Critical Rhythm

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Body, Throng, Race
In American poetics, lyric and rhythm share a history—and since this is America, it is a racialized history. When Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren wrote in 1938 (in the first edition of *Understanding Poetry*) that “the systematic ordering of rhythm we call verse,” their simplified abstract “we” stood in for many different thinkers about poetry over several previous decades—and, as history would have it, this consensus has remained more or less in place through the present decade. In this enduring formulation, $\text{rhythm} = \text{verse} = \text{poetry} = \text{lyric}$. The readers who have abided by this equation have all tended to think that in view of the many disagreements over what poetry is or was or should become, the one thing on which everyone can agree is that rhythm is what poetry’s got—and if there is another point of consensus, it is that most poetry has become essentially or de facto lyric poetry. On one hand, in the first decades of the twentieth century, this agreement was the symptom of the erosion of other forms of prosodic debate, since with the rise of the New Poetry and free verse, the abstraction of rhythm became an ordering principle more capacious than meter; it was also the symptom of the abstraction of particular verse genres (ballads, elegies, songs, psalms, epistles, odes, etc.) into a large idea of poetry as lyric. On the other hand, this agreement actually emerged from a theory of poetry, of rhythm, and of lyric with which most modern thinkers about poetry would be embarrassed to find that they continue to agree.

Before we get to some of the sources of that potential historical embarrassment, let’s go back to our apparent equivalence ($\text{rhythm} = \text{verse} = \text{poetry} = \text{lyric}$) and examine it one part at a time. The word “systematic”
is worth pausing over in Brooks and Warren’s common sense statement. Someone or something needs to organize rhythm so that it can become verse, and so that verse can then become lyricized poetry. Yet as Niklas Luhmann would write, a “system operates on its own terms.” In modernity, a system is by definition self-organizing; thus if the twentieth-and-twenty-first-century idea of verse as a rhythm system does not attribute that organization to an actor, or even to a network—that is, to a poet or to a genre or to a mode—then what accounts for such systematic self-fashioning? For much of the nineteenth century, such questions might have been referred to an organic, or natural principle of creation and limitation, but in the twentieth century, that organic logic shifted to social relations, to human systems. As an organizing and defining principle of poetry as such, rhythm became a cultural rather than a natural system—and, not incidentally, this transition took place just as “the culture concept” (which is to say, the modern discipline of anthropology) took hold, in the first decades of the twentieth century.3

Consider the example of Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction (1995), a book that at the end of the twentieth century made prosody accessible in the way that Understanding Poetry had made the reading of individual poems a matter of general educational practice earlier in the century. In his introduction to this Introduction, Derek Attridge wrote that “to understand and enjoy poetry means responding to, and participating in, its rhythm—not as one of a number of features that make up the poetic experience, but as the heart of that experience.”4 Attridge’s metaphor suggests that rhythm is organic in origin, but when he defines rhythm as “a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived; a series of alternations of build-up and release, movement and counter-movement, tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections,” his description moves from an evocation of natural heartbeats or hot sex to an invocation of cultural patterning, complication, inflection, variation, and locality.5 Indeed, for two hundred and sixty-six pages, Attridge will go on to graph the elaborate phrasing, measuring, marking, stressing, x-ing, \-ing, and /-ing of poetic rhythm. Such elaboration makes it clear that once made “poetic,” rhythm must be a cultural rather than a natural principle, must be learned and notated rather than felt and danced. The imaginary intimacy between natural rhythm and cultural regulation on which this influential view of poetic rhythm depends speaks volumes about the kinds of social relations or human systems we continue to conjure in the idea of “poetic rhythm.” This much is clear, yet the history of that imaginary intimacy, of those imagined social relations, has remained
invisible. There may be good reasons why we have not wanted to know too much about that backstory.

