

BOOK REVIEW

Scanners, Darkly

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Hall, Jason David, ed. *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*. Athens, Ohio UP, 2011. 300 pages. Hardcover \$59.95.

Meter Matters, edited by Jason David Hall, aims to reground the literary history of nineteenth-century poetry in terms of the “irreducible plurality” of its prosody (x). Much of the collection participates, to varying degrees, in the emergent field of historical prosody; where recent work in historical poetics by critics like Virginia Jackson has compelled criticism to rethink inherited logics of genre, historical prosody exposes our limited sense of the historical discourse and practice of prosody. More generally the collection explores what Yopie Prins has termed the “metrical imaginari[ies]” of the long nineteenth century. Circulating imaginaries make prosody possible yet also undermine its phenomenality and universality. Criticism to date has had a very limited understanding of the widespread and divergent prosodic debates and theories of the past; the essays in *Meter Matters* provide highly promising paths through the rough terrain of poetic sound.

Prosody’s mediated nature is at once the lesson of the volume and its greatest challenge. The emphasis on prosody’s (and especially scansion’s) difficulty, from Hegel’s anxiety about lost classical properties to George Saintsbury’s strained effort to reinvent the troubled idea of the “foot,” both unites and disorders *Meter Matters*. Laments over the inadequacy and divisiveness of prosody may be, as Meredith Martin notes, a central trope of all prosodic discourse, but here goes: if the collection’s central achievement is to show the many unacknowledged “dialectic[s] between poet

and prosodist, between doing and theorizing" (xii), the central danger of the volume is an avoidance of scansion, however diverse it might need to be. Given the new intersections this volume makes possible between formal, historical, and cultural studies approaches to poetry, this reader would have appreciated more visible efforts to describe versification. Productive differences might then have appeared between the prevailing theories of meter that Isobel Armstrong's piece so helpfully lays out; critics focused on the relation of stress and syllable would more clearly differ from those focusing on timing or "isochrony" (this divide itself being a major historical debate); the value or danger of subjective accounts would be more apparent (another historical debate still playing out). Perhaps more importantly, a greater wealth of and reflection on scansion would permit readers to interrogate the pedagogy they inherited and teach. There might even have been an opportunity for readers to compare linguistic models—relatively ahistorical yet still provocative—formed over the last five decades but absent here.

It is perhaps only with the final essay in the volume, Meredith Martin's "Prosody Wars," that we fully discern our over-determined and troubled relation to prosody. Revealing the "ideological fiction" of the martial and nationalist English "foot" and the "good English ear" (247), Martin tracks the imbrications of prosody with discourses of nation and empire studied more extensively in her field-defining new work *The Rise and Fall of Meter*. Michael Cohen's "Popular Ballads: Rhythmic Remediations in the Nineteenth Century" also focuses on prosody's politics, tracing the historical "remediation" of ballads by collectors like Francis Child. The oral "harvest" of ballads attempts to define ballads as a national inheritance, a romantic and paradoxical effort to "monumentalize and make permanent . . . oral cultures as histories of the present" (197), yet prosodic details fail to ground this would-be native oral genre. Prosodic instability allows Robert Burns to intervene by including incongruous, unscannable Gaelic refrains that "link to a tradition of metrical

dissonance" (207) and resist the pathos-laden narrative through which Scottish ballads are made to enter "the emergent world order of Anglo-American modernity" (211). Cornelia Pearsall's contribution, by contrast, suggests how Tennyson's metrics figure precisely that world order. Her essay, "Blank Verse and the Expansion of England," charts how Tennyson's blank verse "naturalizes" Britain's imperial project (218). A British subject concerned over the nature of empire need only look to the linguistically natural expansiveness of blank verse. The essay concludes, however, by alluding to the "unnaturalness" of unchecked expansion. Demeter's insistent expansion remains a "disturbing political fantasy." The essay is perhaps necessarily unclear as to whether we should understand Tennyson's poem as ultimately skeptical of the imperial-metrical project.

At its best the collection asks whether poems can remain skeptical—both thematically and formally—about reigning ideologies of meter. Matthew Bevis's "Byron's Feet" finds such a critical prosody in Byron, exploring Byron's prosodic context and antecedents in light of his heightened consciousness of literal and metrical feet. Byron's slipshod, club-footed, wandering measures "court censure" to open divergent modes of embodiment and thought. Byron's prosodic dramas are at once allegorical and physical: "Childe Harold" subjects us to acoustical "impediment" as "metrical footfalls are not so much accommodated as suffered" (83); as "soul" descends to "sole" with both thought and "feeling in each footstep," Byron's prosody develops what Simon Jarvis has called "a phenomenology of subjective corporeal experience" (79). Embodiment becomes a complex operation, something "scann'd"; literal bodies and meter are in tandem neither deterministic nor voluntary, but rather contextual creations, a challenge to "the listening mind . . . that seems to call for a decision or judgment, even as it explores the perils of decisiveness" (97). Potently precarious, Byron's meter becomes in Bevis's reading an "apprenticeship in forms of knowing" (99) and alternate embodiment.

Bevis's essay is illuminated by Yopie Prins's contribution, "Break, Break, Break' into Song." The essay reveals both the figurality and historical situatedness of concepts like poetic voice and musicality that have appeared transhistorical. Such concepts, Prins shows, are mediated by meter, and meter is never immediate but always re-figured into presence. Historical readers of Tennyson, in fact, did not so much hear his music as respond by rethinking poetry's musicality. Reading "Break, Break, Break" alongside its reception and transposition into song, Prins reconnects Tennyson's invitation to play with meter "as if" it were song with "curiously literal" efforts to physically render the poem as song (108). The poet and prosodist Sidney Lanier developed systems of musical scansion not because Tennyson wrote music but because meter was abstract and plastic. Lanier's notation must be regarded as a form of (re)mediation; Prins provocatively suggests that the nineteenth century's "proliferation of metrical treatises" (and, one might add, the twentieth and twenty-first century's) are less descriptions than a long line of continued re-figurations.

