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The Matter with Verse: What Victorian Poetry Wasn’t, and Was

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What is verse? I broach this question partly in homage to one of our editors, whose exemplary essay on “light verse” begins much the same way (Behlman 477); and partly in recognition that, with a handful of mainly recent exceptions, the definition of verse has gone far more honored in the breach than the observance. Of the half-dozen guidebooks to Victorian literature and poetry that I have consulted, not one puts “verse” in the index, although sporadically “blank verse,” “free verse,” and “*verse libre*” appear there, as do the generic “verse drama” and “verse novel,” along with correlative generic terms like “sonnet,” “villanelle,” and “ballad,” and a smattering of metrical terms, conspicuously “Sprung Rhythm.” Even “prose” crops up in more than one index where “verse” doesn’t. And in Matthew Bevis’s admirably comprehensive *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, our topic while often in play does not stand among the seven keyword articles gathered under “Form” in the first part of the book, but must be gleaned at the very end, in the subtitles for chapters 50 and 51, under cover of an epithet: “Comic Verse,” “Bad Verse.”

But verse *per se*, what do we mean by it? If we were to crank up the differential-logic engine that a young John Stuart Mill applied to the similar question “What is poetry?” it would divide to conquer, by a process of nested classification that established what verse wasn’t (Mill 49-63). It would first axiomatically define verse as one of the *language* arts, then disclose that verse pertained to the *written* not the oral domain of those arts. Next it would show that within the literate domain verse was formally distinguished from its historically younger sibling *prose* by such acoustic markers as meter and rhyme, and such paginal visibilia as stanzaic grouping and unjustified right margins. But then the next step, the one discriminating verse from *poetry*, would jam up the mill of ratiocination at once, and from much the same cause that, circa 1830, drove the self-medicating young Frankenstein of utilitarianism into the arms of poetry, when he needed an imaginative supplement and emotional corrective to. . . inveterate logic-splitting.

All poetry is by definition verse; but any reader except Jeremy Bentham – and even his bracingly irreverent comparison between poetry and the board game push-pin loses traction as it degenerates from mischief into malice (Bentham 206-7) – will recognize instances of verse that just don’t merit the name of poetry. For there is such a thing as verse that is *merely verse*. In fact there’s quite a lot of it, and we think we know it when we see it. If an education in literary taste is asserted each time we do, it’s also the case that our education advances each time we change our minds and decide, as the present essay hopes to find now and again, that an ostensible run of mere verse turns out to have been poetry after all. Those of us who teach Victorian poetry try to foster such an educational advance within our classrooms, where the very versifiedness of the object under study counts as a fouled strike against it right off the bat. Those who have professed the subject long enough may further attest how faithfully, and with what success, a couple of recent scholarly generations have labored to promote a comparable educational advance within the academy. Among English professors nowadays Victorian poetry needs little or no apology; but it was for decades broadly discounted and seldom taught, thanks in part to its heavy dalliance with verse’s stiffest conventions. Victorian poems were so relentlessly versed, in fact, that it was easy for the mid-twentieth century to write them off as merely that, verse and nothing more.

When is verse not verse? Why, when it’s Poetry (Mazel 377). Where to disaggregate poetry from the verse it is unquestionably written in is a learned intuition – that is, a function without an operable algorithm – and where to call a passage children’s or newspaper or society verse is no tautology but a widely practiced value judgment, then our words may be playing us false; maybe our categories are too. It is tempting to summon Bertrand Russell, Bentham’s heir and Mill’s, and ask whether in wielding the term *verse* we may not be tangling with a subacute inversion of Russell’s Paradox in set theory (Russell 101ff.). For verse, verbally considered, appears to belong in that set of sets which are members of themselves, along with other collective nouns like *wood* or *air* that name at once a large category and one or more of its constituent units.(To wit, in the case of verse: the overall medium, as defined above; the lesser subgenres, such as nonsense verse; the individual line, as in a biblical psalm; the grouping of lines into a stanza, as in a song with a refrain.) In truth the confusion is terminological rather than ontological; and, because we have to do with hierarchies of evaluation rather than being, we may leave Russell out of it. Still, mulling the analogy to set theory is helpful if it prompts curiosity as to why we should, like Victorian readers, use the same term *verse* on one handto denote neutrally an artistic medium and on the other hand to rank prejudicially a distinct portion of the work done in that medium.

