Ringing Grooves

Nineteenth-century science loved to speculate about origins—the origins of language, of species, of law, of mythology, of private property, the family, and the state. To the extent that our academic institutions are nineteenth-century creations, we too live in spaces outlined by those phantasms of origin. The “singing and dancing throng” claimed by once-influential theorists to be the origin of English lyric displays in multiply overdetermined ways this zeal for origins.¹

“What is Progress?” asked Herbert Spencer in 1857, and offered an example from embryology:

The investigations of Wolff, Goethe, and von Baer, have established the truth that the series of changes gone through during the development of a seed into a tree, or an ovum into an animal, constitute an advance from homogeneity of structure to heterogeneity of structure. In its primary stage, every germ consists of a substance that is uniform throughout, both in texture and chemical composition. The first step is the appearance of a difference between two parts of this substance; or, as the phenomenon is called in physiological language, a differentiation. Each of these differentiated divisions presently begins itself to exhibit some contrast of parts: and by and by these secondary differentiations become as definite as the original one. This process is continuously repeated—is simultaneously going on in all parts of the growing embryo; and by endless such differentiations there is finally
produced that complex combination of tissues and organs constituting the adult animal or plant. This is the history of all organisms whatever. It is settled beyond dispute that organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous.

Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through successive differentiations, holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which progress essentially consists.

Cosmology, geology, paleontology, linguistics, economics, politics, ethnography, and the history of civilization furnish Spencer illustrations of his doctrine of evolution from the simple to the complex, published two years before Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Progress stretches out on a timeline a hierarchy still observable, for Spencer, in the present: “The infant European has sundry marked points of resemblance to the lower human races.” Music and poetry develop along the same lines.

In the co-ordinate origin and gradual differentiation of Poetry, Music, and Dancing, we have another series of illustrations. Rhythm in words, rhythm in sounds, and rhythm in motions, were in the beginning parts of the same thing, and have only in process of time become separate things.

Among existing barbarous tribes we find them still united. The dances of savages are accompanied by some kind of monotonous chant, the clapping of hands, the striking of rude instruments: there are measured movements, measured words, and measured tones.

The first musical instruments were, without doubt, percussive—sticks, calabashes, tom-toms—and were used simply to mark the time of the dance; and in this constant repetition of the same sound, we see music in its most homogeneous form.

Music as a whole is a differentiation or specialization of the primitive cry, in keeping with the pattern of heterogeneity emerging from homogeneity.

We have seen that there is a physiological relation, common to man and all animals, between feeling and muscular action; that as vocal
sounds are produced by muscular action, there is a consequent physiological relation between feeling and vocal sounds; that all the modifications of voice expressive of feeling are the direct results of this physiological relation; that music, adopting all these modifications, intensifies them more and more as it ascends to its higher and higher forms; that, from the ancient epic poet chanting his verses, down to the modern musical composer, men of unusually strong feelings prone to express them in extreme forms, have been naturally the agents of these successive intensifications.

What we regard as the distinctive traits of song, are simply the traits of emotional speech intensified and systematized. In respect of its general characteristics, we think it has been made clear that vocal music, and by consequence all music, is an idealization of the natural language of passion. . . . [T]he dance-chants of savage tribes are very monotonous; and in virtue of their monotony are more nearly allied to ordinary speech than are the songs of civilized races.

But what is rhythm? Seen physically (one of the advantages of Spencer over his more conventionally educated contemporaries is his lack of regard for distinctions between the physical and the cultural), rhythm is "a necessary characteristic of all motion," the self-limiting action of a force working through a medium.

A stick drawn laterally through the water with much force, proves by the throb which it communicates to the hand that it is in a state of vibration. Even where the moving body is massive, it only requires that great force should be applied to get a sensible effect of like kind: for instance the screw of a screw-steamer, which instead of a smooth rotation falls into a rapid rhythm that sends a tremor through the whole vessel. The sound which results when a bow is drawn over a violin-string, shows us vibrations produced by the movement of a solid over a solid. In lathes and planing machines, the attempt to take off a thick shaving causes a violent jar of the whole apparatus, and the production of a series of waves on the iron or wood that is cut. Every boy in scraping his slate-pencil finds it scarcely possible to help making a ridged surface.

