

Beyond All That Fiddle? Poetry and Poetics 'After Theory'

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Abstract: This essay is partly a reflection on the current state of English-language poetry and poetics, and partly – though inseparably from that – a reflection on my own experience as one who has exchanged the role of critic-theorist to that of poet. As such it takes a stand on various issues in the wake of literary Modernism that continue to divide poets along sometimes complex and criss-crossing lines. I discuss the limits of post-structuralist thinking about poetry (my own earlier thinking included), the relevance of Derrida’s texts, especially those on the topic of invention, the continuing function of rhyme as an endlessly renewable asset, and what I call ‘verse-thinking’ – in and through rhyme – as a mode of creative criticism. I distinguish two kinds of formalism, one of them (which I reject) stressing the poem’s self-enclosure or autonomy, the other opening poetry up to the widest range of intellectual, philosophical, and socio-cultural-political contexts. My essay also points to the relative neglect of syntax in current poetic practice, a neglect that has gone along with the countervailing emphasis on metaphor, symbol and spatial form. The interaction or counterpoint of syntax and prosody is again, like rhyme, one of poetry’s greatest resources and its waning fortunes a major loss.

Keywords: creativity, Empson, formalism poetics, rhyme, theory

I

First a bit of life-history, or what passes for it in the case of someone who has spent a large part of his life thinking, teaching and writing. There have been life-events ‘beyond all that fiddle’, as Marianne Moore memorably said of poetry, but any account of them would be of little interest to anyone but myself and maybe a few others. For better or worse the intellectual life tends to acquire its own saliences, structures, narrative shapes, and even epiphanic highlights which may have rather little connection with what’s going on to the eye of a less preoccupied or more practically involved observer. Almost by definition it is a life that takes place in the company of books, journals, correspondence, and ideas despite the extent to which other things intrude, whether beneficially (as most often with family and friends) or malignantly (as most often with obtuse and ill-willed university bureaucrats). But in case you’re wondering, very reasonably, just how this entitles me to lay some claim on your limited reading-time let me start with a few academic-biographical details that might provide at least the outline of an answer.

My academic career – briefly stated – went from English Literature, via literary-critical theory, to Continental Philosophy; took a turn toward analytic philosophy (i.e., the kind practised in most UK, US and other Anglophone philosophy departments); and then, till my retirement from Cardiff University, busied itself with tracing and promoting connections between those (so-called) ‘two traditions’. My official,

i.e., departmental switch from English to Philosophy took place in 1991 and reflected the impact on my thinking of continental thinkers, among them – pre-eminently – Jacques Derrida.¹ For the earlier part of my university career I was doing what came to be known as ‘theory’, a catch-all term that included elements of deconstruction, post-structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and Frankfurt-School sociology. If my work later came to fit less easily into that commodious slot it is because I turned against the anti-realist, cultural-relativist, and social-constructivist aspect of a movement – roughly, post-structuralism – which I thought needed a strong injection of realist thinking from, among other disciplinary quarters, philosophy of science. At risk of sounding paranoid, I’d say this left me badly exposed to fire from both sides, as in Frank Kermode’s image of the WW1 soldier wandering out during a Christmas cease-fire to offer cigarettes all round.

The situation was repeated in modified form when I retired from university teaching – along with the periodic scourge of the Research Assessment Exercise – and took to writing poetry instead of academic books and articles. Maybe the decision went further back and was a kind of unconscious pre-emptive strategy designed to keep me writing – how possibly give that up after all those decades of ceaseless production? – but not writing in the same genres or on the same topics. I have now published eleven volumes of poetry with two more currently in the pipeline and upwards of a hundred individual poems in various journals and collections.² This has occupied most of my writing time over the past ten years and – since I don’t go in for the fashionably slim volumes that launch and sustain many poetic careers – has resulted in what’s already a sizable body of work. I should add that the switch wasn’t quite as drastic as I have made it sound since a good proportion of my verse is devoted to philosophical themes, or to topics from science, history, music, politics, aesthetics, literary theory, and other subject-areas central to my academic work. But any continuity in that regard was counteracted by the poems’ conspicuously formal structures, by their not (or not primarily) being intended to make good on some explicit proposition or truth-claim, and by their not representing a ‘contribution to knowledge’ in received academic terms. Creative Writing courses might seem to be exceptions to that rule, but they could just as well be seen as evidence of extensive and ongoing changes to prevalent conceptions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘creativity’ alike.

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1 See for instance Norris 1982, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1988, 2000, 2012, 2015

2 Norris 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b

II

Now I propose to complicate the matter by finessing the terms of my discussion so far. That is, I have to say that a large part of my current project is to make a case for the kind of verse that combines a strong commitment to formalism (often thought to dispense poetry from the protocols of rationality and truth) with an interest in areas – like science, philosophy, history, and politics – where those values are (or at any rate should be) very much in play. This is not a flat contradiction but an ambiguity about the word ‘formalism’ that has caused a good deal of confusion in literary-critical debate over the past half-century and more. On the one hand, as in my preferred (Type 1) usage, it can signify the kind of poetry that deploys a range of formal devices, verse-structures, rhyme-schemes, symmetries, and other such marked deviations from everyday prose discourse as a means of achieving greater pointedness or heightened powers of expression. On the other it is used to indicate allegiance to a view of poetry as somehow existing in a realm of formal autonomy or closure, effectively quarantined from all commerce with ‘outside’ (prosaic) interests or concerns. Then poetic deviations from prose discourse go along with certain critically favoured rhetorical tropes like ambiguity, paradox, or irony to become the basis for a full-scale formalist (Type 2) doctrine. What’s more this comes with penalties attached for critics who stray into regions such as history, politics, author-biography, or any such extra-poetic precinct where the operative standards are those of valid argument or alethic accountability.

This was the programme raised to a high point of aesthetic, philosophical, and pedagogic principle by the US New Criticism of the 1940s and ‘50s.³ It also had distinct theological overtones, amounting to a veto on poetry that entered into issues of religious faith, like Milton’s or Shelley’s, or criticism that drew those issues out in – to this way of thinking – unacceptable directions. The programme was always a shaky pretence when it came to the business of actually carrying out the kind of ultra-detailed verbal analysis that the New Critics required, often (be it said) with striking results. Thus they smuggled in large amounts of cultural history, biography, and other sorts of presupposed ‘background’ information without which their fine-grained exegetical points would simply not have struck them, or not carried anything like the proper weight of critical-readerly conviction. Consider, if you will, whether Cleanth Brooks could possibly have arrived at his estimate of Marvell’s exquisitely subtle hovering between opposed sympathies in his ‘Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland’ had he not already known a great deal about the poet’s life-history, political dealings, and changeable

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3 See for instance Brooks 1956, Wimsatt 1954, Ransom 1979.

(not to say fickle or opportunist) shifts of party allegiance.⁴ In short: Type-2 formalism is a doctrine more favoured by critics than poets and one that, in theory, places tight constraints on how we think about poetry while Type-1 formalism is a verse-practice with no such designs on our creative, interpretative, or intellectual freedoms.

The New Critics followed T.S. Eliot in constructing a tradition of English poetry that had its high-point in the seventeenth century – in Shakespeare, the ‘School of Donne’, and revenge tragedians like Webster and Tourneur. At this time, according to Eliot’s fanciful but massively influential myth, the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ had not yet occurred, the English language was in a state of creative flux, and poets were briefly able to express an unequalled range of jointly cerebral and sensuous experience.⁵ Much critical ink has since been spilled in defending, rejecting, or modifying this myth, as well as pointing out how effectively it served Eliot’s self-promoting purpose as an American poet lately fetched up in London and keen to establish his British (more accurately English) cultural credentials. Yet if one reads his poetry on the look-out for signs of that elective genealogy then the evidence looks pretty thin, at least if one expects the affinity with (say) Donne or Marvell to go beyond localised instances of ‘intellect at the tips of the senses’ and involve a more sustained or – what his essays gesture toward – a more creative-exploratory mode of thought. The closest Eliot came to his proclaimed seventeenth-century mentors was in the quatrain poems of his early period which, for all their frequent unpleasantness, do sometimes manage to hit off a Donne-like intensity of thought and feeling. Also worth noting is the fact that they manifest a use of rhyme that is distinctly more pointed and semantically charged than in his better-known poetry – from ‘Prufrock’ on – where its function, though not merely decorative, is very much a matter of tone, mood, or atmosphere.

In short, we should not go along too readily with Eliot’s keenness to associate his project with the ‘line of wit’ in English poetry. Later on he rather undermined that claim, not least by electing Dante, not Donne, as the indispensable point of reference for anyone seeking to acquire a sense of ‘tradition’ as defined by his own highly selective Classical-Christian-Monarchist-Conservative lights. In the same revisionist spirit was his later insistence that we not take Donne’s ideas too seriously – especially his at the time radical thoughts about cosmology, theology, and the strained relationship between them – since poetry could or should lay no claim to authority in those areas. Like the US New Critics, who followed him in this as in many respects, Eliot viewed with grave disapproval any notion that matters of such weight and moment might

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4 Brooks 1956

5 Eliot 1999

be adequately treated in poetic form. What he rejected above all was the idea that Donne, at whatever conscious or unconscious level, might have found certain grounds for religious scepticism – or doubts concerning the truth of Christian doctrine – in the new science of his time. Hence Eliot's increasing stress on the need for a complete severance between poetry and faith or belief, on the one hand, and poetry and science or rational thought on the other. Hence also William Empson's growing emphasis, against Eliot, on the wrongheadedness of any such requirement, the extent of Donne's scientific knowledge, and the ways in which readers of his poetry should benefit from grasping how keenly it deploys that knowledge to heterodox or sceptical conclusions. I shall have more to say about Empson, whose influence on my work over the past forty years has been – as he (ironically) said of Eliot – 'keen and penetrating, like an East wind'.

