalienably engaged in the work of reading (where 'work' is not a priori the opposite of pleasure). 'Good interpretation' is not really interpretation, as an exportable product, at all:

> Good interpretation is a shareable spiritual autobiography of the reading self, and, as readers of criticism, we are readers of other readers, who make available to us modes of response we have yet to explore ourselves. But, too often, interpretation is approached as a process whereby a text is translated into a hermeneutic product and a reader disengages himself *from* the text, almost washes his hands of it. Interpretation can turn readings into a merely *preliminary*, or *transitional* activity, whose outcome is another text. (*PFV*, 6)

While criticism on this kind of model of interpretation is certainly a transformative process, it is one with a definite result in view: 'criticism,' that is, 'transforms the signifying *process* of reading into the stasis of a text, always evenly present to itself, and, as a metalanguage, symbolically represents that which is ever heterogeneous and unrepresentable' (*PFV*, 8). It needs to be emphasised here that what Scott calls reading is much more faithful to the workings of verse themselves than is an interpretation that would hope to scrutinize them. As he counsels in conclusion to his reading of the morphing of suffixes into radicals and radicals into suffixes in *The Riches of Rhyme*, 'we should remember that a fundamental resource of verse, and of rhyme in particular, is the ability to represent the complex and ever-changing relationship between the accidental and the essential, the relative and the absolute, the temporality of reading and the eternity of structure.'[4] What interpretation must do, if it is to be 'good' or even viable as an interpretation of any real experience at all, is to attend as closely as possible to what actually occurs in reading.

We should also remember that the agency of that occurrence is both that of the reader and that of the text in the minutest fibres of *its* being. Scott is certainly right to emphasize that 'in reading, we assimilate the text to our own physiology. Reading is the animation of a text by paralinguistic features, by voice, breathing, tempo, and so on' (*PFV*, 98). But it is also true both that, in the process of assimilation, our own physiology is altered by its relation to the text and that,

[4] *The Riches of Rhyme: Studies in French Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 100-01 (and cf. Chapter 3, 'Rhymes, Suffixes, Endings', pp. 72-101). Hereafter *RR*.

significantly, the paralinguistic features potentially comprehended by 'and so on' here may include features that belong not to the oral or quasi-oral production of poetry, but to its visual realisation in reading. In reading, text moves, as the virtuoso reading of Mallarmé and, in particular, Blaise Cendrars in *The Poetics of French Verse* brings into view. The letters of Cendrars's verses are no mere impressions of ink, but are gymnasts and acrobats that transform the page from flat medium to multi-dimensional big top. 'For X beginneth not, but connects and continues.' Christopher Smart's comparable view of the letter X—this instance of which Smart's editor Karina Williamson prints as a reversed G back-to-back with a conventional one, and for which the fonts on offer from Microsoft Word have no near equivalent – sees this letter, as do Cendrars and Scott, not simply as the established beginning in reference to which interpretation must be produced, but rather as a link in the chain between text and reading, as, like the Christ for whom this letter stands in the Christian tradition out of which Smart at once centrally and obliquely writes, an agent of the relation and perpetuation of life.[5] Reading, that is, is a living relationship, not the mechanical production of meaning.

The Inhabited Poem

And yet, from one point of view, a poem may indeed seem as if it is the product of manufacture, neutrally available to different users of it. There it is: you and I may both, indifferently, read it. But in truth a poem is, for any individual reader, both the evolving relationship that she or he has with it and the different relationships that others develop with it too, especially as they are communicated through '[g]ood interpretation' (*PVF*, 6). It is not only because I have difficulty in finding clothes to fit me *just so* that the following way of thinking about reading seems so apt:

> A poem is a garment both tailor-made (reading it is like a series of fittings) and off the peg (other people wear it and it looks different on them). It is not in the best interests of a reader of verse to aim to be an 'average reader', or an 'ideal reader', or a 'super-reader', or a competent representative of a speech

[5] *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart*, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980-96), I: *Jubilate Agno*, ed. by Karina Williamson, Fragment C, l.559, p. 79.

> community, with all that these suggest of a desirable and achievable level of understanding. What we need as readers of poems is a reason for reading the same thing over and over again with renewed and undiminished benefit to ourselves; and we can only have that if we neither know ourselves nor the poem, the latter being a natural consequence of the former. (*PVF*, 89)

Reading may also entail disrobing, as in Mallarmé's 'Autre Éventail', where bather, poet, and reader, all plunge 'into an infinitely pleasurable, free-wheeling reverie in which water, woman, swan, river bank, thrown-off clothing, the languorous and the fleeting, naked jubilation and the jubilation of nakedness, are suspended in a state of dynamic synthesis and metamorphosis.' (*RR*, 64) Nevertheless, the metaphor of text-as-garment is helpful for thinking about the activity of reading, especially if, in taking it on ourselves, we stretch it slightly.