If music derives from emotional language, rhythm marks the rise and fall of emotional energy, for in a finite body, energy cannot go on increasing indefinitely.

Rhythm . . . is seen during the outflow of emotion into dancing, poetry, and music. The current of mental energy that shows itself in
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these modes of bodily action, is not continuous, but falls into a succession of pulses. . . . One possessed by intense grief does not utter continuous moans, or shed tears with an equable rapidity; but these signs of passion come in recurring bursts.⁸

So in Spencer’s theory of expression, rhythm modulates and limits the force of the proposition that “music is an idealization of the natural language of passion.”

But a heterogeneity that derives from a homogeneous beginning could always, presumably, be reduced back to its homogeneity. Western contrapuntal music might be considered the apex of complexity achieved thus far in that art, but when Spencer comes to explain its development, the appearance of internal heterogeneity turns out to be nothing more than a layering and overlap of components in themselves simple.

It was not until Christian church-music had reached some development, that music in parts was evolved; and then it came into existence through a very unobtrusive differentiation. Difficult as it may be to conceive a priori how the advance from melody to harmony could take place without a sudden leap, it is none the less true that it did so. The circumstance which prepared the way for it was the employment of two choirs singing alternately the same air. Afterwards it became the practice—very possibly first suggested by a mistake—for the second choir to commence before the first had ceased; thus producing a fugue. With the simple airs then in use, a partially-harmonious fugue might not improbably thus result: and a very partially-harmonious fugue satisfied the ears of that age, as we know from still preserved examples. The idea having once been given, the composing of airs productive of fugal harmony would naturally grow up, as in some way it did grow up, out of this alternate choir-singing.⁹

The voices meeting in canon or counterpoint could always be brought back to the same beginning, be scored in unison. Nothing essentially new has emerged from the temporal deferral or rhythmical differentiation among the musical lines. But the imagined primitive throng has not yet arrived at the “mistake” that initiates a new musical complexity: their essential trait for the purposes of these demonstrations is to be simple.

Thus the history of poetry, as a subset of the history of all progress in the universe, returns us for our explanations to the singing and dancing throng. In it singing and dancing are as yet undifferentiated, rhythm is a natural impulse of the muscles, and words have hardly begun to distinguish themselves from music; different classes and professions are not
yet to be discerned in it; and if it is an English throng, its words must be the Saxon roots, direct in their onomatopoeia. The ballad-theorists Francis Barton Gummere and George Lyman Kittredge, who spread such conceptions, had their disciples. Some of them were influential. But the history of poetry that they extract from folkloric examples, making primitive poetry flow from a single ethnic, linguistic, and rhythmical origin, convinces only insofar as it excludes.

Forms That Err

In a lecture about “Techniques of the Body” delivered in 1934, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss told a few stories about how he discovered that *habitus* or learned behavior saturates the body, making what might seem to be a biological or natural object a social and cultural one.

You know that the British infantry marches with a different gait from ours: with a different cadence, a different length of stride. . . . The Worcestershire Regiment, having distinguished itself in the battle of the Aisne alongside the French forces, was awarded a company of French drummers and buglers and requested royal permission to incorporate them. The outcome was discouraging. For nearly six months, long after the battle of the Aisne, I saw the following spectacle in the streets of Bailleul: the regiment had kept its English style of marching and tried to fit it to a French rhythm. . . . This unfortunate regiment of tall Englishmen could no longer parade. Everything in its march was discordant. When they attempted to fall into step, the music was out of step. In the end, the Worcestershire Regiment had to drop its French military band.

Mauss’ discovery of culturally distinct modes of walking started, as so often happens, from something going wrong: the British soldiers tangled up in their own feet, unable to match their strides to the beats of a French music squad. Presumably they would have had no trouble marching in time to an English military band, the beats and pace of which would have been designed to accompany their way of walking.

This might have remained just a curious story from the front, or the foundation-myth of the Ministry of Silly Walks, were it not for a bout of dysentery that Mauss suffered while on a visit to New York in 1926.