For these and other reasons I am a Type-1 formalist, much devoted to rhyme, metre, and various sorts of complex verse-form but convinced – *contra* autonomist creeds – that poetry can and should partake in all manner of debates across the greatest range of subject-areas. This puts me, I think, in some distinguished company – W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, William Empson, John Fuller, Marianne Moore, A.E. Stallings, and Richard Wilbur among others – but also draws its share of negative comment from practitioners of free verse (an oxymoron, but leave that aside for the moment) and assorted experimentalist or *avant-garde* quarters. Poets are a competitive, not to say rivalrous and (sometimes) prickly bunch – myself included – and on this matter they tend to divide along sharply-drawn if not impregnable lines. Rhyme and metre are often written off by anti-formalists, together with anything in the least complex or challenging in the way of verse-forms, on the grounds that these are irksome constraints which fetter creativity, falsify experience, trade feeling for artifice, and constitute a barrier between poet and reader. Formalists typically respond by acknowledging the few undeniable 'free-verse' successes – often instancing 'The Waste Land', though it takes a tin ear to miss Eliot's subtle tweakings of the norm – before going on to stress their fewness and freakishness.

There are times, especially after lengthy work on a new poem, when I do if fleetingly feel the force of objections to rhyme and metre. Might they not, after all, have something retrograde, even atavistic about them, some echo of how they once served a collective mnemonic purpose, as in oral epic poetry where speech-melody and rhythmic stress patterns made up for the absence of graphic notation? Or don't they buy into a kind of Rousseauist guilty nostalgia, a desire to recall civilization to that imagined pre-literate state of grace when language expressed feelings directly with, as yet, no need of inferior supplements like writing or grammar? I once spent a lot of time rehearsing the fallacious character of such ideas through a detailed account of Derridean deconstruction, including (of course) his

now canonical reading of Rousseau on the evils inflicted by writing on speech, as likewise by culture on nature, harmony on melody, and civil on 'primitive' orders of society.⁶ Thus I can say with some confidence that my thinking is not unduly in hock to that particular misconception. And I am further armed against it by my preference for verse-forms that deploy rhyme and metre in distinctly literate (writing-dependent) ways, along with extended, often complex stanzas and syntax that would stretch comprehension beyond reasonable limits in oral delivery.

Any defence of rhyme and metre advanced on my part as a practising poet is unlikely to involve the self-deconstructing mystique of a language conceived as somehow harking back, in its origins, beyond the very possibility of language as a system of articulate structural relations. If that defence is to fit what I do as a poet – or am attempting to do – then it will need to offer a justification in quite different terms. I shall take rhyme first since that's the aspect of 'traditional' verse that raises most hackles amongst hustlers of the *Zeitgeist* who maintain that things have moved on and that nothing more surely indicates failure to keep up than the falling-back on such a time-worn, otiose device. My view, conversely, is that functional (as opposed to decorative or purely musical) rhyme is a vital creative-exploratory resource, a means to open up new possibilities of poetic thought through the access to semantic, conceptual and speculative regions unreachable by prose discourse. Especially when joined to complex verse-forms – pushing hard on the rhymester's inventive powers – it can prompt a sounding-out of remote meanings and associations that would scarcely occur to anyone just wanting to have their preconceived say on this or that topic. No doubt poets need to bear in mind that their own chief sources of satisfaction, like hitting on a wonderfully apt or innovative rhyme, may not have quite the same effect on even the most responsive reader. All the same it is a feeling that should be just as familiar to readers of Auden, Empson or Wilbur as to enjoyers of Cole Porter's or Stephen Sondheim's lyrics.

III

I should be clear that all this has very little to do with Heideggerian poetics, or with the depth-hermeneutic questing-back to supposedly primordial meanings and truths covered up through the history of Western thought but occasionally there to be divined in the texts of poets like Hölderlin, Rilke and Celan.⁷ Etymologies, primordial or not, may sometimes play a part in such moments of discovery but the latter far more often result – in my experience – from multiple meanings, senses, or

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6 See Derrida 1976; also Norris 1982 and 1987.

7 See especially Heidegger 2001.

connotations within a single word whose interaction produces that effect. It is at such moments that poetic creativity – or inventiveness – is most strikingly apparent. Something like this goes on in certain uses of the very word ‘invention’, its Latin etymology having to do with fortuitously ‘coming upon’ some received but highly apt rhetorical device for a given purpose or context, while its subsequent history points in more radically creative directions. Once more we have Derrida to thank for some subtle and revealing commentary on this process of semantic-conceptual change.⁸ But for me, as poet-theorist, the thinker who did most to figure out what was happening with instances of truly inventive rhyme was Empson in his 1951 book *The Structure of Complex Words*. Here he went far beyond the brilliant but somewhat scatter-shot approach to close-reading that characterised his earlier and much better-known *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.⁹ In short he now offered a theory of multiple meaning that, had it been taken up more widely, might have had profound consequences for literary criticism, philosophy of language, and related disciplines.