I want to turn now to consider explicitly the relation of reading to habit and, in particular, to think about the different ways in which reading might be something we inhabit. A habit, of course, is something that characterizes us, but is also, understood as clothing or as analogous with clothing, something that we might put on and off. Indeed, its earliest sense in English is as '[b]odily apparel or attire; clothing, raiment, dress', developing slightly later the sense of '[e]xternal deportment, constitution, or appearance; habitation'.[6] The *OED*'s general heading for the varieties of the latterly developed sense of 'habit', however, perhaps too confidently insists that habit is an 'external' feature: many of its citations, on the contrary, suggest that 'habit' may at least potentially be taken as a token or corollary of inner character—as when in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1590) Tamburlaine declares of Theridamas that 'Noble and milde this Persean seemes to be, | If outward habit iudge the inward man'—or that 'habit' may even name the constitution or temperament of the body—as it does, for example, in Chambers's *Cyclopædia* (1728)—which, insofar as the body has both an inside and an outside, is in turn both inner and outer.[7]

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[6] 'habit, *n.*' Senses I.1.a and II. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 23 July 2014.

[7] Marlowe, *Tamburlaine* (I.ii.162-63); Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 2 vols (London, 1728), I, 198

What the record of the development of 'habit' in English shows is a close association, then, with the embodied self—a close association, that is, in the sense that habits may come close to the body as its raiment or may even, more closely still, characterize the self. But as we have also seen, the scale, so to speak, of that proximity is not fixed. Habits may be external or internal, or both, and, as the lexical field of 'habit' develops further, we may inhabit, so to speak, not just our own characters or clothes, but our world; many things may also, of course, inhabit us. 'I finde that our greatest vices,' says Florio's Montaigne, 'make their first habite[ ]in vs, from our infancie'.[8] What is clear from this citation—which, significantly if implicitly, marks the connection between habit and habitation, a marking perhaps felicitously underscored by the printer's failure to interpose a space between 'habite' and 'in'—is that while we may be inhabitants of various, concentrically expanding milieux, we are also inhabited—by vices, naturally, but therefore also potentially by virtues, and certainly by practices of reading, recollected snatches of verse, and so on.

One of the main aims of Scott's literary criticism is to recover the richness of these senses of habit and inhabitation for thinking about our practices of reading. Thus the statement that '[t]exts are meaning in the making, where the making is a complex verse-structure which reading allows us to inhabit as an experiential milieu' (*PFV*, 8), especially taken in the context of Scott's view of reading as the mutual transformation of reader and read, views the inhabitation of verse-structure as deeply and radically immersive, so that our milieu is no indifferent environment or mere ambience, but the air we breathe and, by so doing, modulate. This sense of 'inhabitation' is central, for example, to Scott's defence of Paul Verlaine's 'floating sensibility', which allows the poet 'to capture the unfocused, almost undifferentiated ripplings of consciousness at its lower levels' (*RR*, 237-38). Insofar as Verlaine may be thought of as a Symbolist, that is, '[i]t is because his poems present, through sensory encounter, the shifting polyvalence of moods which are inhabitable but not identifiable' (*RR*, 238). What Scott's emphasis on habit and

[8] *OED Online*, ibid., sense II.7. Iohn Florio, Book I, Chapter 22, 'Of custome, and how a received law should not easily be changed', *Essayes Written in French by Michael Lord of Montaigne* (London, 1613), p. 47.

inhabitation here and elsewhere entails is that, contrary to the hermeneutic obsession with settled identification, we may move in and out of the texts we inhabit, and may therefore return to them, making a habit of reading them, where a 'habit' is not mechanical repetition but a pattern of 'self-surrender and self-retrieval' (*PFV*, 8).