Susan Wolfson's contribution, "Romantic Measures," echoes Prins's emphasis on the historical determination or "genealogies" of meter. Meter matters because it is a "shared sounding ground," a site of both memory and potential dissonance. This enables poets like Wordsworth to calculatedly "risk a reader's displeasure" (57). Though examples of scansion and more prosodic description might help mark the specific nature of the "sounding ground," the essay nonetheless orients us towards meter's crucial role in defining, enabling, or provocatively disabling poetic sound. The most important intervention of Isobel Armstrong's "Meter and Meaning" is perhaps the careful attention it draws to Hegel's dialectical understanding of meter and other prosodic forms. Surveying four increasingly complex "epistemologies" of meter, Armstrong moves from binary accounts of meter (stressing variation, freedom, and restraint) to polyrhythmia (multiple rhythms interacting) as more characteristic of prosody from

the nineteenth century on. Hegel turns out to be a thinker of polymetrics; Armstrong shows how he sought out sensuous or corporeal counterpoint for the purely "spiritual" component of verse, bound to stress in modern poetry, that threatened to subsume the sensuous (in classical poetry, Hegel notes, there remained a counterpoint of stress and quantity). If modernity "structure[s] itself around further splits between the idea and its embodiment" (49), then poetry endangers itself and its readers by non-dialectically abandoning rhythmic counterpoint. Armstrong thus returns us to Hegel's theories of art as a necessary framework for comprehending prosody's social and cognitive relevance (and, even better, to prosody as a necessary frame for understanding modernity).

The contested place of the sensuous body and of individual experiences of prosody is the subject of Jason Rudy's "Material Patmore" (treated more fully in his book *Electric Meters*). Rudy locates this conflict both within Victorian prosody (especially the battle over the "spasmodic" poets) and within the poetry and theory of mid-century prosodist Coventry Patmore. Rudy's essay is an important caution to critics who would clearly identify prosody with either the abstract or the empirical, since a historical view shows how these are terms in a dialectic. Patmore's poetic form and theory remain at odds, we learn, and his verse is thus less in control of our experience (and morality) than he hoped. Given how adherence to metrical structure is both variable and symbolic of moral order, it would be helpful to see what constitutes metrical "adherence" in Patmore. His shifting metrics may be difficult to pin down (then and now), but scansion might still provide a tentative guide.

Summer Star's essay, "For the Inscape's Sake," studies the relation between prosodic theory and practice in Hopkins's sprung verse. Star foregrounds Hopkins's notion of "sake," or "the intimacy he conceived between meter . . . and the affirmation of a human self's purposiveness" (154). Hopkins's complex prosodic nominalism heard "pitch" as moral pitch and stress

as a body's "instress." Prosody, as "metrical service," embodies the complex interrelations within a body or self. Star's essay thus recalls prosody's effect outside of the conscious mind and its intentions. It figures and performs that which is, in Kantian terms, purposive rather than fixed in purpose, that which "receives its presencing and ultimate being from outside" the self. In Swinburne's oeuvre as well, Yisrael Levin argues in his essay, prosodic law becomes itself "poetic" by engaging in a constant dialogue with praxis. Levin holds up Swinburne and his later champion, the central fin-de-siècle prosodist T.S. Omond, as productively defiant of classical models in favor of a more "flexible" and reader-driven theory of meter. The essay crucially argues against a view of prosody as mere "analytical device" and thus pushes back against modernism's (largely successful) efforts to limit the formerly diverse discourse of prosody to a mechanical, philological pursuit. In both Star's essay and Levin's, however, the rejection of prosody as mere "device" seems to push the authors away from laying out their own ways of hearing or scanning. It would be interesting to know which prosodic effects are, in Hopkins, most characteristic of "sake" or "metrical service"; though prosodic effects, such as shifts between duple and triple meter, are mentioned by Star, the avoidance of scansion makes it a challenge to hear what might constitute a remarkable moment of "stress," and therefore "instress." Levin, by contrast, provides ample scansions meant to illuminate the principle of isochrony—the line's division into equal time units, regardless of syllable count—but these do not link clearly to Omond's practice, or to Swinburne's. It does not seem enough to declare that beneath a seeming "disarray of amphibrachs, dactyls, iambs" there is "clear metrical regularity" (188). Indeed Levin provides evidence that Swinburne (as well as Omond) doubted the accessibility of his meter and worried (well before T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost) that it might seem "diffuse and flaccid."

Hopkins and Swinburne (and Byron, Wordsworth, even Ezra Pound) proliferated, practiced, and doubted scansion si-

multaneously. Thus while the variability or absence of scansion in *Meter Matters* might be defended on the ground that there is no “clear metrical regularity” in the nineteenth (or other) century’s metrical field, fast-moving and non-technical descriptions of verse form are unfortunate precisely because they limit the comparative possibilities that so charge the collection’s best moments: those that suggest how poets maneuvered in and against the varying prosodic intuition and explicit theory of their time, and those that test how readers may have engaged prosody’s circulation. That said, these essays bring nineteenth-century meter’s polymorphous construction and circulation to light for the first time. They show how—with due attention to our own prosodic assumptions, limitations, but also abilities—we might better chart historical verse forms’ intersections with a range of “discursive economies, both elite and popular” (3).

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