What Empson means by a ‘complex word’ is one that contains two or more senses but which also manages to fit them into an ‘equation’, that is, a logical (or sometimes not-so-logical) structure where the relation between them is one of predication, inclusion, purported identity, analogy, or metaphor, this latter conceived in broadly Aristotelian terms as a complex chiasmic pattern of inter-exchanged properties or attributes. These equations are emphatically intra-verbal, i.e., located within the word and not thought of as spread over a larger context or vaguely there in the background. Empson had come to feel, not without cause, that ambiguity was too vague or catch-all a term and that *Seven Types*, with its huge early influence, had tended to promote an over-emphasis on the irrational element in poetry. This was accompanied by a growing fascination with themes of extreme psychological conflict and – one of Empson’s abiding *bêtes noires* – with Christian-theological paradoxes such as that of the Trinity and Christ’s atonement for human sin.¹⁰ Thus *Complex Words* sets out to provide the theoretical apparatus – the table of equations, the symbolic notation (albeit rather homespun and out of line with modern logicians’ practice), and above all the working interpretative procedures – for a full-scale intention-based structural semantics with due sensitivity to social and historical shifts of usage. This still leaves room for the poetry of conflict but enables us to place it against a set of recognisably normative structures, examined most closely in the word ‘sense’, which allows for deviations from the rational or reasonable norm without (normally!) counting them instances of verbal psychopathology.

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8 Derrida 2007

9 Empson 1930 and 1951

10 See especially Empson 1988.

The main problem with the book, as Empson realised, was its unbalanced, internally fractured and to this extent un-reader-friendly structure. It comprises some lengthy outer chapters of a largely theoretical-expository character along with a central core of interpretative essays where the theory is applied to texts of Erasmus, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Jane Austen, and others. But the complex words in question – ‘fool’, ‘dog’, ‘sense’, ‘all’, and a range of lesser though related instances like ‘quite’ and ‘delicate’ – are simultaneously put through their logico-semantic paces and supplied with a truly remarkable depth of historical, social, and cultural-intellectual grasp. Like no other book known to me *Complex Words* gives the sense of a mind intensely conscious of its own creative-critical workings whilst also maximally receptive to the ways that other writers – or indeed collocutors – can jolt that mind in new and revelatory directions. It is perhaps worth noting that Empson ceased to write poetry – so far as the record goes – at the time when he was most deeply engaged in working out the theory and producing the book. Having read it repeatedly over many decades as a critic-theorist and found its insights constantly coming to mind while writing poems I can see how those two events might well have coincided in Empson’s case.¹¹ The sort of mental activity involved in doing critical work like that is very much on a level with the kind of inventiveness required to write poems like those he produced during a fairly brief but intensive early period of verse-creativity.

The chapter that shows this most strikingly, I think, is ‘Wit in the “Essay on Criticism”’, a *tour de force* of sustained close-reading that examines how the key-words ‘wit’ and ‘sense’ between them articulate the various options, commitments, and moral-intellectual priorities that emerge in the course of Pope’s verse-essay. The chapter defies quick summary but captures with incomparable deftness, aided by a poet’s insider knowledge, how it is that these key-words enable Pope to think his way through – and suggestively beyond – what might seem a clash of contrary doctrines. Thus ‘sense’ conveys the received Augustan wisdom on this topic, namely the kind of fundamental good sense that won’t be too much distracted by the ‘high gyrations’ of (e.g.) seventeenth-century poetic ‘wit’ but will rather provide the ‘steady ground bass’ of an outlook rooted in common-sense virtues. ‘Wit’ has its place, all the same, when it comes to enlivening, provoking or upsetting the often complacent since thought-resistant verities of plain good sense. Besides, its etymology (from Old English *witan* = ‘knowledge’) is sufficient to suggest – without going full-strength Heidegger – that Popean ‘wit’ can justifiably lay claim to its own epistemic or cognitive credentials. What results, in Empson’s reading, is a niftily instructive dialectic of concepts staged in such a way that ‘wit’ and ‘sense’ end up by retaining their tensile opposition but have meanwhile run the gamut of multiple, increasingly complex encounters. If the reader is sensitive to

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¹¹ Norris 1978, Norris and Mapp (eds.) 1993

Pope's very likely pre-conscious subtleties of semantic implication they will then find out how it feels to achieve a set of ethical, social and literary responses more 'adequate to the task of criticism'.