The ambiguity of the term must betray some instability, either in the judgment itself or in the relation between formal means and aesthetic effects on which the judgment is based. When verse takes a modest second seat to genuine poetry’s radiant throne, as across the nineteenth century it distinctly did, is it because the real thing poetry transfigures its verse medium, or transcends it? Converts form into something rich and strange, or leaves it behind in order to breathe in a realm where only the spirit giveth life? As for mere verse, is it deemed inferior because it makes too little of formal parameters, or too much? Does verse underwhelm us by cheapening its given form with banal topics, or does it compensatorily overcharge its form and tumble into bathos? In any case, mere verse is what we call a poem that has not escaped its dependency on the verse medium. Such a poem comes most clearly into its own when frankly conceding that dependency, flaunting the material substrate of mediation, and embracing as its very purpose the deed of inscription that poetry with higher aims tends to occlude or sublimate (Williams 819-20). For that reason most of the examples to be considered here either present themselves as inscriptions, identify themselves by title as verses or verse components, or do both those things together.

Take as a first case the last ten lines of a poem that William Morris wrote in 1891 to be embroidered in Gothic script on the valance of an antique bed in the family home. The preposition that starts the title – “For the Bed at Kelmscott” – both acknowledges this purpose and prepares us to receive the lines as a script to be delivered by the furniture on which it is displayed:

I am old and have seen

Many things that have been;

Both grief and peace

And wane and increase

No tale I tell

Of ill or well,

But this I say:

Night treadeth on day,

And for worst or best

Right good is rest.

(Morris 158; lines 19-28)

Rhymed couplets in dimeter verse: the two-by-two format matches the rectangular structure these verses were composed for, and Morris doubles down on the effect by building so many individual lines out of a pair of semantic opposites. Playing no favorites and (a rarity with this poet) telling no tales, the old bed subtends within the monosyllabic finality of “rest” every antithesis the foregoing lines have itemized. “All verse,” Samuel Daniel had long ago declared in his 1603 *Defence of Ryme*, “is but a frame of wordes confined within certaine measure” (2.359). Morris’s certain carpentry of rhyme, meter, and alliteration converge in “rest,” securing within the lineated form of the verse a jointure aligning that form with the materiality of the frame it was written at once to adorn, and be supported by.

Morris here was writing verse, not poetry, though of that verse he made a fine small poem. Transcribe a passage of the loftiest, deepest poetry you can find onto so substantially material a fabric – a sampler, a plaque, a pedestal – and it will abide there as verse instead, trumped by the manifest substrate into revealing the formal features that melt or evanesce in whatever airier, richer habitat poetry flourishes in. If it bonds to the format, it's verse; or, in other words, to the extent that you concentrate on the format of a poetic passage, it’s as verse that you are reading it.

Hence throughout the career of Robert Browning, media-theorist *avant la lettre* that he was, *verse* persists as a term of choice for the produced verbal object, *poetry* for the mysteriously subjective process of its production. In *Paracelsus* (1835) a sunset over Constantinople “black and crooked runs / Like a Turk verse along a scimitar” (2.5-6), a crafted inscription whose significance, to the alienated mind of the eponymous European hero in a strange land, inheres in its contour as a textual object whose beauty is strictly that of an undeciphered calligraphic signifier. Half a century later, and a world away in tone, come Browning’s last verses, a couplet scribbled on a pencil sketch of him made the month before he died. The portraitist asked the poet to sign his name, which is and is not what he did:

Here I’m gazing, wide awake,

Robert Browning, no mistake!

(Browning 2.972)

Is he gazing from the portrait or at it? Object of the draftsman’s lines, or author of the lines of verse? The bifold rhymes and matching caesurae of this scrap echo the visual mirroring that a look at oneself in any medium focalizes, even as the physical inscription of the verses directly onto the sketchbook page performs a minor auto-ekphrasis: low-demand, admittedly, and yet sufficient to claim last word in the rivalry of the sister arts.

Browning composed, often *ex tempore*, lots of such stuff – a term that, in a context of material poetics, should be used advisedly but should be used all the same. Most of the stuff that his scholarly editors garner in an annex at the back of their edition the poet left untitled; so it is up to editorial diligence to give each stray piece a name. The editors’ choice of titles gravitates less often to generic terms (“epigram,” “dialogue,” “impromptu”) than to the sheer components verse is made from: “rhyme,” “couplet,” “limerick,” and, leading the pack, “lines.” These choices bespeak the cardinal editorial virtue of neutrality, in the service of descriptive bibliography by other means. On at least one occasion, however, Browning may be credited with having created such a label on his own. “Terse Verse” names an octave on the Carlyles, facetiously subtitled “Being a Contribution to a Scottish Anthology,” that the poet apparently improvised for fun while visiting Tennyson in the early 1880s:

Hail, ye hills and heaths of Ecclefechan!

