État présent: French Verse Analysis

Clive Scott

➡ For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/208211

ÉTAT PRÉSENT
FRENCH VERSE ANALYSIS

Clive Scott

What follows is not a comprehensive *état présent* of studies in French versi-fication; that would require an account of a completely different order of magnitude. Instead, I wish to use a briefer and selective survey of writing on French metrico-rhythmics, predominantly since 1990, to highlight some of the issues which seem most pressingly to deserve further reflection. However much analysts would wish it otherwise, metrics, or metrico-rhythmics, is not an exact science, but an unstable critical discipline, subject to ideological conflict and cultural fluctuations.

Voice and music
One noticeable feature of syllabist 'orthodoxy' is the continuing resistance to the admission of paralinguistic and experimental phonetic evidence into metrico-rhythmic assessment. Even though the 'crisis' in French verse of the latter half of the nineteenth century has as much to do with the repossession of the voice (Verlaine, Rimbaud, Corbière, Laforgue), as with repossessing music, what Tenint tried to do for the perception of French versification on the basis of Hugolian drama has fallen on stony ground. The 'Platonic' cast of much French metrism means that the voice is simply disqualified. Benoît de Cornulier (*La Théorie du vers: Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé* (Paris, Seuil, 1982)) makes these three statements in the course of his argument against the admissibility of experimental phonetic evidence: 'La personne la mieux qualifiée pour dire ses vers est naturellement [?] le poète lui-même'; 'rien ne nous garantit que le poète retrouve, en les [quelques-uns de ses propres vers] lisant, l'état d'inspiration dans lequel il les a créés, peut-être les recrée-t-il'; 'Mais que cette diction est parfaite, comment le saurait-il [notre démonstrateur] ?' (pp. 128–29). More recently, Valérie Beaudouin (*Mètres et rythmes du vers classique: Corneille et Racine* (Paris, Champion, 2002)) argues that we do not know how lines were read/declaimed at the time of their composition — but nor do we know with what metrico-rhythmic understandings they were composed either — and that there are a high number of inter- and intra-individual vocal variables ('Comment se fier, en effet, à un seul ou à un nombre limité de récitants pour construire un modèle de vers?', p. 21). These arguments are not persuasive, confusing, as they do, transcription and transdiction, orality in verse and the recitation of verse, historicism and the assimilation of verse into our own reading community. We are

interested in the vocal realization of verse not in order to establish a model of the verse-line, but to discover what features a voice identifies as rhythm-giving, as bearers of the line's expressivity and, consequently, what features should ideally be built into scansion, what variables should be taken into account if we are to understand a line's *field* of operation. But there are signs that the voice is becoming a more insistent preoccupation; new departures in thinking are particularly to be culled from *Voix et création au XXe siècle*, edited by Michel Collomb (Paris, Champion, 1997) and *La Voix dans la culture et la littérature françaises: 1713–1875*, edited by Jacques Wagner (Clermont-Ferrand, Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2001).

The other side of the coin of voice is music. For many, music may seem little more than a convenient way of ousting the voice, of justifying the elocutory disappearance of the poet, by implying that words have a music of their own and that the instrument that best plays that music is not a particular voice but the perfectly tuned International Phonetic Alphabet. Sound patterns are indeed profoundly significant, but not to be dissociated from the accentualization of the phonetic and the phoneticization of accent, nor from segmentation and juncture, nor from the forward movement of verse in all its variabilities and recurrences. The usurpation of the notion of orality by that of musicality is thus to be treated with circumspection. But views and responses can be tested against the collection of essays gathered from a colloquium held in 1999 at the Université de Bourgogne, *Le Vers et sa musique*, edited by Jean Foyard (Dijon, Centre de Recherches Le Texte et l'Édition, Université de Bourgogne, 2002). Foyard's 'Propos d'ouverture', speaking through the voice of Joseph Samsom (*Claudel poète-musicien*, 1947), asks us to equate music, rhythm and accent: 'A la numér-ation en soi nous refusons la vertu rythmique. La numération ressortit à la quantité, le rythme à la qualité'; 'la primauté de l'accent sur le chiffre est un fait avéré qui s'impose à tous les musiciens de langue française' (p. 10). The syllabic account of the line has no music; it is a matrix of musics. The syllabic account provides a string of syllables at whose limit there occurs an accent (which is also a prosodic accent) and within which is a potential play of further prosodic accents (rhythm is an aleatory by-product of metre). The evasiveness of this approach is enacted in Jean-Michel Gouvard's contribution, 'Mètre, rythme et musicalité'. Appropri-ately, Mallarmé, doyen of silent music, of the 'intellectuelle parole à son apogée', attracts two articles, one on tonality (Mireille Dereu, 'Variations tonales dans les *Poésies* de Mallarmé'), the other an exhaustive analysis of the complex musical structure of 'Apparition' (Jean-Pierre Chausserie-Laprée). Michel Murat writes on the distich, Thierry Balard on 'patrons phonématiques' in Charles Van Leberghe, Stéphane Giocanti on the 'com-posantes musicales' of Charles Maurras's *La Musique intérieure*, Arnaud Bernadet on Apollinaire's 'vers phonétique'.