I have no room here to go more deeply into this or other chapters of Empson's remarkable book. What it gave me to think, first as a critic-theorist of poetry, then as philosopher of language, and then as a practising poet was the possibility of doing the same kind of thing more consciously, or with foregone intent. Indeed, as I've said, Empson's advance from *Seven Types* to *Complex Words* consisted precisely in devising an analytic framework – a 'machinery' of equations, intra-verbal structures, or compacted 'statements in words' – by which to articulate what had previously seemed, even at its most brilliantly revealing, a rich but confused or contradictory bunch of meanings. This has some large consequences regarding my case for rhyme as a creative-exploratory resource, that is, as a means of allowing thought its inventive head through the encounter with unpredictable events of logico-semantic discovery. For one thing it envisages a kind of *rapprochement* between what we're apt to think of as two quite disparate genres of poetry, the seventeenth-century Metaphysical 'line of wit' and the eighteenth-century ('Augustan') mode of rational, often philosophical or theologico-political verse that may be considered prosaic for couching its ideas in a largely discursive or constative form. For another, it places poetry in close relation to the kinds of practice that characterise present-day philosophy of language and which likewise involve – at their insightful best – a capacity to think *in and through* the varieties of utterance (e.g., statements or the sundry kinds of performative speech-act) that make up their elective domain.¹² More than that, it lets us see that autonomist doctrines of closed poetic form are ignoring – or perversely pretending to ignore – the patent continuity between poetry and other matters of human intellectual, moral, political, and scientific concern.

Not all complex words are rhyme-words, or formally required to function as such, although many of Empson's most striking instances (like 'wit' and 'sense' in Pope) have their special clincher-like uses in that role. My own poems often let the rhyme-words bear a high degree of semantic overdetermination and, to that extent, can be seen as 'rhyme-driven' very much as A.E. Stallings describes her own formalist verse-practice.

Paradoxically, I like things like rhyme and meter precisely because using these random limitations (as a more *avant-garde* poet might say) can leave you open to things beyond your control, spaces for the Muse to move through.¹³

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12 See for instance Austin 1975, Derrida 1988, Felman 1984.

13 Stallings 2018

Her point is that rhyme-driven verse isn't poetry that sticks – as its detractors claim – with outworn, self-hobbling conventions and thereby abjures the expansive horizons of free-verse practice. Rather it is poetry that takes creative bearings from its own most vital resource, namely the capacity of ear-and-mind attuned language to surpass the confines of everyday communicative discourse. One reason for that – though Stallings doesn't make the further point – is that rhyme performs this function to greatest, most striking effect when the sound-sense complex in question is that of an Empsonian complex word with senses that don't merely aggregate but form intra-verbal structures with latent propositional content and force. This may seem an overly complicated way of talking about natural-language features or functions that go back to an early stage of human cultural development and continue to exert a strong fascination, not least for young children. But it is one worth attempting at a stage in that development when thinking about poetry in advanced or (academically) fashionable quarters has very largely turned away from such resources.

It has also tended to devalue the syntactic dimension of poetry, chiefly in consequence of the Romantic-to-Modernist emphasis on image, metaphor, and symbol – along with their larger-scale structural analogues like 'spatial form' – as the prime constituents of poetry.¹⁴ This goes along with a marked distaste for poems that possess any kind of propositional content, or adopt a discursive mode of address suited to the conveyance of ideas, arguments, or points of view. Here again Empson is the great exception since his poems exhibit such a remarkable gift for combining a Donne-like power of condensed yet far-reaching metaphorical expression with a syntax that articulates complex ideas and a verse-music, in the best sense, that keeps ear and mind jointly on their toes. Indeed, his central thesis in *Complex Words* can usefully be seen as a micro-application of the same approach, that is, a way of treating – unpacking – individual words or lexical units to reveal 'compacted statements' or immanent structures of sense and implication. That poetry can best be understood this way, by deploying more keenly rather than suspending our everyday modes of linguistic grasp, is Empson's main premise in this book and its major advance on *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. As I have said, it is one that goes flat against some of the ruling suppositions of present-day poetic practice and theory, which no doubt explains why *Complex Words* has remained far less widely read than the earlier book. My case, more generally, is that syntax – on whatever scale – is among the greatest resources of poetry and its interactive counterpoint with prosody something to be thrown away only at huge expense.

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¹⁴ See especially Frank Kermode 1957.

IV

This was brought home to me lately by a review of my collection *The Trouble with Monsters*, a sequence of verse satires, polemics, interventions, and occasional reflective poems addressed to the current state of UK, US and global politics.¹⁵ They are written in a range of rhyming and metrical verse-forms and with the aim of deploying those forms to the most sharply pointed and knowingly provocative effect. Thus they stand more in the line of descent from a satirist like Juvenal, an excoriating brand of 'savage indignation', than the line from Menippean satire whose more genial, dialogical, 'polyphonic' values have earned the allegiance of theorists brought up on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁶

Sour grapes, if you like, but I felt the review was oddly off-the-point, above all when the author expressed surprise that I, with my known post-structuralist leanings, should fall back on those traditional props. Rather, he opined, I should have brought my verse-practice more into line with my politics and taken a lead from those – like the so-called L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets – who build post-structuralist theorising into their poems, often through direct as well as implicit reference to sources like Barthes and Derrida.¹⁷ No matter that their poetry is self-occupied to the point of epistemic-linguistic solipsism and entirely without those requisite features – tonal, prosodic, rhetorical, performative – without which it must be sadly lacking in political-activist potential. Indeed, any attempt to make good the equation between 'advanced', 'progressive' or 'radical' tendencies in the arts and the use of those terms as applied to political movements or positions will very quickly run into a whole range of problematical counter-instances. Nor is this really such a puzzle given the hermetic and the often highly specialised, theory-driven character of many artistic developments in the wake of cultural High Modernism.