A sort of revelation came to me in the hospital. . . . I wondered where I had seen young ladies walking like the nurses on my ward. I had plenty of time to think about it. Finally I realized that it was at the
movies. Once I was back in France, I began to notice, especially in Paris, that this style of walking had become frequent. French young ladies were walking in that same way. As it happened, American ways of walking had begun to circulate among us thanks to the cinema. This was an idea that I could extrapolate. The position of the arms and hands during the act of walking are a social peculiarity—not simply the product of some purely individual, almost entirely mental arrangements or mechanisms. For example, I believe I can recognize a convent-educated young woman. She will typically walk with closed fists. And I can still hear one of my high school teachers shouting at me: ‘You stupid animal, stop flapping your big hands as you walk!’ So walking derives from a form of education.13

And thus, Mauss realized, the ways people have of moving around, of holding tools, their postures and stances in movement and rest are culturally acquired pieces of knowledge. We readily agree that there is such a thing as Greek, Basque or Ukrainian dancing, but no one ever heard of Greek, Basque or Ukrainian walking. Walking, being so basic, should belong to everybody, should just be walking. But Mauss found that this attitude is wrong. To get a sense of what “the American walk” might have looked like for French observers of the 1920s, the reader may wish to consider the Mary Pickford short from 1918, “100% American.” In this film, Mary Pickford’s character decides not to spend her money on clothes and bus fare, but to save it and buy Liberty Bonds. After looking in a shop window, she turns and walks away under a long portico, attracting the admiring gaze of an idle old man. The heroine doesn’t let her clothes hobble her. You see her shoulders thrown back and her arms moving in proportion to her long, purposeful strides. This is a walk expressive of an ethos—but not just an individual ethos. Her gait, no less than the special feminine saunter known among the Maori as “onioi,” must have been learned from someone.14 It is not shown as specific to Pickford’s character. Her friend who spends money on clothes and hats walks in a similar way, with big strides and elbow action; so the female American Walk is not for a single personality type, but general. Walking is of course a practical behavior, one of our basic bodily actions, but it also communicates: it tells the world something about who we are and what we do, and it communicates itself from body to body by processes of imitation.

So, Mauss hypothesizes, such techniques of the body as walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, eating, not to mention the postures adopted while climbing trees, swimming, chopping wood, having sex, and so forth, do
not happen as a matter of course but have to be installed (montés) in a body through training.

More technically, Mauss calls any technique of the body an engrenage or gearing-together of subordinate routines, a “physio-psycho-sociological assembly of acts in series.”¹⁵ (This engrenage later becomes the core idea of André Leroi-Gourhan’s *Le Geste et la parole*, under the name “chaîne opératoire.”)¹⁶

The body is the first and the most natural tool of mankind. . . . Prior to the techniques using tools, there is the class of techniques of the body. . . . This constant adaptation to a physical, mechanical or chemical aim is carried out in a series of pre-installed acts (actes montés), installed in the individual not only by his own volition, but by his whole education, by the whole society to which he belongs . . .¹⁷

Mauss insists on the cultural particularity of these patterns, on the idea that there is no such thing as mere sitting or sleeping *per se*, but that every human group codes a certain set of behaviors as normal and desired, and considers departures from those norms unfortunate or even sinful. Techniques of the body vary, but every culture has them.

But what is a body? Doesn’t everybody already know that? It might seem that the body, as a topic, is as close to home as anything can be, and therefore as far as possible from estrangement. Indeed the classic theories of alienation, from Hegel through Feuerbach to Marx and Lukács, always presuppose the body as the axis from which alienation departs.¹⁸ Techniques of the body, in line with this understanding, are said to be historically and presumably conceptually “prior to the techniques using tools.” But let us take a second look at the experiences by which Mauss learned to recognize the technical and cultural specificity of these ways of inhabiting a body. A body trained to march to a certain rhythm is already not a natural body. Troops march in an artificially precise way, which is scored and formatted by military music, among other things. Is it that some kind of national biological characteristic accounts, as a common factor, for both British marching and British drumming? Certainly not. Mauss is arguing that the body is not simply material and therefore predictable in its psychological realizations: rather, the social is the level at which you will find the explanations for behavior. Rules that we learn in society make our material bodies operative.