Accent and syllable

Equivocations about voice and about rhythm in French verse-analysis are a necessary consequence of the view of many commentators that accent is in no way constitutive of French metre. Hesitations and anxieties about the status of accent surface in *Le Vers français: histoire, théorie, esthétique*, edited by Michel Murat (Paris, Champion, 2000), a collection of papers from a colloquium held at the Sorbonne in October 1996. Here can be found fascinating studies of Verlaine's 'rime androgyne' (Dominique Billy), Verhaeren's *coupe lyrique* (Marc Dominicy), Mallarmé's 'dynamique du vers' (Claude Zilberberg), Georges Lote (Joëlle Gardes-Tamine) and the non-coincidence of phrase and metrical segment in Racine (Robert Garrette). But for our present purposes, we should highlight Cornulier's 'La place de l'accent, ou l'accent à sa place: position, longueur, concordance' (pp. 57–91) and Michèle Aquien's 'La fronde de l'accent' (pp. 93–106). French analysts' suspicion of accent and the consequent failure to confront questions of rhythmicity are expressed in Aquien's conclusion: 'La notion d'accent est artificielle et peu opérante en métrique; mais je ne vois pas comment la poétique et la versification pourraient s'en passer sans appauvrir considérablement l'analyse' (p. 102).

There is plenty that is frustrating in this formulation and Roger Pensom has taken up the cudgels with his own generative-accentual account of French metre (*Accent and Metre in French: A Theory of the Relation between Linguistic Accent and Metrical Practice in French 1100–1900* (Bern, Peter Lang, 1998)), which echoes and develops work by Paul Verluyten ('Recherches sur la prosodie et la métrique du français', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Antwerp, 1982; 'L'analyse de l'alexandrin: mètre et rythme', in *Le Souci des apparences: neuf études de poétique et de métrique*, edited by Marc Dominicy (University of Brussels, 1989), pp. 31–74). Briefly, this analysis provides a generative model for the relation between linguistic word-accent and the principle of metrical alternation, and argues that metrical norms are directly derived from spontaneously occurring patterns of alternation in prose and speech. In Pensom's reading, intraphrasal accents, either unacknowledged or treated as aleatory and non-metrical by 'syllabists', recover a rule-governed, metrical role. Even if one disagrees with Pensom about the status of accent and its prosodic consequences — is French an accentuated or an accentuable language, does metre reflect prose and speech, is the basis of French metrico-rhythmic patterning phrasal (measure) or lexical (foot)? — one must welcome his word-over-syllable analysis and the questions it poses about the identification of metrical norms and likelihoods, as one must welcome his breaching of the barriers between the linguistic and paralinguistic — he bases his findings on reading-aloud, including intonation and pausing, and corroborates them by reference to

musical settings (Lully, Fauré). Pensom's book is comprehensively reviewed by Billy ('Accent et mètre dans le vers français: à propos d'un livre de R. Pensom', *Revue de linguistique romane*, 67 (2003), 365–403).