It is here that 'verse-music' takes on a significance about as far as possible removed from its typecast association with Tennysonian mourning, early-Yeatsian yearning, or Symbolist-decadent swooning. In political poetry more than anywhere there is nothing so reliably effective – or powerfully engaging – as well-chosen rhyme-schemes and metrical patterns. The Brecht-Eisler partnership is just one, albeit very striking instance of the way that political activism can tap into the latent energies released when poetic (and to this extent musical) speech joins up with just the right vocal setting.¹⁸ In such cases the deployment of a good, i.e., functional, complex, semantically load-bearing rhyme can sharpen the satirical point so keenly that it feels like a knock-down point in debate.

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15 Norris 2019a, DiDiato 2020

16 Bakhtin 1984

17 Bernstein and Andrews (eds.) 1984

18 Bunge 2014

I have taken issue with my reviewer here not by way of a shift to the (supposed) special case of political verse, or verse-satire, but because it seems to me not at all untypical of the choices nowadays facing any poet who wants to stay in touch with the vitalizing sources of verbal creativity. Indeed it is a mark of poetry's present-day retreat from its wider responsibilities – along with what I have elsewhere called the hegemony of lyric – that a combination of Type 2 formalism and self-occupied brooding has made those genres appear so wide of the contemporary mainstream.

This is by no means to attack theory or endorse the wish of poets that it not make such grossly unwarranted intrusions on their privileged since ultra-sensitive domain. Empson put this notion very firmly to bed in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* when he stood up for the virtues of tough-minded 'analytic' criticism against the wilting-flower defenders of an 'appreciative' approach that renounced analysis for fear of 'pruning down too far' and destroying the delicate plant.¹⁹ Rather it is to say that theory is best deployed in relation to poetry at a certain agreed-upon distance, or – as logicians might say – at a certain meta-linguistic remove such that each avoids treading too heavily on the other's expressive, creative, critical, or conceptual-explanatory toes. What's more this outlook has the signal virtue of leaving the supply-lines open in both directions for poet-theorists unwilling to declare sides in so ultimately futile and misconceived a debate. All the same there is a risk, as rather urgently needs saying, that Creative Writing courses will combine the wrong kinds of theory with ill-chosen examples of poetic practice and thereby achieve the worst of any worlds to be placed in the path of impressionable students. If anti-formalism is made a chief principle of such teaching then they will, for reasons suggested above, be apt to miss out on one of poetry's most vital human as well as creative-intellectual resources.

I have said a lot about rhyme and hardly anything about metre so should now try to make good the omission. It is a big help here that in the heyday of 'theory', that is, of post-structuralism as it affected our thinking about poetics and literary criticism, Anthony Easthope published a book entitled *Poetry as Discourse* where he took a strong line against formal metrics in general, and the iambic pentameter in particular.²⁰ I admired his pugnacity at the time – and recommended the book to students – though, like him no doubt, I went on reading and teaching the canon from (let's say) Wyatt to Tony Harrison, and often without theoretical cautions or disclaimers. Easthope's thesis was that, more than any other metrical form, iambic pentameter naturalised the accents, rhythms, tonal inflections, social nuances, velleities, discreet intimations (etc.)

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19 Empson 1930

20 Easthope 2002

of a certain class, the ever-rising bourgeoisie, for whom it served as a collusive *entre-nous* while for others it marked a zone of exclusion, again with penalties attached. His argument was a great deal subtler than this and supplied with a good range of practical instances from other, e.g., popular or folk-poetic traditions. But these were there chiefly to emphasise the point that iambic pentameter had hogged the cultural high ground – especially in consequence of Shakespeare’s having used it for his tragic or high-class (not comic or low-class) characters and scenes – and so went to reinforce Easthope’s case for its deep complicity with the norms and prerogatives of bourgeois society. My own writings at the time fell in pretty much with this historical, political, and socio-cultural view of things, as indeed did my and Richard Machin’s priorities in co-editing the volume *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*.²¹ So – again – I should acknowledge how powerful its appeal from a standpoint that is by no means entirely alien or opaque to the way I think today.