This recovery of habit and inhabitation was also central to a poet who was, like Verlaine, often accused of vagueness. Central to Percy Shelley's thought is a critique of mechanically habituated custom, but that does not entail, for him, the outright rejection of forms and ways of being that are in important ways habitual. For Shelley, it is mere familiarity that breeds disorder, and poetry, in breeching the carapace of the familiarly established, institutes a new and different order, as he claims in 'A Defence of Poetry':

> It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos [. . .] It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso – *Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta*.[9]

Recurrence is the agent of the blunting of impressions and the familiar world is a mere chaos in contrast to the world created by poetry, but we are nonetheless the 'inhabitants' of the world of poetry, for Shelley—more than one-off visitors, we are its proper and customary tenants. Earlier in the 'Defence', familiarity itself is thought of as having been recuperated, rather than simply having been shown to be chaotic, by a political act—the abolition of slavery—that Shelley characterises not as analogous with poetry, but as, indeed, poetry itself:

> It was as if the statues of Apollo and the Muses had been endowed with life and motion and had walked forth among their worshippers; so that earth became peopled by the inhabitants of a diviner world. The familiar appearance and proceedings of life became wonderful and heavenly; and a paradise was created

[9] *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 533. Hereafter *SPP*. Compare Henri Meschonnic's claim, made in commenting on Shelley's 'Defence', that 'poésie reproduit l'univers', *La Rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989), p. 187. And note Meschonnic's expansion on this idea: Henri Meschonnic, *Vivre poème* (Liancourt: Dumerchez, 2006), p. 12.

> as out of the wrecks of Eden. And as this creation itself is poetry, so its creators were poets; and language was the instrument of their art: 'Galeotto fù il libro, e chi lo scrisse.' The Provençal Trouveurs, or inventors, preceded Petrarch, whose verses are as spells, which unseal the inmost enchanted fountains of the delight which is in the grief of Love. (*SPP*, p. 525)

If we are tempted to take Apollo and the muses as the straightforward agents of change here, we need only be reminded that they are animated statues, whose initial fabrication was human and whose animation is effected by means of a transformation in human affairs. Moreover, it is, on close inspection, acutely undecided whether the 'inhabitants of a diviner world' simply are Apollo and the Muses, or whether the earth itself has become diviner than it was and is therefore now peopled by just such inhabitants. [10]

The productive negotiation in the above passage between familiar and new, divine and mundane, statues, divinities and people, is comparably at work in the lines from Shelley's late poem, 'With a Guitar. To Jane', to which I wish now to turn. This poem was an elaborate gift-tag, presented with a guitar to one of Shelley's extra-marital love objects, Jane Williams, the common-law wife of his friend Edward Williams. Most of the poem is spent recounting the guitar's manufacture from a tree that had grown on an Apennine slope and exhorting Jane either to bestow upon the dead wood her own spirit or to entice out of it the spirit of the tree apparently inhabiting the form of the guitar. The poem's concern is with the way in which the dead wood from which the guitar is made may somehow be renovated in the music that Jane produces, but it is careful not to cast that renovation as a straightforward charismatic investment on Jane's part.

It should also be admitted at this moment, having given this preliminary orientation, that I have examined these lines before, in *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life*,[11] but that admission should be coupled with another one to the effect that my repeated returns to these lines bring home to me not the soundness of my previous interpretation, but rather the non-finality of my reading of them. The compulsion to return to known texts may not always, indeed, be very comfortable

[10] See *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life*, pp. 171-72 for my earlier comments on this passage.
[11] *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 110-12.

and may turn out to be somewhat aggravating, especially since it is hardly in accord with the quite different professional compulsion to produce new and assessably distinctive interpretations: 'While interpretation, on the whole, attempts to demonstrate its own hermeneutic effectiveness, an effectiveness which can only be measured by transcendence of the text and by closure, reading lacks all finality, all resolution, and produces that psychic pruritis which can only be eased by repeated revisitations of the text.' (*PFV*, 18-19) So, it is in part in order to ease the itch that this text provokes in me that I return to it now, but also in order to show how it performs the drama of habit and inhabitation that, I have been arguing, is central to Scott's vision of reading. At the following moment in the poem, the poet has been describing the knowledge that the guitar he is giving to Jane Williams gleaned while it was a tree in the Apennines before being fashioned into a musical instrument; that knowledge, however, is not straightforwardly or automatically communicable:

> All this it knows, but will not tell
> To those who cannot question well
> The spirit that inhabits it:
> It talks according to the wit
> Of its companions, and no more
> Is heard than has been felt before
> By those who tempt it to betray
> These secrets of an elder day.—
> (*SPP*, ll. 79–86)