Hail, ye banks and braes of Craigenputtock!

T. Carlyle was born in Ecclefechan,

Jane his wife was born in Craigenputtock:

She – a pearl where eye detect no speck can,

He – ordained to close with and cross-buttock

Cant, the giant – these, O Ecclefechan,

These your glories be, O Craigenputtock!

(Browning 2.960)

The stunt, obviously, lay in finding any rhyme except themselves for the outlandish birthplaces of homespun Thomas and Jane. Those rhymes which Browning did find overshadow a lesser tissue of internal chiming that is nevertheless distinctly present – “Hail” with “hills,” “detect” with “speck,” most subtly “Cant” with “giant” – and that informs the self-rhyming self-description “Terse Verse.” No bed here, no scimitar or sketchbook; but the thickening precipitation of phonemes brings out with elementary force the foregrounding of the signifier, with its accompanying semantic attenuation, towards which verse, *qua* verse, tends.

Shallow-pocketed diffidence to invest in big ideas lets verse travel light. Play the poetaster and, as T. Carlyle himself might have said, you get to lessen your denominator and so make off with a higher dividend. Doggerel can offer even the most earnest of poets a way to beware the high-serious doggedness to which, it will be agreed, mainstream Victorian literary culture was especially liable. A case in point is Matthew Arnold, whose last poem “Kaiser Dead” (1887) elegizes in stanzas of a “plain stave” (84), and in a suitably mongrelized tonal register, a mixed-breed collie-dachshund who is missed for, among other things, his own “jokes in doggish language said” (71). The opening stanza suffices to show how literary Arnold’s graceful tribute is:

What, Kaiser dead? The heavy news

Post-haste to Cobham calls the Muse,

From where in Farringford she brews

The ode sublime,

Or with Pen-bryn’s bold bard pursues

A rival rhyme.

(Arnold 609; lines 1-6)

The bereft bard’s summons goes forth from his Surrey cottage to the English laureate Tennyson, the Welsh best-seller Sir Lewis Morris and, through the confessed loan of a Scottish stanza, the shade of Robert Burns - the last, W. H. Auden affirmed, of the great verse writers (lines 11-12; Auden xvii). Arnold’s news is as heavy with rhyme as it is with poetic allusiveness, and its art will be to sustain the obligation to produce four *a*-rhymes per six-line stanza, without either claiming Burns’s dialectal license or indulging the elaborate slapstick we just saw in Browning. This formal balancing act figures the emotional equipoise with which Arnold’s pet elegy steers between twin hazards: on one hand, a failure of loyalty in parting from a favorite; on the other hand, a public lapse from composure into sentimentality – or (same difference) cuteness.

That the reins of verse could become guidelines governing a heart that craved temperance no less keenly than it did such things as faith, love, and renown is a principle also attested by the oddly bland titles Arnold bestowed on several inwardly turbulent poems with much higher stakes. His visit to a famed Carthusian monastery evoked severe meditations on the Victorian crisis of belief that, in their substance, might furnish plenty of matter for a Tennysonian “ode sublime.” But Arnold called them just “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” not writing them off, exactly, but keeping their plangency within the perimeter of verse’s surveillance. Likewise, it is part of the stern sobriety of Arnold’s important 1850 elegy for Wordsworth – it measures how much more the poet in Arnold felt this death than he did that of his friend Clough in the ornately brittle loftiness of “Thyrsis” (1866) – that the poem is captioned so sparely: “Memorial Verses: April, 1850.” The depth of reserve behind this stone-faced title corresponds, at some level, to the depth of Arnold’s reservations about the state of European literature at mid-century, though the title risks belying how earnestly that theme is handled in the poem itself. Major poetic ambition is underbid once more in the comparable deadpan of “Lines Written in Kensington Gardens” (1852), a poem that in closing all but commends the Arnoldian habit of selling inspiration short lest it seduce to rapture: “Make it mine / To feel, amid the city’s jar, / That there abides a peace” (37-9). The jar of opposing impulses virtually snaps into witty focus a few lines later with the oxymoronic lyric cry “Calm, calm me more!” (43).