All the same it is alien in certain ways, and those ways have much to do with my return to writing poetry after many decades as a traveller in the purlieu of theory, philosophy, and the history of ideas. I have already given one reason for this in the fact that my poetry is largely discursive in character – presenting a case, pursuing an argument, thinking a problem through, looking at an issue from different angles – and thus tends to settle on measures, like iambic pentameter, that allow maximum scope for such applications. The main desiderata are line-length (long enough to carry the discourse forward but not so long as to muffle a point); flexible stress-patterns set off against an always present but unobtrusive background norm; a capacity to register tonal inflections or nuances of speech implicature; and the scope, via enjambment, for lengthy and complex syntactic structures in counterpoint with verse prosody. These all count as virtues for my purposes, while for Easthope they are all subtly complicit in a hegemonic order that passes off as natural or ahistorical what is in truth thoroughly cultural and timebound. Hence his title, *Poetry as Discourse*, where ‘discourse’ signifies roughly ‘a mode of address marked by the assumption that its style, tone or register will be familiar to, and shared by, a dominant social community or group’.

To be sure, that assumption is strongly present in some poetry of the kind, as with the heavily end-stopped ‘Augustan’ rhyming couplets of Pope, Dryden, Dr. Johnson and (to a lesser extent) Swift, where modern readers may well be offended by the tone of complacency or unquestioned common-sense wisdom. But this is an extreme instance readily explainable with reference to historical, political and cultural factors bearing on the poets’ keenly felt need for a sense of restored social stability and civic order. Otherwise the word ‘discourse’ can just as readily apply to interrogative, critical, oppositional, radical, or

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21 Machin and Norris (eds.) 1987

politically dissident poetry just so long as – in accordance with its basic meaning – the verse-form is indeed properly discursive, or sufficiently concerned to engage the reader in a process of open-ended dialogical exchange. To this extent, I would suggest, there is a good deal of poetry in the broadly modernist line of descent that lacks, underplays, or in effect repudiates the above set of claims. In so doing it subscribes to the Type 2 formalist doctrine that I rejected earlier, that is, the idea of poems as verbal constructs best thought of in spatial terms, or with reference to the visual arts, especially those of architecture or sculpture. This gives the impression, very often, of lifting poems out of the discursive domain and raising them to some transcendent realm of timeless, object-like being. One need only think, in that connection, of Horace's 'monuments more lasting than bronze', or the habit amongst critics of treating poetic 'development' – say, from early to late Yeats, Eliot, Rilke or Celan – as a gradual and hard-won passage from the temporal to the eternal.

This tendency is further reinforced by the privilege traditionally granted to metaphor over metonymy, symbol over allegory or, in more Coleridgean-Romantic terms, imagination over fancy. Behind all these value-laden binaries stands the preference for eternizing figures of thought and for the sense of aesthetic and spiritual transcendence that comes of their denying the contingencies of time and change. Critics, theorists and linguists have lately been at pains to reveal the extent of this bias, whether through Roman Jakobson's rehabilitation of metonymy as a trope with creative-imaginative powers different from but by no means inferior to those of metaphor, or – more controversially – Paul de Man's beady-eyed deconstructive undoings of 'aesthetic ideology'.²² Ages back I had a hand in these fairly arcane endeavours but would now prefer to take the poet-practitioner's part and simply note, as above, how much is lost in the way of depth, intellectual reach, and communicative force in consequence of letting such prejudices shape the writing or reading of poems. To which I'd add – with an eye to the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets and other anti-rhymesters or anti-formalists – that the prejudices in question run not only all the way from Romanticism to Modernism but well beyond that remarkably protean chapter of developments.²³

V

Here I find myself in the good company of Donald Davie when he remarks that '[a] poem is necessarily a shape made out of lapsing time, out of the time the poem takes to be read; yet we seem to conceive of a poem by analogy with architectural forms, forms which occupy not time but

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22 See for instance Jakobson 1987, de Man 1996, 1986, Norris 1988.

23 Andrews and Bernstein (eds) 1997

space'.²⁴ Davie acknowledges, as must any competent judge, that some splendid poems have been written during the past century that do indeed invite the analogy with visual, sculptural or architectural forms and which likewise aspire to a condition outside or above the temporal-successive. Indeed he allows that most good poems partake of both attributes in varying degree and that the tension between them is often a source of creative stimulus. But in the end, he says, '[t]he great advantage of taking poetry as a special kind of discourse, rather than a special kind of art, is that it evades these ancient and troubling questions about the metaphysical or religious grounds of the poetic activity'.²⁵ This recalls the anxieties expressed by late-1960s rear-guard defenders of the 'old' US New Criticism when their autonomist doctrines of the poem as 'verbal icon' or 'concrete universal' came under threat from a range of 'continental' (phenomenological or deconstructionist) quarters. Theirs was essentially the idea of poetry as a 'special kind of art', and of poems as artefacts – Keatsian well-wrought urns – possessed of a formal or structural integrity that rendered them proof against the depredations of time. More specifically, it headed off the sorts of questioning – 'metaphysical or religious' but also historical, political, social, and ideological – that might befall the poem if opened to the buffeting winds of 'extra-poetic' or 'extraneous' debate.²⁶