Although Attridge’s book was published in the U.K., it is widely taught in the U.S. as the modern model of English prosody. As Attridge and many others have pointed out, there is a history of precedents for a pedagogy so many have come to take for granted, but one precedent that is never invoked in such accounts is the work (between the 1880s and 1910s) of a once prominent though now relatively obscure American theorist of proto-modern poetics, Francis Barton Gummere. There is ample evidence of Gummere’s influence in early twentieth-century poetics, especially in academic circles, but the reason that it is worth returning to Gummere’s work is not merely its historical interest but its symptomatic and, as it turned out, field-defining emphasis on rhythm as the socializing principle of poetry. By “socializing,” I mean the idea that poetic rhythm not only emerges from social origins but that poetic rhythm enables social “participation” (to use Attridge’s word). At the intersection of German Volksgeist philology with the emerging disciplines of ethnography and psychology, an intersection that was instrumental in forming the new discipline of English literary study, Gummere’s work occupied a transition zone between theories of poetic rhythm as natural and theories of poetic rhythm as a cultural system. “Poetry, like music, is social,” according to Gummere; “like its main factor, rhythm, it is the outcome of communal consent, a faculté d’ensemble; and this should be writ large over every treatise on poetry.” As Max Cavitch has suggested, Gummere’s turn-of-the-century declaration that rhythm is “the essential fact of poetry” capped off a long history of associations of rhythm with fantasies of racial identification, but Gummere marks a difference in that history when he makes the socializing influence of rhythm the explicit principle of modern poetics. The French phrase serves to index the enlightened sociality of Gummere’s theory, as does the key word “consent,” to which we will return. Gummere is important because he emphasized the inherited idea that rhythm is at the heart of poetic experience, but also because his insistence on the ideally community-forming agency of poetic rhythm has become a secret hidden in plain sight in modern accounts of what poetic rhythm is or should be.

Michael Golston has noted that “competing notions of rhythm have been the flash points for many of the controversies involving poetry in the twentieth century,” and he has pointed to the background of those controversies in what he calls the racialized science of “Rhythmics” in the early twentieth century. Gummere was the predecessor of the developments
that Golston traces, of Harriet Monroe's declaration that rhythm is "an unalterable law" as well as of Pound's 1912 credo of "absolute rhythm." But Gummere's account is instructive not so much because a direct genealogy descends from it, but because he modeled a conflict or confusion that has come to define modern poetics after it. To put simply the contradiction I will explore in the pages that follow: if rhythm is thought to be the defining principle of verse, and if (as we shall see in Gummere's theory) that defining principle is traced back to a social, ideally communal rather than natural origin of poetry we have lost in modernity, and if by recovering rhythm we might recover some of the socializing, communal force of those origins (as Gummere put it, "in order to draw the mind of the reader from the warped and baffling habit which looks upon all poetry as solitary performance"), then does poetic rhythm become a racially reinforcing inheritance or an agent of social progress? Since "culture" in the decades in which Gummere wrote was in the process of detaching itself from racial genealogies, what does the challenge of imagining poetic rhythm as racial in origin and post-racial in effect mean for thinking about modern American poetics? As Erin Kappeler has eloquently written about Gummere's influence on the first decades of the twentieth century and the rise of "the New Poetry" associated with Monroe and Poetry Magazine, "the idea of the New Poetry emerged at a time when the concept of multiculturalism as we understand it had not yet crystallized, meaning that a celebration of poetic diversity could as easily be used to champion racialist logic and American exceptionalism as to promote cross-cultural understanding." Curiously, Gummere addressed this emerging uncertainty by suggesting that the eventuation of all poetry into the modern lyric individualizes and abstracts rhythm's communal racial origins, yet of course that individualization and abstraction does not solve the problem (indeed, as the language above indicates, Gummere often worried that it just makes the modern predicament that much worse, and as Kappeler suggests, it actually did). It is my argument here that some version of Gummere's double bind may continue to shape current definitions of the modern lyric and of poetic rhythm more than we would like to think. As recently as 2015, Jonathan Culler suggested that "rhythm gives lyric a somatic quality that novels and other extended forms lack—the experience of rhythm linking it to the body and, perhaps to the rhythms of various natural processes." By returning to Gummere's now historically obscure logic, we might begin to trace the overdetermined origins of such versions of lyric rhythm as natural culture and to imagine an alternative history of American poetics, a history of the poetics of rhythm not modeled on naturalized (and thus racialized) concepts of culture or on English prosody or on common
sense, an alternative that acknowledges the contradictions of any notion of a shared Anglo-American rhythm or shared Anglo-American poetry, a history in which the idea of rhythm remains central, but central as symptom rather than central as solution.