The dissonance between this tranquilizing message and its verbal (punctuational!) insistence epitomizes the way “Lines” and “Verses” and “Stanzas” all camouflage passion in a plain brown wrapper. By now these titles are so well known as to feel inevitable, as indeed the entire titling convention they observe is long since naturalized in nineteenth-century poetry (Ferry 155-8). But the convention is peculiar nonetheless. We might reclaim its peculiarity by imagining that Arnold had titled his signature prose collections not *Essays in Criticism* but *Sentences in Print* or *Polemical Paragraphs.* Such stubbornly retrenched advertisement of nothing but the medium of conveyance we might deem literally *prosy*. But then isn’t the discounting of “Memorial Verses,” by the same token, *versy*? Arnold wrote the same stoical brokerage large when in 1853 he withdrew from publication his most prepossessing work to date, *Empedocles on Etna*, on the plea that it lacked the great “action,” or inward structuring form, displayed by classic masterpieces, and thereby traduced “the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws” (Arnold 671). Better trust the discipline of versing, this Victorian consistently maintained, than succumb to the cult of the spontaneous (Behlman 478; Williams 823).

Verse’s way of turning down the volume, and deflecting attention from message to medium, emerges with special force when poets expressly take up the aspirational medium of their own art, the published book. Poems written on books constitute an entire nineteenth-century subgenre, and if we work both sides of that ambiguous preposition *on* we will probably discover more poems that are physically inscribed *into* books, and at that by authors from a far wider social range of the literate public, than poems that are composed *about* books as material objects (Stauffer). In the latter category *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) remains the Victorian era’s most conspicuous exemplar, although Browning’s earlier biblio-grotesque “Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis” (1845) makes for easier handling. Both senses of writing-on-books obtain in a Browning poem that is less well known: *The Inn Album* (1875) braids the two categories together within a single fiction, making the inscription of stereotypical rhymes by sundry hands in a hill resort’s guestbook (“Queer reading! Verse with parenthetic prose”: Browning 2.338; line 130) into the motor that drives an entire book-length mystery. Published poems about verse inscription constitute literature of an exceptionally literary sort, parading as they do a writtenness that hovers somewhere between manuscript and print, and invites readers to shuttle between the replicated commodity in the hand and the auratic original in the mind.

The genre of the verse-letter, together with its Victorian spinoff the epistolary monologue, brings this fanciful traffic distinctly into view. Browning’s Alexandrian aesthete Cleon (1855), whom we are to imagine not speaking aloud but silently writing, shows us the way when he endows his correspondent with a prosthetic voice: “They give thy letter to me, even now: / I read and seem as if I heard thee speak” (Browning 1.712; lines 5-6). So deeply immersed is Cleon in literate culture that, when recalling his own “epos,” he sees it as an incised artifact on a “hundred plates of gold” (47); his concession that “I have not chanted verse like Homer” (139) reflexively subordinates the fancied acoustics of bardic chant to what comes foremost in his mind: the literally literal visibility of “verse” as alphabetic medium. We readers actually hear not a word of this, but Browning bets that we’ll think we do, and he wins. Do you hear this voice? Maybe; it depends who’s asking. “Do you see this square old yellow Book?” (Browning 2001, 4; line1.33). Yes, if only in the no-man’s-land whose rules of engagement mere verse is specially privileged to enforce.

Something of the same kind holds for the poems-on-books to which we turn next, each of which differently exploits verse’s material dependency on the writtenness of the word and the printedness of the medium. In “Lines Written for a Blank Page of ‘The Keepsake’” (1830), the very early Victorian poet W. Mackworth Praed makes verse the instrument of a flirtatious gallantry that still savors, like the gift-book annuals themselves, of the Regency when he came of age. Whether or not Praed’s three stanzas written “for” their intended *Keepsake* page ever reached that destination in handwriting, the commodified gentility of the proposed medium, and its sublimated sensuality too, afford an ample entrée to courtship that shows what this poem is really for:

Lady, there’s fragrance in your sighs,

And sunlight in your glances;

I never saw such lips and eyes

In pictures or romances;

And Love will readily suppose,

To make you quite enslaving,

That you have taste for verse and prose,

Hot pressed, and line engraving.