The lines may be said to present a vision or even, perhaps, a theory of performative reanimation, but it is not that vision or theory that I am concerned with here. Rather, I want to detail the dense acoustic fabric of these lines, in particular in order to argue that its unfolding in reading at the same time performs the intertwinement of syllabic material with reading consciousness that is implicitly envisaged in the conceit of the singer's recuperation of the tree's knowledge. The /l/s of the opening line of the above quotation are modulated by the differences between the vowels that precede them but also, strikingly, when tracked through the line seem to spell out a vital message for the reader, 'All […] will […] tell', as if

at once offering reassurance that the guitar will divulge its secrets while also performing, in the cryptic communication of that message, the indirectness of its divulgence and the fateful ease of misprision or oversight incumbent upon it. Comparable is the graphic and acoustic hide-and-seek of /w/ here, importantly different instances of which are clustered around the centres of the first two quoted lines. While 'knows' and 'will' offer relatively straightforward instantiations of /w/, the latter the more so, since its /w/ is its initial letter, 'who' offers *w* to sight but not to hearing, although it does in turn render more emphatically audible realisation to the *h*s graphically and minimally audibly present in 'this' and 'those'; 'question' allows us a return to /w/, of course, even though, unlike in 'who', it is nowhere to be seen. In the travels of graphic *w* and acoustic /w/, and in the differences between them, minute verbal matter is again both unfixable in and vital to reading processes. It might be further argued that the transition from the relative clarities – at once, in fact, semantic, graphic, and acoustic – of 'knows' and 'will' to the relative opacities of /w/ and *w* respectively in 'who' and 'question' enacts the transition from the guitar's certain knowledge and determination to its interlocutor's putative interrogatory inadequacy.

But then one might alternatively suggest that other transitions, which are either graphic or audible or, indeed, both, suggest a more accommodating relation between the guitar and its player – and thus between the poem and its reader. The echo, for example, of 'this it knows' at a similar place in the following line, in 'those', transforms the confident statement of the fact of the guitar's knowledge into the pronoun signalling the aspiring recipients of that knowledge. A similar set of acoustic relations connects 'companions' and 'according': both are preceded by two and followed by three monosyllables; both are the only polysyllabic words in their lines; both share the same pattern of weak-strong-weak syllables. Having drawn attention to these shared features, one must acknowledge the difference between the straightforwardly tri-syllabic 'according' and the necessitated glide at the end of 'companions' to deliver /kəmˈpænjəns/; it might also be pointed out that *com–* and *–corr–*, despite their graphic similarity, are acoustically realised somewhat differently, as are, more so, the *i*s and *n*s and their combination at the respective ends of each word. But then what is being imagined in these lines—in

the poem as a whole, in fact—are precisely the differences and similarities between what may and may not, ultimately, be shareable amongst various material incarnations (tree, guitar, human voice) of what the poem calls 'spirit'. Matter, that is, is no merely indifferent or inert vessel of spirit.

At the centre of 'this it knows', whose echoes I have just been tracing, is a word that is crucial to the reader's animation of this poem's material: 'it'. More precisely, it is as both word and sub- or, perhaps, crypto-verbal syllable that 'it' is so central in these lines: 'The spirit that inhabits it: / It talks according to the wit'. The first of these lines breaks from the multiple intercalations of /l/s and /w/s that I examined above, but it does so in order to establish a new and even more intricately involving pattern. The word 'it' here refers to the guitar but may also, in fact, be found lodged at the centre of 'gu*it*ar'. But before we imagine that that lodging is tantamount to confinement, or that at the heart of the guitar is the blankest, deadest mere materiality, 'it', or, at least, /ɪt/ turns out to be remarkably mobile and convivial, since it is common too to 'spir*it*', 'inhab*it*s', and to the 'w*it*' of the singer according to which the guitar may choose to communicate. This insistence but also, as it were, verbal minority of /ɪt/—its incorporation, that is, as syllabic material in other fully fledged words—is then startlingly transformed into verbal independence with the emergence of 'it' as its own word across the pause and resumption—the iteration, we might say—of 'it: / It'. The first of these *it*s is the habitation, or one might almost say the confinement, of the spirit; the second is the autonomously active and yet embodied spirit itself. Although the semantic emphasis of these lines is on the spirit's inhabitation of the guitar, the transmutation of /ɪt/—which started out, let us remember, pronominally indicating the guitar—across 'spirit', 'wit', and, indeed, 'inhabits' suggests that it is as much the guitar that inhabits the spirit as the other way around. This pattern of anticipation and recuperation—as also in the close but subtly modulated echo of 'been felt before'—renders acutely suspended the source and agent of feeling, so much so that tree, wood, and guitar, as well as human poet and anticipated singer, may feel. The iteration of 'it' here is not barren repetition of sameness predicated

upon the mere emptiness of this most featureless of words, but rather the recuperation in differing embodiments of pre-verbal syllabic material.[12]