In 1905, Gummere became the fifteenth president of the MLA, an organization he helped to build. He spent his teaching career at Haverford College, though Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Chicago all tried to hire him several times; he wrote that he felt that teaching at a small college left more time for his research career (and he was committed to the values of Quaker education). This is to say that Gummere was a specialist’s specialist, an academic’s academic, and the special province of his work (like that of his mentor Francis Child in the first Department of English at Harvard, and of his mentor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in the first department of Modern Languages at Harvard) was the poetry of the people, or poetry before it became the province of the academic specialization in poetics that Gummere (on the shoulders of Longfellow and Child) helped to create. According to Gummere’s turn-into-the-twentieth-century poetics—particularly in his fourth book, *The Beginnings of Poetry,* published literally at the turn into the twentieth century, in 1901—what modern poetry has lost is a communal function. Whereas poetry once sprang from “the improvisation of verses in a singing and dancing throng,” as Gummere wrote (and wrote often, as “throng” became his key word for the imaginary social experience organized by rhythm) in modernity “a solitary habit of thinking has made itself master of poetry, particularly of the lyric . . . Poetry [has passed] to a personal note of thought so acutely individual that it has to disguise itself, wear masks, and prate about being objective.” In Gummere’s account, by the beginning of the twentieth century, not only had poetry become a decadently solitary enterprise, but it had become so “acutely individual” that in order to address a public it resorted to disguising its actual social situation. If in that idea you hear echoes of Adorno’s “Lyric and Society” *avant la lettre,* that is no accident, since like Adorno’s Marxism, Gummere’s theory of intellectual and social history was Hegelian (though his poetics owed much to Herder). Like Longfellow and Child before him at Harvard, Gummere studied literary history in Germany (he received his Ph.D. in Philology at the University of Freiburg in 1881), where he adopted a dialectical understanding of the progress of history “as a steady advance . . . At each fresh occasion at which the individual isolates himself from society, he takes with him the accumulated force that society, by its main function, has stored up from traditions of the past.” This is to say that for Gummere—as for
Adorno—the radically isolated individual subject of the modern lyric carries within himself the traces of that “dancing throng,” the traces of a language of men between whom the barriers had fallen (or between whom the barriers had not yet been built). For Gummere as for Adorno, the alienated modern subject of lyric may be redeemed from his isolation through the very medium of his isolation. But whereas for Adorno, that utopian horizon can be discerned in the alienated, objective language of the modern poem, according to Gummere, even in the modern isolated lyric, pre-lyricized, shared popular song may still be felt in the poem’s rhythm. Modern poetry may have been reduced to lyric, but this lyric remnant carries traces of a lost communal past, and if we attend to that rhythmic trace we will be able to imagine a way out of decadent modern liberal individualism, may be able to glimpse in poetry, of all places, a world in which things could be different.

In 1987 Gerald Graff suggested that by the 1880s, the romantic theories of cultural origins associated with Herder and the Brothers Grimm had become “embarrassing” to the new Departments of English that had just been founded on them. When discussing the history of “the Culture Wars” in 1991, Geoffrey Hartman referred to Gummere as the representative of “an older philological tradition that recognized the theories of folk or communal origin” behind Propp’s analysis of the folktales, which Hartman described as “the crucial scholarly event between Grimm and Guattari.” This sort of double refusal and acknowledgement at the end of the twentieth century of the continuing influence of the ideas that formed the study of poetics at the end of the nineteenth century certainly owes much to the catastrophic consequences of some of those ideas in the first half of the twentieth century. How could those consequences not produce aversion and ambivalence? It is no wonder that such ideas seem more attractive to contemporary literary theorists in Adorno’s Marxist version than in Gummere’s *Volksgeist* version. Yet the utopian strains of Gummere’s theory of not only the communal origins but the communal horizon of poetic rhythm may be more central to our inherited critical assumptions than we have wanted to acknowledge. As Steve Newman has argued, “individualist definitions of lyric and individualist antidemocratic politics go hand in hand” for Gummere, but it does not follow that in this view the modern lyric forfeits the socializing agency of rhythm, the potential to restore communal life. Rather, for Gummere, the lyric remains “flexible and progressive still, welcoming the new individual idea while it retains the old sympathy, the old cadence, form and phrases.” Can the old sympathy give rise to a new sympathy, can the old cadence become a
modern beat? That is the question that hangs fire for Gummere, and for American poetics ever after him.

Gummere’s description of how and why the spectral survival of popular song may be felt in the break, may be imagined where it can no longer be read or heard is worth reading in detail, since it makes visible some preconditions for later apparently commonsensical assumptions about the equivalence of rhythm and verse, and of modern verse and lyric:

The modern artist in poetry triumphs mainly by the music of his verse and by the imaginative power which is realized in his language, often merely by the suggestion of his language; for poetry, as Saint-Beuve prettily remarked, lies not in telling the story but in making one dream it. For present purposes, then, it will be enough to look at the formal quality of rhythm and the more creative quality of imagination . . . one must see in rhythm, or regularity of recurrence due to the consenting cadence of a throng, the main representative of communal forces . . . Because the critics take rhythm and verbal repetition largely for granted in the work of any great poet, and look rather to his excellent differences in thought and variation of style, one must not ignore the immense significance of those communal forces in the poetry of art. It is not the mere rhythm, grateful, exquisite, and powerful as that may be, but it is what lies behind the rhythm, that gives it such a place in poetry; it appeals through the measures to the cadent feet, and so through the cadent feet to that consent of sympathy which is perhaps the noblest thing in all human life.20