(Praed 1.406; lines 1-8)

The “pictures or romances” that adjoined album verse within the elegantly produced *Keepsake* are such as to have excited “sighs” and “glances” in the reader these lines address. And because the “taste” they cater to is an affair of the senses, to which in their degree both the images rendered by “verse and prose” and those pictorially presented by “line engraving” minister, that “taste” correlates strongly with the lady’s “lips” and the “fragrance” of her person. Pictures and romances in a book are all very well, but they fade beside what matters here much more, which is how they affect their tender reader bodily, and how this in turn affects her “enslaved” admirer. “Hot pressed” gets the temperature of these verses about right, and also of the remainder of the poem, which warmly invites its addressee to be pressed in his arms waltzing on the dance floor at the next opportunity: “dream of me tonight, / And dance with me next season” (23-24). And the whole display has much to do with versing, as repeated puns on *turn*, the root sense of *verse*, roguishly let on. “Your partner’s head is turned, they say, / As surely as his ankles” (11-12); a promising waltzer will pivot on the ankle, and look about him on the dance floor, all the better when dizzied aright by love. Where “one / Good turn deserves another” (15-16), the graceful turning of a verse – enjambed for good measure – solicits the dance turn that is to come later on, after the lovers have each turned a page or two. If the entire gambit works, it is thanks to the way verse has leveraged the physicality of the book against that of the courting couple: *vers de société*, trimmed to meet a burgeoning industrial revolution in print (Auden xviii; Behlman 484).

Our next entry by Praed is on the whole less happily conducted, but it claims the signal merit of having actually gotten itself inscribed in the intended volume. This title, “Verses Written in the First Leaf of a Child’s Book, Given by ----- to her Godson, Aged Four” (1837), is even more circumstantially detailed than the last. “Verses” here, like “Lines” above, posts the by now familiar warning (or reassurance) that readers should not expect too much; the enumeration of contextual data puts verse in its unassuming place more firmly still. Most of the introductory pointers are technically redundant, since a diligent reader will infer them from things said in the verses that follow; but then Praed means to make everybody at home by dispelling all interpretive anxiety in advance. “First Leaf,” therefore prefatory to the printed leaves; “Child’s Book,” therefore juvenile literature, and “Aged Four,” therefore on target; “Given,” therefore a present, and “Godson,” therefore a family setting for the emotional cargo transmitted by the entire poem:

My little Freddy, when you look

Into this nice new story-book

Which is my Christmas present,

You’ll find it full of verse and prose,

And pictures too, which I suppose

Will make them both more pleasant.

Stories are here of girls and boys,

Of all their tasks, and all their toys,

Their sorrows and their pleasures;

Stories of cuckoos, dogs, and bees,

Of fragrant flowers and beauteous trees,

In short, a hoard of treasures.

When you have spelled the volume through,

One tale will yet remain for you, --

(I hope you’ll read it clearly;)

’Tis of a godmamma, who proves

By such slight token, that she loves

Her godchild very dearly.

(Praed 1.439)

I hope little Freddy liked the book, because I doubt that, at the age of four, he could like the poem very much. That’s because the poem while nominally addressing him was manifestly written for the godmother. Her withheld identity (“-----”) is the uniquely, and gratuitously, abiding mystery within the prolix title; and the stanzas mystify her further by a certain sleight-of-pronoun. For the first-person donor in lines 3 and 5 (“my Christmas present,” “I suppose”) turns without notice into the third-person benefactress whom the last three lines indirectly praise. By that point we understand that she has been the implied audience throughout.

This we know because, even supposing a precocious boy who can decipher cursive script, the poem for all its feigned condescension keeps talking over his head at somebody older. We may assume Freddy likes a good picture and a nice story; but the difference between “verse and prose” (line 4) can’t mean much to him, “beauteous” he may guess but will hardly find boy-friendly, and to regard his own godmamma’s love as a “tale” he must “read” seems downright Pumblechookian. In truth Praed, who was quite clever enough to estimate another reader’s experience in his *Keepsake* verses, has not on this occasion troubled to imagine what it might be like for Freddy to read much of anything. Granted a remote general awareness that children care for “cuckoos, dogs, and bees,” the challenges and rewards of construal that might bring these creatures to life out of a book count here for nothing. If anything, reading emerges from Praed’s “Verses” as a chore. The charge to “spell the volume through” looks like toil not play, and the alliteration of “toys” with “tasks” sounds like a deterrent for any boy who has yet to internalize the adult work ethic of his culture. Pretty pictures may sweeten the deal and make the labor “more pleasant,” but that’s only because in itself the act of reading verse and prose is no fun. Neither, we may fear, is loving your godmother, especially one who switches identities as she does in the final stanza after an ambiguous parenthetized “I” has intercepted the message and commandeered the address. To “read it clearly” is just what line 15 seems designed to render impossible: we who gather that its “I” is the inscribing poet are conscripted into a knowing wink among grownups to whom the niceties of polite compliment are child’s play.