Periods and surveys

Pensom might also be the starting-point for those wishing to explore recent thinking in early-period metrics. His *Le Sens de la métrique chez François Villon: 'Le Testament'* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2004) shows how metrical variation revitalizes the tiredest cliché and reinvests banality with a mystery not to be plumbed. Alongside, one might profitably read Gilles Eckard's 'Observations sur les structures métriques et prosodiques de la poésie de Villon' (*Le Vers et sa musique*, pp. 65–75). Billy's edited volume *Métriques du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance* (Paris — Montreal, L'Harmattan, 1999) covers a range of topics, including Billy's own examination of the schwa in clitics, particularly in the rhyme-position: Charles Doutrelepont traces the use of 'rythme', 'nombre' and 'mètre' in Aristotle, Cicero, Victorinus and Augustine; Aldo Menichetti undertakes a comparative study of anisosyllabism on either side of the Alps; and Yves-Charles Morin reassesses Baïf's 'quantitative' hexameter.

The seventeenth century is served by Beaudouin's exhaustive *Mètres et rythmes du vers classique*. Basing her analytical methodology on the generative models of Pierre Lusson and Jacques Roubaud, Beaudouin undertakes a statistical analysis of the complete plays of Corneille and Racine (some 80,000 lines), using a custom-designed computer programme, the *métromètre*. But in its treatment of theory and its statistical comparisons with nineteenth-century verse, this book has implications that go far beyond the classical theatre.

For the eighteenth century, we could do much worse than (re)visit Georges Lote's *Histoire du vers français*, Troisième partie, *Le XVIIIe siècle*, tome IX: *Les Genres et les formes. La Versification. Du classicisme au romantisme* (Aix-en-Provence, Université de Provence, 1996), edited by Joëlle Gardes-Tamine, Aïno Niklas-Salminen and Lucien Victor. Interesting here are the explorations, in the final section, of the 'flexibilizing' effects of the *drame bourgeois* and Talma's acting on the classical modes of verse-delivery. Of the former Lote writes: 'Ajoutons encore que la mélodie du vers, assoupli comme nous venons de le dire, se charge volontiers de cris ou de soupirs, qu'elle se coupe de longs silences expressifs; surtout elle se développe et s'élargit par des intonations pathétiques qui en constituent l'un des caractères les plus marqués. En d'autres termes, l'accent détruit le syllabisme' (p. 287).

In contrast, the latter half of the nineteenth century, the site of a metrico-rhythmic sea-change, has attracted persistent attention, growing out of Cornulier's ground-breaking *Théorie du vers*, with its metricometric

analytical methodology. Appositely, Cornulier draws together his own reflections on Verlaine's decasyllable, with those of Jean-Pierre Bobillot ('Entre mètre et non-mètre: le décasyllabe chez Verlaine', *Revue Verlaine*, 1 (1993), 179–200) and William Holowacz ('Le décasyllabe dans l'œuvre de Paul Verlaine', *Cahiers du Centre d'Études métriques*, 3 (1997), 99–122) in a paper for a Cerisy colloquium ('L'invention du "décasyllabe" chez Verlaine décadent: Le 4–6, le 5–5, le mixte, et le n'importe quoi', *Verlaine à la loupe*, edited by Jean-Michel Gouvard and Steve Murphy (Paris, Champion, 2000, 243–89), a collection also containing an 'excerpt' from Jean-Louis Aroui's comprehensive investigation of Verlainian stanzas ('Les tercets verlainiens', 225–42), which makes use of Cornulier's *ponctuométrie*, a method for calculating the mean of line-terminal punctuation). More recently, Alan English, in *Verlaine: poète de l'indécidable* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005) explores Verlaine's prosodic ambiguities through the conceptual lens of Derridean 'undecidability', anti-binarism and supplementarity, showing the continuities between microstructural and macrostructural undecidability, between prosodic undecidability and Verlaine's lexical cultivation of the 'vague' and the 'imprécis'. Bobillot's explorations of Rimbaud's poetry, published in shorter pieces over some twenty years, have been gathered and re-synthesized in *Rimbaud: le meurtre d'Orphée — Crise de Verbe et chimie des vers; ou, la Commune dans le Poème* (Paris, Champion, 2004), as provocative in its thinking as it is vivid in its expression. David Evans (*Rhythm, Illusion and the Poetic Idea: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004)) argues, with incisive verse-analyses, that, as the only viable response in an age which could no longer appeal to divine absolutes as the source of poetic rhythms, 'we must relish Poetry's re-veiling, and savour the necessary problematization of poetic rhythm which helps to keep this veil in place' (p. 314). Elsewhere, Elisabeth McCombie looks to find an appropriate, and appropriately rigorous, conceptual framework, beyond metaphorical impressionism, for navigating between poetry and music, in *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text* (Oxford University Press, 2004).[1]