In the break, “through the measures,” rhythm emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century as what poetry’s got, but also as what modern poetry is in danger of losing.21 According to Gummere, the modern poet and modern critics value everything in poetry (music, imaginative power, differences in thought, variation of style) except rhythm and verbal repetition. These verse basics are taken “largely for granted in the work of any great poet,” and in a way, that makes sense, since “it is not the mere rhythm” that defines poetry as such. No, “it is what lies behind the rhythm, that gives it such a place in poetry.” In order to understand rhythm as the defining principle of poetry in Gummere’s terms, it is necessary to enter into Gummere’s philology of rhythm: Gummere does not, like Attridge, propose an overview of how poetic rhythm works on the page, but proposes something stranger, a genealogy of poetry before the page. Rhythm “appeals through the measures to the cadent feet,” according to Gummere, in another odd turn of phrase that grants poetic rhythm the agency
of address, the ability to interpellate us into a system of cultural origins. In that culture system, “the cadent feet” are both the metrical arrangements of modern poems and the dancing feet of the primitive “throng,” residual in modern meters. Yet in these terms, poetry’s appeal is not just primitive and somatic, but a “consent of sympathy” that civilizes, that has the agency to transform primitive, affective somatic response into “the noblest thing in all human life.” That is quite a lot for poetic rhythm to do, since in it Gummere invests not only the redemption of the otherwise isolated modern lyric but the revision of modern social relations. “Conditions of production as well as of record” may have changed, Gummere writes, “the solitary poet has taken the place of the choral throng, and solitary readers represent the listening group; but the fact of poetry itself reaches below all these mutations, and is founded on human sympathy as on a rock. More than this. It is clear from the study of poetic beginnings that poetry in its larger sense is not a natural impulse of man simply as man. His rhythmic and kindred instincts, latent in the solitary state, found free play only under communal conditions, and as powerful factors in the making of society.” Poetic rhythm may lead to an origin story, yet for Gummere (as for Schiller, and a long line of romantic thinking about poetics) that story is not only an account of individual affective response but of “rhythmic and kindred instincts,” a sympathy of kin and kind that made culture in the first place and could make it anew.

But what culture, what kind, and what kin? The word that Gummere uses to name the communal forces he wants to invoke as origin as well as utopian horizon of poetic rhythm yields some curious answers to that question. According to the OED, the word “throng” derives from Middle English þrang, þrong, probably shortened from Old English geþrang throng, crowd, tumult, derivative from verbal ablaut series pring-, prang-, prung-: see THRING v.: compare Middle Dutch dranc(g-), Dutch drang, Middle High German dranc (earlier gedranc), German drang throng, pressure, crowd; Old Norse þrong (feminine), throng, crowd. Throng noun, verb, and adjective appear about the 13–14th cent., the adjective being the latest.

This etymology would have been important to Gummere, not only because the OED itself was the product of the mid-nineteenth-century comparative philology that formed his own training, but because Gummere was a scholar of Anglo-Saxon and Old English verse (his translation of Beowulf was a best-seller); Gummere’s dissertation and first published book was The Anglo-Saxon Metaphor (1881), in which he wrote that “the passionate nature of the Germanic race is thoroughly opposed to the use
and development of the simile. The lack of the latter in Anglo-Saxon is entirely natural, and explains itself.

In his third book, *Germanic Origins: A Study in Primitive Culture* (1892), Gummere claimed that “the Germanic race is the source of English life, and that the Germanic invaders of Britain may be fairly styled founders of England.” Thus “throng,” the word that appears hundreds of times in *The Beginnings of Poetry*, condenses in its etymology the racial inheritance embedded in this view of the English language itself. The implicit violence of that view in the context of America in 1901 almost registers in Gummere’s prose. “What lies behind the rhythm” are the echoes of the “cadent feet” of white people, but does this racial origin story mean that the “consent of sympathy which is perhaps the noblest thing in all human life” is restricted to white people, or that only those descended from the Germanic/English throng can groove to the primitive rhythms that survive in modern poetry? While in 1885 Gummere suggested to the new Modern Language Association that Anglo-Saxon meters be taught in elementary education in order to “train up a race or scholars” informed by their own racial heritage (“What Place,” 171), by 1911, when he wrote *Democracy and Poetry*, Gummere wanted to shift his earlier focus on racial communal origins to the future consensual effects of poetic rhythm. In Gummere’s theory of rhythm as the basis for all poetry, we can see the transition from race to culture in action. Like Adorno, Gummere wanted to believe in the progressive historical potential for the modern lyric, but unlike Adorno, Gummere did not claim that potential on the basis of a negative dialectic. If Gummere’s fantasy of the dancing throng stood for an imaginary natural cultural rhythm, his hope that poetic rhythm could produce “a consent of sympathy” in modernity proved more difficult to articulate. Perhaps this difficulty arose because a community based on “consent,” or elective affinity, could no longer be imagined in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Or perhaps the issue for Gummere was that such a shared public rhythm could exist only in imagination—only as an idea. In this sense, the social agency of poetry in a pre-modern communal past becomes an idea of what poetry might be in a future that has not yet come to pass. It is this transformation of poetry from genre to idea, from a set of social practices to a utopian horizon of social promise that would prove central to modern American poetics. Not incidentally, Gummere locates the trace of this shift in the simultaneously pragmatic and imaginary phenomenon of poetic rhythm, and he locates that rhythm in a poetry that has devolved into the lyric.