The *OED* tells us that the all-too-familiar neuter pronoun in its subjective uses is reserved for reference to 'an inanimate thing or (where sex is not particularized) an animal or (usually young) child'; that is, 'it' indicates either what is not living or what society holds to be only minimally individualized and thus deserving of only neutral pronominal indication. In the lines from 'With a Guitar. To Jane', however, /ɪt/ develops a quite different neutrality, a refusal to be reduced to one inert instance of shaped matter, which licences its mobility across the lines and between guitar, spirit, and wit. At one point in his enormously useful compendium of salient questions for a contemporary programme of poetics, Michel Grimaud asks what role grammatical, as opposed to full, words may play in the workings of verse: 'What is the value of definite articles when talking about alliteration or as part of a rhyming measure? Is the overly frequent "th" of "the" neutralized and thus psychologically irrelevant for rhyming or alliterative effects?'[13] Grimaud's question is a good one. It may bring to mind Paul de Man's self-deprecating joke 'about his inability to pronounce the difference between "tread" and "thread" on which his interpretation [of Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'] was,' as Marc Redfield puts it, with consummate wit, 'hanging.'[14] Indeed, might one wonder if Grimaud's own objection to the 'th', but not, notably, to the 'e', of 'the' stems from difficulties that non-native speakers of English, such as he was, often have with this, amongst the world's languages, relatively rare phoneme?[15] Quite what the

[12] Some of these thoughts, though pursued in a different direction here, are in part prompted by Samuel Weber's 'It', in *Glyph*, 4, ed. by Samuel Weber and Henry Sussman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 1-31. I thank Derek Attridge for drawing my attention to this essay.

[13] Grimaud, 'Versification and its Discontents', *Semiotica*, 88:3/4 (1992), 199-242 (p. 207).

[14] Redfield, 'Appendix I: Courses Taught by Paul de Man During the Yale Era', in *Legacies of Paul de Man*, ed. by Marc Redfield (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 179-84 (p. 181).

[15] Grimaud does not, indeed, seem to find repetitions of *e* as excessive as repetitions of *th*. He makes, for example, the following remarks on the opening stanza of Hugo's 'Booz endormi': 'Si les occurrences du [e] et du [ɛ] à la rime et ailleurs contribuent à l'impression d'unité de la strophe, la différence entre les deux sons est aussi importante pour l'impression de variété dans la regularité.' *Poétique et érudition: Microlecture du Booz endormi de Victor Hugo*, Archives des Lettres Modernes, 247 (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1991), p. 14. But the point here is that it is precisely the difference (neglected, Grimaud points out, by Elizabeth Beaujour in her reading of the poem)

solution to the 'overly frequent' deployment of 'th'—which of course also afflicts *this* and *that* and *those* and *these* and *there* and *then*—would be, is difficult to say. In any case, Grimaud's question rests perhaps too securely on the assumption of a psyche to which some bits of acoustic matter have become inescapably and irredeemably neutralized through the deadening mechanism of mere repetition, no matter what poetic virtuosity might do to or with them. The answer of 'With a Guitar. To Jane' to Grimaud's question is that verse may recuperate not just acoustic material, but words that have lost their meaningfulness and have turned, as in the case of 'it', into tokens for the dead or for those whose individuality and distinctiveness society ideologically refuses to acknowledge. While the guitar's telling is explicitly viewed as the response of its spirit to skilled questioning, that it is its wooden body from which it takes even its 'highest holiest tone' (l. 89) and upon which that telling relies, refuses a separation of the guitar's spirit and knowledge from its body and sound. That knowledge is nowhere spelled out in the poem, will nowhere be spelled out in response to skilful questioning, and is nowhere spelled out in this, it is hoped, 'shareable spiritual autobiography of the reading self'; instead, the movement of that knowledge's eliciting is prefigured in the movement of the most apparently mundane of the poem's words and syllables.

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between 'le *è* (ouvert) and le *é* (fermé)', rather than any straightforward sonic repetition of the kind he identifies in the 'th' of 'the', that is at issue and which produces the rather Coleridgean quality of 'variété dans la regularité'. In case we are by now willing to concede the excessive, neutralized, and psychologically irrelevant status of 'th', see, for an informative account of the voiceless dental non-sibilant fricative, Peter Ladefoged and Ian Maddieson, *The Sounds of the World's Languages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; repr. 1998), pp. 143-45. And for an account of the emergence of the pronunciation of θ as a fricative rather than an aspirated voiceless plosive in classical Greek and, subsequently and less concertedly, of *th* in classical Latin, see respectively W. Sidney Allen's *Vox Graeca: A Guide to the Pronunciation of Classical Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 20-24, and *Vox Latina: A Guide to the Pronunciation of Classical Latin*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978; first pub. 1965), p. 27. I am grateful to Clive Scott for drawing my attention to Allen's work.