Cornulier's spirit of initiative, embodied also in the foundation of the Centre d'Études métriques at Nantes, has been answered by a corresponding renewal of impetus in the publication of handbooks, manuals and treatises on French verse-art: besides Cornulier's own *Art poëtique: notions et problèmes de métrique* (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1995), we might mention Aquien's *La Versification* (Paris, PUF, 1990, third edition, 1995), *La Versification appliquée aux textes* (Paris, Nathan, 1993) and *Dictionnaire de poétique* (Paris, Livre de Poche, 1993), Brigitte Buffard-Moret's *Introduction*

---

[1] The connection between French verse and musical practice in the *mélodie* is addressed in David Hunter's wide-ranging and sympathetic *Understanding French Verse: A Guide for Singers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

à la versification (Paris, Dunod, 1997) and Gouvard's *La Versification* (Paris, PUF, 1999). But this has in no sense entailed the supercession of earlier authorities: after the combative and admirably ambitious 'Verdier trilogy' (*Critique du rythme: anthropologie historique du langage*, 1982; *La Rime et la vie*, 1990; *Politique du rythme: politique du sujet*, 1995), Henri Meschonnic has joined Gérard Dessons to publish a searching *Traité du rythme: des vers et des proses* (Paris, Dunod, 1998); and the fifth edition of Henri Morier's *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique* (Paris, PUF, 1998) is every bit as indispensable, as a source not only of reference but of projective thinking, as it was forty-four years ago.

Rhyme

Alain Chevrier's most recent publication, *La Syllabe et l'écho*: *histoire de la contrainte monosyllabique* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2002) is, as its title suggests, concerned to trace, from late antiquity to Oulipo, the neglected world of monosyllabic writing, and the associated phenomena of anadiplosis (or adjacent repetition), as found in 'rime annexée', 'rime couronnée' and the 'vers-écho'. Chevrier also pursues echo-phenomena in their wider formal and thematic aspects. This book is as much embryonic anthology as exhaustive inventory, just as was his earlier *Le Sexe des rimes* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1996), a comprehensive history of the uses and abuses of rhyme-gender. This venture, too, is invaluable as a source-book and reminder of texts and poets who have slipped below the critical horizon; but like its successor, it frustratingly avoids interpretative conclusions. Cécile Vernier-Danehy's rather starkly structured study of rhyme in Racine (*Racine à rebours: une lecture de la rime* (New York, Peter Lang, 2003)) does not lack in ambition: it takes the totality of Racine's dramatic output and traces, within each play, the dramatic activity of certain rhyme-pairs (more often than not involving proper names) showing what part these rhyme-pairs play in the play's structure, its action, the representation of its characters, its conceptual framework, and what it is able to achieve as an intra-textual and intertextual resource. Particularly illuminating is the substantial chapter (7) on internal rhyme, a feature of Racine's verse-art which has hitherto received little attention. The volume which perhaps gives the most 'rounded' picture of current preoccupations about rhyme is *Poétique de la rime*, edited by Michel Murat and Jacqueline Dangel (Paris, Champion, 2005), with articles on Graeco-Roman rhyming (Mihai Nasta, Dangel, Bruno Bureau), on 'Rime et contre-rime en tradition orale et littéraire' (Cornulier), on the richness of rhymes in classical French verse (Aroui), on the 'rime normande' (Morin), on rhyme in Hugo (Jean-Marc Hovasse, Buffard-Moret), and on assonance in Verlaine (Billy). Statistical studies thrive, whether comparative or single-poet, as do studies of rhyme's constitutive elements. But we are still some

way from grasping rhyme's intertextual activity, what it means as an organization of cultural knowledge, as a generator of paradigmaticity, as the measure of horizons of expectation; we are still some way, too, from understanding the operational range of the latent or phantom rhyme, the *rime in absentia* (as addressed here by Olivier Gallet). Each verse-text whispers rhymes in our ear, suppressed thought, the language of taboo, alternative texts.