This is to say that while on the one hand Gummere’s attempt to make the lyric the repository of a virtual community set the stage for the twentieth-century versions of lyric reading that would come after him,
the part of Gummere’s view later poetics would not share may be even more instructive. By 1957 John Stuart Mill’s 1833 definition of poetry—“feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude” —had become so normative that Northrop Frye could define the lyric simply as “preeminently the utterance that is overheard” without allusion to Mill. Gummere, however, vehemently rejected Mill’s version of the modern lyric. “Something overheard?” Gummere asks,

I mean, [Mill] explains, that “all poetry is in the nature of soliloquy,” is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation. Now this is sheer nonsense, although more than one critic has hailed it as an oracle; of that which comes down to us as poetry, a good part is anything but soliloquy or the fruit of solitude. “Read Homer,” cried out Herder, perhaps at the other extreme, but certainly with better reason than Mill, “as if he were singing in the streets!” . . . Poetry is a social fact.

If the modern lyric is to address a public, is to be “a social fact” and not “in the nature of soliloquy,” how might this be possible, short of returning to Greek choral epic or to Herder’s “other extreme”? In 1911, in Democracy and Poetry, many decades before Benedict Anderson made the phrase famous, Gummere wrote that “only the individual poet, going back to the imagined community for his strength and his hope of a better issue, leaning on the communal sympathy and taking the communal rhythm, undertakes to justify the ways of God to man, eschewing, however, that poetical justice, as one calls it, which is born of the democratic hope that the community will at last attain the perfection of justice and social order.”

The difficulty of theorizing a basis for “the communal sympathy” that may or may not survive in modern poetics is palpable in this prose. “The individual poet,” or the lyric descendent of “the choral throng,” can no longer rely on the “communal conditions” that once produced poetry, so the modern lyric poet must produce “the imagined community” as a placeholder for the community that is no longer there. Is that placeholder pure fiction? How such a fantasy allows the poet to lean “on the communal sympathy,” much less to “take” “the communal rhythm” is at best unclear, since those lost worlds can presumably only be invoked in “hope of a better issue,” a better and differently communal future.

If the community on which modern lyric rhythm depends is an optimistic imaginary, is Gummere’s derivation then pure fantasy? If so, does the modern lyric poet draw upon this fantastic rhythm in order to conjure a social life of poetry, or does the lyric poet produce a vision of communal poetics in order to conjure an imaginary rhythm? As the fabrication of an ethnographic logic of poetic rhythm gives way to a hist-
tory of the present, Gummere’s account of poetic rhythm wavers. At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Gummere can forecast that shared rhythmic “poetic experience” only proleptically, as something lost that might yet again come to pass. The allusion to Milton seems bizarre in this context, as if only faith could bring about the revolutionary political conditions that would make poetry matter. Gummere is quick to distinguish that order of emphasis from a banal form of poetic justice, from a version of poetics in which “the perfection of justice and social order” would be available only in poetry. The conversion that proves hard for Gummere to think through is the transformation of his earlier version of a racially coherent experience of poetic rhythm into a community of “rhythmic and kindred instincts” no longer based on race. In this “imagined community,” elective consent rather than racial genealogy will or would or could make rhythm the basis of an experience that will or would or could be “poetic” in the sense that it is of poetry but also in the sense that poetry would make it possible. Whereas for Benedict Anderson, a nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” in Gummere’s precedent use of the concept (which Anderson, as an anthropologist drawing on many of the ethnographic concepts that influenced Gummere may well have known), readers of modern poetry share an imagined community only insofar as they are able to forget that this “image of their communion” is based on social relations they do not actually share.