With a slight difference in emphasis, I reach for the vocabulary of phenomenology. A rhythm, for example a four-four march time, is an intentional object projected into the future, a rule that anticipates and regulates the behavior of those who accept it: *one*-two-three-four, *one*-
two-three-four, until a halt is called. And a different rhythm, for example a waltz, sets out a different rule and formats future behavior in different ways. A “recurrent figure of sound” (Gerard Manley Hopkins) orients and projects. The soldiers of the Worcestershire Regiment found themselves with legs and feet trained to one projected rule, and ears receiving a different rule: they had a two-body problem or even a four-body one.

Techniques of the body come to consciousness because something goes wrong in a specific way, in the very way that scholars of comparative literature are apt to notice: the clash of codes. There is thus something to compare, a culturally specific remainder that arises when the two patterns don't mesh seamlessly, but leave margins of code unaccounted for on both sides. But it's too simple to describe the Worcester Regiment's problem as a clash between British and French rhythms. The maladjustment happens rather among four patterns of rhythm: the British step and the French music, of course, but, no less, the missing British music and the French way of stepping that the French music was meant to accompany. These are normative behaviors. They reveal themselves to consciousness as techniques, as artifices, when things do not go according to plan—and they would not do this if the bodies were simply carrying out successful goal-directed actions according to a technique. Estrangement, ostranenie, as Viktor Shklovsky called it, occurs. We could not speak here of homogeneity developing into heterogeneity by progressive differentiation. Rather, heterogeneity comes crashing in on the homogeneous. Two throngs merge with no single rule to guide their movements. Their encounter is historically new and irreversible.

Techniques of the body always involve at least two bodies, an experienced one and a projected one. Exceptional circumstances allow Mauss to see the two bodies as two rather than as one. The nurses who cause the patient to re-experience his hours spent in the cinema, as if they were quoting the evanescent figures on the silver screen, exhibit their bodies in double, as praxis and as norm. This the stumbling soldiers also do, although in their case, the norm is unattained, and the signals proper to two conflicting norms haunt and confuse their practice. Along with these revelatory moments of failure, the discovery of the technical body is also enabled by media. It is notable that cinema, in Mauss' account, has transmitted bodily gestures and disciplines—the “American walk”—across oceans and continents without at the same time transmitting the people and bodies who originated them. Parisian women learn from the cinema how to walk the brisk American walk, just as, if other circumstances had favored it, they might have learned how to walk the Maori “onioi.”

The cinema is just one of the great nineteenth-century mimetic tech-
nologies that permit the separation of acts, voices, gestures—in a word, *habitus*—from the bodies that issued them. Thanks to the cinema, or more precisely thanks to the originator of time-sequenced photography, Étienne-Jules Marey, we can give a positive answer to the famous question posed by Yeats and reiterated by Paul de Man, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” It would be a mistake to call cinematic representation the dance in itself, or to confuse it with the whole dance, but enough of the dance can be captured that it can be repeated and transmitted by mechanical means; it becomes textualized. As Walter Benjamin put it, cinema, like technical reproduction in general, “substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced.” By 1920, viewers of cinema could perform the walks of foreigners just as they could learn to perform a piece on the piano with the help of sheet music.

This contagious, re-citable property of media, implying a wider definition of textuality, opens up for us a definition of the body that will not require a common-sense, you-know-what-I’m-talking-about, essentialist or fundamentalist definition of the body at the center of our talk of corporeal techniques. As an alternative to that path, we have another path that says that what will count as a body is an effect of the representational or discursive means available to incarnate it. The body operative in our discourse is whatever we have the ability to speak, chart, compute, or perform—walk, dance, shimmy—into being.

And for this reason the characteristics of this body are apt to change every time a new imaginative or representational technique emerges. Marey is responsible for more than one such change. Well before his work with successive photographs of the movement of bodies in space brought him to the threshold of the cinema, he had first made his name as an inventor of devices for capturing physiological change and movement within living creatures. Marey’s strategy was to make the biological phenomena write themselves. He hitched an oscillating penholder to an arrangement of springs, cords and tubes connected to the organs of interest, and made the organs move the indicator in proportion to their normal physiological action. On the side of the output, Marey’s strategy was to reduce what must be measured to one or more variables of space, and plot changes in that variable against an axis of time. The result was a two-dimensional table. Graphs representing quantitative change over time had been appearing here and there since William Playfair’s charts showing the recent growth of the British national debt in 1801, and indeed a musical score is a kind of time-series chart. Marey’s original contribu-
tion was in permitting the flesh to speak—or rather, write—its actions rather than be spoken about by an observer.