I therefore agree with Davie when he plumps for poems – or conceptions of poetry – which stress the discursive dimension of verbal art rather than the visual artwork-based analogy that finds insufficient room for poetry as continuous with other modes of human linguistic interaction. 'To take poetry as a special kind of discourse', he writes, 'is to make it a special kind of communication between persons', unlike the other, non-interactive, quasi-sculptural idea of it which treats any deviation of that type as falling into one or other of the New Critically forfended 'heresies' (intentional, biographical, historical, or paraphrastic).²⁷ Such issues now feel decidedly antiquarian but they are still rumbling on in various contexts of present-day poetic debate. Thus the notion of spatial form finds its ultra-symbolist but also post-structuralist and deconstructive variant in a late-Mallarméan poetics where the scattered signifiers call for a mode of reading – or scanning – that blocks any thought of the text as unfolding in and through the time of interpersonal discourse. The same goes for much OULIPO-influenced poetry where interest is focused on lexical games or on wordplay at the level of the signifier and where this very often works to exclude any larger

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24 Davie 2004, p. 132

25 Davie 2004, p. 135

26 Brooks 1956, Wimsatt 1954 and 1976, Ransom 1941

27 Wimsatt 1954

appeal to contexts of thought, knowledge or experience beyond the 'words on the page'.²⁸ If that phrase echoes the 'old' New Critical insistence on readings that remained strictly within autonomist bounds then the echo is hardly accidental.

As I said earlier, there is not much hope of conjoining a radical poetics with a radical politics if the former entails a severance of signifier from signified, sign from referent, or textual from extra-textual realms of discourse. The 'revolution of the signifier' was heady stuff and elicited some truly brilliant writing from a few highly gifted individuals like Roland Barthes. But it can now be seen as a revolution that never came to terms with its own art-based rather than discourse-oriented approach. Post-structuralism was always a self-defeating enterprise because it staked its claim to a world-transformative, revolutionary programme for the reading of (among other things) fiction and poetry on the false premise that this could be achieved by severing the tie between word and world.²⁹ Coming to reject that misplaced belief while acknowledging how 'theory' sharpened our critical, philosophical, and readerly perceptions is not at all the sign of a late-Wordsworthian retreat into social-political conservatism. Rather it is to recognise, with the benefit of late-gained experience, that certain of poetry's most important functions depend on its not giving up resources – such as rhyme and metre – that make of it, in Davie's precisely stated sense, a 'special kind of discourse'.

When Empson chides Eliot for spoiling Donne's poetry, or spoiling the experience of it for readers told not to take serious notice of Donne's ideas, he is speaking up strongly in defence of that 'special kind of discourse'.³⁰ It is 'special' not at all in the 'special interest' or 'restricted access' sense but in so far as it finds room for a great range of human experiences, from the sensual to the cerebral, with connections between them going by way of metaphor, analogy, structuring conceit, and all the formal devices brought into play by formalist poets. This description is a good fit for Empson's own poems, or those of them – the best-known, mostly early ones – written at a time when he was, by his own account, 'imitating Donne with love and wonder'. What he took from Donne and adapted to his own purposes was an advanced knowledge of the current physical sciences, a 'conceited' (intellectually precocious) style, a high valuation of enlightened modernity, and – consistent with that – a distinctly qualified respect for the achievements of literary Modernism. That these latter two movements were often at odds in political, cultural, and intellectual terms was an issue that registered increasingly with Empson as literary academe swung in, for the most part, behind the high

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28 Terry (ed.) 2020

29 For a range of views see Attridge, Bennington and Young (eds.) 1989, Eagleton 2008.

30 Empson 1993

Modernist banner. Indeed he spent much of his time from the mid-1960s on in a spirited defence of humanism and rationalism against what he saw, rightly enough, as a creeping erosion of values widely shared in his earlier years but now under attack on multiple fronts.³¹

At that point the logico-semantic theorising of *Complex Words* gave way to a far more combative or gloves-off approach that tackled the malaise in its various guises from French Symbolism down. This is one reason why the complicated tale of 'Empson on Eliot' has so much to reveal about the twentieth-century background to present-day literary schisms and debates. It is a tale that starts out with the Empson of *Seven Types* who wrote some of the sharpest-minded and most sympathetic early criticism of Eliot's poetry as well as pretty much accepting Eliot's mythic but potent view of English poetic tradition. It ends just as tellingly with Empson's insistence, *contra* Eliot, that poetry is continuous with the widest range of human experience and interests, including those of science and (crucially) the critique of religious belief.³² I have rehearsed the tale here because my poems owe more to Empson, as poet and critic, than to anyone else and because I have attempted – hopefully with a few successes – to stick with that continuity-principle. This has meant keeping them so far as possible in touch with the contemporary life of the mind as manifest beyond the rather cramping regions of first-person lyric utterance. And it has also involved doing justice to the claims of a formalism aware of its part in extending and enabling, not restricting, that openness to the widest range of ideas and experience.

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³¹ See Empson 1987.

³² Empson 1993

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Volume 9
Issue 1