Thus for Gummere as for a long tradition of American poetics after him, the virtual community lyric rhythm offers the modern reader is full of pathos and disappointment. According to Gummere, Whitman’s lyric failure is a case in point: “No great poet ever put his naked Me into verse . . . The ‘I’ of every lyric poet is conventional, however sincere the utterance, however direct the confession.” By refusing all convention, Gummere writes, “Whitman deliberately refuses to keep step: and all the great poets do keep step, mainly in a very simple kind of march. They lead; but they lead in the consent of a consenting, coherent band. If Whitman’s verse can be proved to be artistic, regular, governed by any definite law, then this objection breaks down. But proof of such artistic restraint, such definite law, in Whitman’s verse I have not yet seen. He cannot be the poet of democracy in its highest ideal who rejects the democratic idea of submission to the highest social order, to the spirit of the laws, to that imagined community.”
One part of this view is the familiar complaint that, as a British reviewer had put it in 1856, “Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art, as a hog with mathematics,” but Gummere was writing in 1911, two decades after Whitman’s death and long after his transformation into the Good Grey Poet. Although “free verse” would not be coined as such until 1915, Whitman’s verse was no longer so startlingly unconventional as it had seemed half a century earlier. Indeed, one might think that Whitman, the laureate of social relations based on queer elective affinities, would represent the perfect alternative to Mill’s version of poetry as “the fruit of solitude.” Certainly if any American poet ever wrote “as if he were singing in the streets,” it was Whitman. But Whitman’s verse “refuses to keep step” with what Gummere calls “the consent of a consenting, coherent band,” a refusal that turns out to be a refusal of a common rhythm. To recall the equation with which we began, if Gummere’s work is one forgotten chapter in the story of how rhythm came to = verse, which came to = poetry, which came to = lyric, then the problem with Whitman’s verse in this view was that it did not find the conventions that could make lyric rhythm a shared experience, and so could not effect this equation. And what would those conventions be, if they could be found? As we have seen, the logic of the imagined community relies on a rhythm that can only be virtual; thus Whitman’s rejection of “the democratic idea of submission to the highest social order” is just that—an idea. Gummere is not complaining that Whitman did not write in, say, pentameter lines or ballad stanzas. Gummere instead uses Whitman as an example of a modern predicament in which the “social fact” of poetry is that we no longer feel that we are part of a rhythm system, whoever “we” may be; Whitman’s failure to invoke the cadence of consent is a sign that what modern lyric readers consent to is not a shared rhythm but a shared sense that there is not a shared rhythm, that there is no “consenting, coherent band” except as “that imagined community” we have agreed to call poetry.

Except as “that imagined community” we have agreed to call poetry. Meredith Martin has shown that during the first decades of the twentieth century, English prosody began to be simplified and “rhythmitized” into what she has called “the military metrical complex,” or the creation of a distinctive “English beat” that could rally the troops marching into Europe’s Great War. Gummere’s invocation of “a very simple kind of march” as the convention with which “Whitman deliberately refuses to keep step” betrays a desire for such an American beat, but unlike his contemporary British prosodists and poets, Gummere cannot name such a rhythm. Instead, his name for what an American rhythm would not be is “Whitman,” who is not “governed by any definite law.” Although Gum-
mere's own theory of modern lyric's imagined community would make such a definite law impossible in practice, that theory also demands that the idea of a rhythmic law be the stuff of which the American rhythm will be made. Thus when in 1912, a year after *Democracy and Poetry*, Ezra Pound wrote, "I believe in an 'absolute rhythm,' a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be . . . his own," he was certainly, as Martin argues, replying to the emerging idea of "a collective, national 'metrical' identity . . . with an even more individualized idea of rhythm" in the British context, but he was also offering a solution to an impasse in American poetics. Gummere saw that solution coming and declared in advance that it wouldn't work, but Gummere's alternative to each man's "absolute rhythm" was a lyric rhythm that was a contradiction in terms, that could only work in our shared sense of its only virtual (or lyrical) possibility, as "that imagined community" we have agreed to call poetry.