And in time Marey’s externalization of the body’s processes onto paper came to be applied to language, incorporating what it had sought to displace—words. Philologists and linguists have always been dissatisfied with existing alphabets. No two languages use the letters in the same way; a single language will use them differently from one period to another, or from one region to another. Desirous of the precision that was making possible recent advances in physiology, a linguist, Pierre Jean Rousselot, and a laryngologist, Charles Rosapelly, attempted to use the devices Marey had developed in his laboratory to transcribe the subtle, coordinated movements of the vocal tract. Rousselot’s adaptation of Marey’s physiological recording devices made the tongue, the nose and the larynx write their own displacements onto paper, leaving a trace even more detailed and individualized than the sound recordings on wax cylinders that soon began to appear. (Edison first demonstrated his phonograph four years after Rousselot and Rosapelly published their study of the muscle movements in language.) Psycho-physiology framed the human body itself as an analogue and confirmation of such mimetic extra-corporeal technologies as the phonograph and cinema. Capturing and replaying motion was its signal ability. Man was once more “the most mimetic of animals.”

Just what kinds of distinctions the human perceptive apparatus is able to capture, and what it makes of them next, is the question that experimental psychology was set up to resolve. From the laboratories of Fechner, Wundt, Helmholtz, and Marey, devices for evaluating human response to sensory stimuli proliferated and found a home in all forward-looking universities. Reaction time, sensory discrimination, and other features of mental life could be measured in setups combining a human subject and a variety of inscribing and calibrating devices.

Rhythm particularly lent itself to such investigations. A strictly quantitative stimulus could be established on the machine side of the setup—for example, a series of mechanically generated clicks—and the human responses evaluated for subjective qualities such as inferred groupings or supposed accentuation. Imagine the laboratory set up for an investigation of the psychology of rhythm. At the center is a human body (then as now, a student volunteer). This body is coupled on one side with a device producing regular, uniformly paced clicks, and on the other side, with a device allowing the body to record an output reflecting what it hears, for example by tapping on a telegraph key. The output might (and usually did) reveal rhythmical groupings, accents, and other features of order that had been supplied by the subject, not given in the original stimulus.
People thrive on pattern. Robert MacDougall, writing in 1903 from William James’s lab at Harvard, observed that

the rhythm form is not objectively definable as a stable type of stimulation existing in and for itself; the discrimination of true and false relations among its elements depends on the immediate report of the consciousness in which it appears. . . . The artistic rhythm form cannot be defined as constituted of periods which are “chronometrically proportionate” . . . It is not such in virtue of any physical relations which may obtain among its constituents, though it may be dependent on such conditions.  

R. S. Woodworth in 1907 noted that “a uniformly spaced series of equal sounds . . . is often heard in rhythmic form, and the same series may be heard in different rhythms. For example, a series of seven sounds may be heard either in 3/4 rhythm or in 6/8 rhythm. These differences are not contained in the stimulus, which is equivocal. . . . The groupings are not describable in sensory or motor terms, but are non-sensory qualities.” Richard Wallaschek, the author of Primitive Music (1895), contended that

the muscular sense is not directly and in itself the cause of enjoyment in music, but becomes the case not only of enjoyment but of high mental edification when forming the basis of a cortical process which consists in arranging a certain number of sensations in time-periods, and perceiving them as whole united groups. Through this mental process the otherwise mere sensuous enjoyment rises to the higher rank of artistic value, while without it the musical performance would have to be placed on the same level with gymnastics or, as in the savage world, with beating and fighting . . .