The proper home for writing like this was never the manuscript leaf, always the printed page of a book quite different from the one it refers to. It found its place there only posthumously, since Praed died young in 1839 (after a brilliant poetic start at Eton and Cambridge and early rhetorical successes in Parliament); his miscellaneous verses, often occasional in kind and published in periodicals, were collected in book form within five years of his decease, and at intervals thereafter. The ratio of manuscript to print is inverted in our last exhibit, a much more appealing poem about the childhood reading and adult oversight of verse that Christina Rossetti wrote “To Lalla, Reading My Verses Topsy-Turvy”:

Darling little Cousin,

With your thoughtful look

Reading topsy-turvy

From a printed book

English hieroglyphics,

More mysterious

To you, than Egyptian

Ones would be to us; --

Leave off for a minute

Studying, and say

What is the impression

That those marks convey?

(Rossetti 1979, 1.170; lines 1-12)

Rossetti was still a teenager, half a child herself, in 1849 when she wrote the poem these stanzas begin, and the “printed book” of hers indicated in the title must be the *Verses: Dedicated to Her Mother* that had been privately published by her maternal grandfather two years previously. Like Praed’s patronizing “Verses,” these make their appointed rounds within the family circle and, while ostensibly addressed to a child, quickly show by their diction and syntax that they are meant for adult eyes: family members, surely, but crucially the grownup whom the poet keenly regards herself as becoming (Karlin 1997, xlii).

Lalla approaches her elder cousin’s *Verses* as containing verse in the most radically material sense. They are engrossing if unmeaning “marks” on a page, “More mysterious” than “hieroglyphics” from ancient Egypt, yet still mysterious in much the same way as hieroglyphics: their lineated order betokens, we might say, a literate-symbolic order that Lalla is in the first stage of entering. At that stage it hardly matters that she is perusing them “topsy-turvy,” upside-down. Horizontal parallels, stanzaic groups and the spaces between, the strong vertical rule enforced on the right side of each page as she beholds it, all attract her “thoughtful look”; indeed, she is probably “Reading” and “Studying” these verse visibilia more attentively than we do who, reading right-side-up and left-to-right, get distracted by verbal interpretation. Lalla is likewise apter than we to note and trace the “impression” left by inked type pressed into paper, and in that way to come closer to the book’s embodied three-dimensionality. “Impression” is the poet’s pun, not Lalla’s, of course, and on its hinge the poem swings into its reflective second part:

Only solemn silence,

And a wondering smile:

But your eyes are lifted

Unto mine the while.

In their gaze so steady

I can surely trace

That a happy spirit

Lighteth up your face.

Tender, happy spirit,

Innocent and pure;

Teaching more than science,

And than learning more.

(13-24)

We can only wonder what Lalla is “wondering” at, the text she has been called away from or the interpellating presence of its fond author – a choice of wonders that incidentally recapitulates the dialectic of book and body that animated those *Keepsake* lines by Praed. At all events, it becomes Rossetti’s turn here to play the reader and “trace” the meaning of the “gaze so steady,” the just interrupted yet already again quite absorbed “pure” regard, with which her little cousin looks back at her. What Rossetti beholds there may be more than she can say with scientific precision, but then she doesn’t need to say it that way. “There is ‘light verse’ which is better,” as Daniel Karlin points out, than verse that’s merely comic: better, “and more distinctive, and whose effect is not to make you laugh but to make you see” (Karlin lxii).

Where childhood’s “happy spirit” giveth life, and the wisdom of innocence holds firm in Lalla’s gaze, there need be little worry about the killjoy liabilities of literacy. At least not yet. Struck dumb meanwhile by a vision, which is also a not so distant memory, of that primal state of mere unlettered being beside which all written poetry is reduced to verse, Rossetti remands Lalla unalarmed to the keeping of her book – “your book” and not my book, even though I did write it – to “Read on,” secure for the time being on the looking-glass side of that knowledge which the poet can answer for only by the writing of so charming a poem.

How should I give answer

To that asking look?