Free verse

Murat's contribution to the same volume ('Le vers libre rimé') explores Symbolist free verse's differing degrees of involvement with rhyme. It may be that the question more pertinently to be asked is not what rhyme does to 'restrain' free verse, but what free verse does to change the status of rhyme, where it has no rights as a structural given. Rhyme is now as much experienced as a point of acoustic dissemination as of acoustic concentration, and that in two senses: (a) it occurs across a wider range of kinships (rhyme, repetition, assonance, consonance and other oblique relationships); (b) it competes within the poem's total acoustic network. It has now more intimately to do with the operations of the psyche and the unfoldingness of enunciation: rhyme-interval layers consciousness, traces mental fixations, processes of memory and forgetting, associative mechanisms, verbal opportunism, 'hasard objectif'. In a poetry in which conditions of production no longer overlap with processes of reception, rhyme becomes a variable, a stake, in the reciprocal process of improvisation.

Syllabism depends on the uncontestedness of its numbers; within a context of alexandrines, a hendecasyllable is a *vers faux*, not an approximate alexandrine. Confronted with free verse, the syllabist is likely to resort to a metrics of recuperation, to avoid the line of verse that is accidental, or hypothetical, or, put another way, to avoid verse which has no awareness of, and therefore attributes no significance to, its pedigree. In his comprehensive investigation of the metrics of Apollinaire's *Alcools* ('Le Vers d'*Alcools*', *Littératures contemporaines 2: Guillaume Apollinaire 'Alcools'* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1996, pp. 183–213)), Gouvard sets out from a convincing initial proposition: 'notre hypothèse de départ sera qu'Apollinaire a effectué, dans les textes en vers libres, un travail à partir de cette forme canonique [alexandrine], qui ne consistait plus simplement à ménager des mètres de substitution, mais à inventer, à "deriver", au sens morphologique du terme, un nouveau type de métrique' (p. 197). But it is easy to backslide towards metrical solutions (e.g. *césure épique*), so that the *e* becomes either supernumerary, or suppressed, or metrically present, depending on the price to be paid for the retrieval of familiar verse-lines.

What we need for free verse,[2] perhaps, is a 'metric' of vacillation, a 'metric' in which verse phenomena are of changing and changeable status, which assumes syllabic indeterminateness and accentual variability (not only whether an accentuable syllable is promoted to accentuation, but also its changing quality and degree). By syllabic indeterminateness I mean two related things: (a) whether a syllable is counted/pronounced; (b) the sense that any syllabic number relates by potential rhythmic metamorphosis, to other, adjacent syllabic numbers. Immediately the rules of production no longer overlap with the rules of reception, then the making of the verse (aurally, orally) involves reciprocal acts of improvisation on the part of the poet and reader, acts which do not coincide; the alexandrine's 12 consorts with 11 and 13, and even with 10 and 14 perhaps. And immediately *coupe* supersedes caesura and margins multiply, the rhythmic supersedes the metrical and the 'hierarchy' of accent disappears. This is a 'metric' which is generated by the tensions between the voice and the eye, between the linear and the tabular, between the peculiar dynamism of an individual consciousness and the suspended state of a reader experimenting in polymorphousness.

Conclusions

If we are left with certain desires for the future of research and publishing in French verse, they are these: a series of critical editions of historical treatises on French versification, particularly those dating from 1800; more work on the metrico-rhythmic nature of free verse; progress in the exploration of the rhythmicity of avant-garde and experimental poetries (*lettrisme*, concrete poetry, *poésie sonore*); more work on comparative versification using translation as its source; more work on the alternative prosodies of translation (rhymelessness, the fourteen-syllable alexandrine, the sixteen-line sonnet, the hendecasyllables of Bonnefoy's Shakespeare, the polymorphous alexandrines of Pierre Leyris).

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

---

[2] My own attempts to get to grips with free verse are to be found in *Vers Libre: The Emergence of Free Verse in France 1886–1914* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), *Reading the Rhythm: The Poetics of French Free Verse 1910–1930* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993) and *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 252–80.