As I have argued elsewhere, over the last part of the eighteenth, all of the nineteenth, and the first part of the twentieth centuries, the last three terms in our equation (verse, poetry, and lyric) converged through a gradual and uneven process I have called lyricization. Basically, the process of lyricization was a process of abstraction. While Gummere's account of the emergence of the modern lyric is a (somewhat fanciful) chronicle of the loss of communal life and the isolation of the individual, I would argue that modern ideas of poetry became lyricized because stipulative verse genres (ballads, odes, elegies, epistles, epitaphs, drinking songs, psalms, hymns, riddles, etc.) collapsed into an idealized version of poetry as lyric. Gummere was right that Mill was instrumental in this idealization, though not because Mill made poetry into "the fruit of solitude" so much as because he imagined lyric poetry as "more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other," yet sought in vain for an adequate representative of a lyric poet among his British contemporaries. I have been suggesting that Gummere shares something of Mill's (and Hegel's, and for that matter, Whitman's) idealized utopian horizon of lyric possibility, and I have been further suggesting that what Gummere adds to the nineteenth-century process of lyricization is a focus on rhythm as the agent of this generic abstraction. How and why did verse genres with particular objects of address and particular modes and economies of circulation begin to blend together to form one big idea of Poetry? And how and why did that big idea of Poetry become identified with the lyric? Because the process of lyricization took place over centuries and took many different forms in many different places, there is no one, totalizing answer to such questions. Instead, there are several different answers, and one of them
might be the abstraction of rhythm and the equation of rhythm with lyric that I have been tracing in Gummere’s poetics. For Gummere—and, as I have been suggesting, for a long line of thinkers about poetics who followed him without knowing his name—lyric became a repository of the socializing effects of rhythm at the same time that lyric indexed the loss of the communal, racial origins of that rhythm. Just as the development of the figure that came to be known as the impersonal lyric “speaker” in the early twentieth century solved the problem of particularly raced and gendered poetic identities, blending all bodies into a fictional dramatic persona, the early twentieth-century idea of a rhythm as the imaginary horizon of a virtual community deferred the problem of social “consent” between actual persons in actual political conflict. To return to the definition from *Understanding Poetry* with which we began, if we understand “the systematic ordering of rhythm” as what poetry *is*, we can stop worrying about what poetry, and what we, might have become, since the idea of rhythm, like the idea of lyric, always promises a future in which we will be different.

And who are “we”? If for Gummere in 1911 “the cadence of consent” could just barely be imagined as post-racial, the after-effect of that post-racial turn has been the abstraction of the idea of lyric rhythm into another form of whiteness, into the whiteness of the unmarked impersonal, of the disembodied, because unrealized, imagined community that we continue to associate with (of all things) lyric poetry. The problem of reclaiming that abstract, white, and impossible idea of rhythm for actual and non-white communities is at least as old as that idea itself. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a book that, like Gummere’s work, grew out of the *Volksgeist* theories he had learned at Harvard.37 In that book, Du Bois famously wrote of “the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave . . . not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.”38 The beauty of these songs is in their pathos, as Du Bois’ name for them, “the Sorrow Songs,” makes clear, but in view of the turn-into-the-twentieth-century American poetics I have been discussing here, Du Bois’ understanding of the virtual promise of the “cadences” of that pathos is especially striking:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadence of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes it is faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their
souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?39

Du Bois leaves the question hanging fire at the end of that early book, and at least part of this suspension can be traced to the lyricized theory of rhythm Du Bois shared with Gummere. The much-discussed juxtaposition of lines and stanzas of lyric poetry from the Western canon with bars of music from the Sorrow Songs that stand as epigraphs to each of the fourteen chapters of The Souls of Black Folk could be read as the assimilation of folk rhythms to predominantly white lyric rhythms or it might be read as the reiterated difference between the two. Consider just the first instance of this practice (Figure 1).40

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**THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK**

**I**

OF OUR SPIRITUAL STRIVINGS

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry,
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand.

The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.

Unresting water, there shall never be rest.
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.

Arthur Symons.

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**Figure 1.** Musical and poetic epigraph from *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1. First Edition, 1903. Poem is “The Crying of Water” by Arthur Symons. (Scan by Beinecke Library)
Not all of the verse choices in *Souls* are as lyric or as white or as odd as the opening selection from Arthur Symons, from a poem published in 1903, and only in the U.S. Curiously, this first-person “lyric” has often been read as the “voice” of Du Bois or of the “black folk,” as when Cornel West writes that “the hearts of a heartless slave trade cry out like the sea: ‘All life long crying without avail / As the water all night long is crying to me.’” Although the race and situation of the “I” are not identified or identifiable in the poem, precisely this lack of specificity allows West’s lyric reading of Symons’ decadently and artfully varied pentameters and daring triple cadences as the somatic beats of “the hearts of a heartless slave trade.” This is not a lyric reading based on rhythmic traces but on pure rhythmic fantasy; similarly, West reads the musical bar from the spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” as “inexplicable lyrical reversal:

*Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,*

*Nobody knows but Jesus*

*Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen*

*Glory hallelujah.*

Just as West (and a long history of lyric readers) make Symons’ lines the vehicle of a tenor that is not actually there, so West (and a long history of lyric readers) imagine a community singing a spiritual that is not actually on the page. All that is on Du Bois’ page are the first three bars of music, or the transcription of the tune to the first line of the song; there are no words, and we would need to read the music to sing the tune. The quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and half notes in the musical bars remain stubbornly untranslated from musical notation to poetic rhythm (probably a varied hymnal or ballad stanza of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines) in Du Bois’ text. The “lyrical reversal” that takes place in West’s reading of the lines not apparent on the page is an imagined community in which the Sorrow Song indeed promises “the ultimate justice of things.” But is that what the graphic rhythmic dissonance of Du Bois’ epigraphs promises? The conversion of an idea of a raced folk into a consenting group, the transformation of communal song into the individual lyric that proved difficult for Gummere’s distinctly white poetics became a stark contrast in Du Bois, and this dramatic disjunction has proven productive for modern black poetics. As Brent Edwards has written, “the lyric is not a timeless, universal form; it is marked by history—and its history couches a threat.” For Edwards that threat is “to the enunciation of black subjectivity,” but I have been arguing here that this threat might also be hidden in the place we would least expect to find it: in a modern theory of rhythm as what marks poetry as raced and at the same time
frees poetry from racial constraints, a theory of lyric and of rhythm that
draws on a lost communal past at the same time that it promises a com-
munal future that can exist only in poetry. To understand rhythm as “the
heart” of “the poetic experience” in America, to understand lyric as the
heart of poetry, and to understand American culture as the system that
organizes lyric rhythm, we would need to understand that not even in
poetry—especially not in poetry—will we find rhythms we all can share.

Notes
1. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Poetry (New York:
Henry Holt, 1938), 213.
2. Niklas Luhmann, Art as a Social System (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University
Press, 2000). I do not cite Luhmann here to invoke all of systems theory, but to index
a recent salient endpoint in a historical trajectory of thinking about systems as self-
organizing social phenomena. It will be clear that this essay does not share Luhmann’s
structuralist approach to analyzing that self-organization, especially when it comes to
poetics (about which Luhmann is consistently and rather eccentrically wrong).
3. See Mark Manganaro, Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept (Princeton, N.J.:
Princeton University Press, 2002) for an introduction to the history of the culture con-
cept. The original definition of the culture concept is usually attributed to E. B. Tylor,
who wrote in 1871 that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, be-
lief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as
a member of society:” Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology,
Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom (New York: Gordon Press, 1871). Tylor was one
of Gummere’s most important sources, and his definition is still posted as the current
4. Derek Attridge, Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Most (though not all) of Attridge’s examples are British rather than American,
and all but two are by white poets. Attridge tends to stress British history as the history
of the language (which is especially interesting in view of Attridge’s South African edu-
cation and scholarship). Given those emphases, it is worth wondering how and why his
examples have been taken to apply so easily to American examples.
7. Francis Barton Gummere, The Beginnings of Poetry (New York: Macmillan,
1901), 101.
teenth-Century American Poetry, ed. Kerry Larson (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2011), 103. Cavitch’s brilliant phenomenology of race and rhythm elaborates the
history this essay only begins to trace.
9. This is to say that Gummere participated in an emerging discourse on rhythm as
the simultaneous identification with and liberation from racial and cultural determina-
tion. He should be read in the company of Nietzsche, Kittredge, Lanier, Du Bois, and
many others in this period. Jack Kerkering’s The Poetics of National and Racial Identity
in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2003), begins to map this discourse, though he does not emphasize the importance of
rhythm as its central term.

11. In 1912, Ezra Pound wrote, “I believe in ‘absolute rhythm,’ a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man’s rhythm must be interpretive, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” (“Prolegomena,” in *Poetry and Drama*, ed. Harold Monroe, 1912). Harriet Monroe’s 1916 remarks are reprinted in *Poets and Their Art* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 54.


16. Ibid., 465.


31. Ibid., 125.


mitize” marks the ways in which meter was abstracted and converted into rhythm, an argument too complex to summarize here, but one that applies to the American case as well, though in different forms, as this essay hopes to show.


35. Martin, The Rise and Fall of Meter, 181.


39. Ibid., 262.


41. Symons’ poem appeared only in Lyrics, published by the Maine publisher T. B. Mosher in 1903.


43. Ibid., 103.

44. It should also be said that Du Bois’ mise en page has proven productive for literary criticism, which as Daniel Hack has recently pointed out, has tended “to see the pairing of the epigraphs as graphically modeling the overcoming” of “the gulf between black and white America.” In the context of my reading of the genealogy of a discourse on American rhythm, the epigraphs don’t work that way. Hack makes the excellent point that the critics who want them to work that way do not consider the tradition of what Hack calls “African Americanizing citation,” a tradition Hack’s book makes visible. See Daniel Hack, Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017), 179–80.