Darling little Cousin

Go back to your book.

Read on: if you knew it,

You have cause to boast: --

You are much the wisest,

Though I know the most.

(25-32)

So concludes a poem that Rossetti knew enough, at this early point and throughout a productive literary career, not to publish. She kept a more intimate faith with the wisdom of these verses by retaining them in manuscript alone.

*Concluding Dyslexic Postscript.* If you read the phrase “topsy-turvy” upside down or backwards, with a weather eye for anagrammatic shuffle and an ear open to phonemic lateral motion, you can make out of it both “poetry” and “verse.” Such reversals and inversions take to an extreme the inside-outings of verse that we have considered here, and they crop up in poems more often than by statistical right or stochastic hap they ought to. They are nearly business as usual in *In Memoriam* whenever Tennyson turns to meditate upon the state and prospects of the verses he is writing. It seems proper to take our examples in topsy-turvy order, back to front. “What hope is here for modern rhyme / To him, who turns a musing eye / On songs. . . ?” (Tennyson 53; lines 77.1-3). Nowhere in the entire elegy does Tennyson insist harder on verse’s material substrate, the paper pages that “May bind a book, may line a box, / May serve to curl a maiden’s locks” (6-7); so the reader’s “musing eye,” alerted perhaps by the pun in “turns,” has reason to find the missing term *verse* curled up inside its anagram “serve”: an oddly mutated, and muted, device for “modern rhyme” to conjure with.

Just two lyrics earlier our key word *verse* has been exposed, again in a context of poetic self-depreciation:

I leave thy praises unexpress’d

In verse that brings myself relief,

And by the measure of my grief

I leave thy greatness to be guess’d.

(75.1-4)

Expressly airing the inadequacy of mere verse lets Tennyson imply what he can’t deliver: the full-throated greatness of a poetry that, could the poet but write it, would vindicate Hallam’s promise. Yet that apology is half retracted by “the measure of my grief,” a phrase that at once denotes verse’s scansion and asserts its proportional dignity as a metric for poetry’s loftier but unrealized ideal – an effect underscored by the way the phrase harbors *verse*, if we agree to hear as a *v* the voiced fricative in “of”and scavenge “measure” for spare parts. Claiming for such dyslexic opportunism a bit more labial license, a few stanzas later we may hail in both “breeze” and “praise” (11-12) phonemic proxies for the *verse* they are about. Tennyson thus conjures up the poetry he says he can’t write by muttering in broken spells the word he won’t quite declare.

Each of the five stanzas in lyric 20 rigs a version of this anagrammatic shell game, which comes out into the clear as “open converse” (17) only after the great pretender *verse* has been disguised in “atmosphere” (14), “freeze” (12), “service” (8) and “servants” (3), and, with least salience but utmost poignancy, “griefs” (1, 11). Tennyson’s topic remains what to say about the unspeakable; once again he engages it by means of a scrambled subliminal semaphore that encodes his medium. In the better-known apology for verse’s therapeutic machinery from lyric 5, “grief” stands in twice, and symmetrically (2, 11), for its incognito secret sharer. Earlier and obscurer still is one of the elegy’s most disturbing cruxes, where the poet imagines crushing his sadistic mistress Sorrow, “like a vice of blood, / Upon the threshold of the mind” (3.15-16). Let “vice” summon to mind its vowel-distorted homonyms *voice* and *verse*, and the well-made *In Memoriam* stanza shapes up as a horror chamber, tormenting the poet with thoughts that his art may be nothing but a painstakingly structured absurdity, “A hollow form with empty hands” (10-12).

Reversing direction to follow the usual reading sequence reveals in the above samples a pattern of gradual clarification that parallels most thematic accounts of *In Memoriam* taken whole, as it works through religious, psychological, and other issues. At the outset disorientation and occlusion prevail, leaving blind intuition to fend for itself; but eventually the verse that dared not speak its name emerges into a distinct articulation that is the stronger for its baffled and lengthy incubation in the dark. “That reverse of doom” (72.6) may be read, by a literal reversal of printed characters, to identify a mood swing that verse’s therapies are helping to bring about. Lyric 77, with which this postscript began, forecasts how posterity will “turn the page that tells / A grief, then changed to something else” (10-11). By that point in the poem, the anagrammatical reader who has spelled out the transpositions making *griefs* and *verse* each other’s metamorphs will be prepared to regard verse as a change agent of formidable versatility.

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