The question hanging over these investigations is whether rhythm is necessarily a physical thing or an intellectual thing. Posed in these terms, the alternative is false, for a socialized body, as Mauss would have said, is a physical thing that performs cultural work on itself and its environment. The body attentive to rhythm is, we can say without too much metaphorical exaggeration, a transformer. It takes a flow of energy (sonic pulses) and packages it into a specific form of current that is best able to travel in its particular cultural milieu. Among infantrymen, it will be a four-four measure; among hearers of ancient Greek epic, it will be dactylic hexameter; among singers on the Scottish-English border, it will be the ballad stanza; and so forth. The body does not introduce new quantities of matter or energy that are not already in the environment, it merely
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alters the form of the material given it, but it does so in a way that secures consensual uptake by other receivers similarly prepared.31

The transformer that is the socialized body gives to heard sound an order that renders the sound memorable or that predisposes it to significance in relation to other sounds experienced in the hearer’s milieu. In short, transforming sound into meter is the work of the perceiving body. This is cultural work. The choice whether to parse a series of sounds as falling into 3/4 or 6/8 meter is unthinkable without prior exposure to music in those time signatures, and the same must surely be said of McDougall’s or Wallaschek’s aesthetic syntheses. A rhythm is, to repeat, an intentional object, and a collective one at that.

The biomechanical hybrid—what Mauss calls an “assemblage of physio-socio-psychological acts in series”—thus delineated is in an epistemological feedback relation with a general model of “energetics” shared by physicists, biologists, social theorists, philosophers of art and cosmologists in the years around 1900.32 In a universe heading inexorably toward disorder, why should anything be permanent? More specifically, why should anything in such a universe be remembered or repeated?

It takes some expenditure of energy to maintain cultural forms (failing which, they would simply dissolve or become indifferent). Repetition and the enforcement of norms go with the conservatism of most pre-industrial cultures. Even William Carlos Williams, in accounting for the modernist poetic movement in which he took a leading part, explains it chiefly as an effect of decay: traditional “measures . . . were synonymous with a society that was] uniform, and made up of easily measurable integers, racial and philosophical,”33 but “our lives . . . have lost all that in the past we had to measure them by, except outmoded standards that are meaningless to us.”34 Accordingly, “they should be horrible things, those [modernist] poems. To the classic muse their bodies should appear to be covered with sores. They should be hunchbacked, limping. And yet our poems must show how we have struggled with them to measure and control them.”35

The pathos of decline here assumes victory over premodern sensibility and conventions accomplished. And yet “to break the pentameter” took a “heave.”36 Once a cultural form—a rhythm for example—is launched and has been adopted by many people, it will take effort to dislodge it. Where does this countervailing energy come from?

Consider what is being offered to our listening and reciting bodies by the following:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed . . .

You will have recognized Rupert Brooke’s famous sonnet “The Soldier,” reprinted during the Great War in newspaper leaders and recited from pulpits across Great Britain. Iambic pentameter, precise rhymes, elevating sentiment, patriotism, nostalgia: “the military-metrical complex,” as Meredith Martin has called it, on parade. Another example of war poetry from 1915, however, refuses to fall in step:

Here we are, picking the first fern-shoots
And saying: When shall we get back to our country?
Here we are because we have the Ken-nin for our foemen,
We have no comfort because of these Mongols.
We grub the soft fern-shoots,
When anyone says “Return,” the others are full of sorrow.
Sorrowful minds, sorrow is strong, we are hungry and thirsty.

Horses, his horses even, are tired. They were strong.
We have no rest, three battles a month.
By heaven, his horses are tired. [. . .]
We come back in the snow,
We go slowly, we are hungry and thirsty,
Our mind is full of sorrow, who will know of our grief?

The second example comes from Cathay, Ezra Pound’s book of translations or quasi-translations from the Chinese. The reader has little sense of being led on by a familiar rhythmic pattern, as one does with the Brooke sonnet. Each line has to be scanned individually; the stresses clump or disperse as they will; despite a predominance of feminine endings, the lines are end-stopped in obedience to the blunt, paratactic statements being made rather than to demands of rhyme or meter. The “recurrent figures of sound” (Hopkins) that permit us to recognize rhythm are rare: when the phrase “hungry and thirsty” echoes the last two feet of a Homeric hexameter ( –˘˘ | –˘), it is like a raft sighted on a wide sea. The lines stumble. We might as well be marching with the Worcestershire Regiment, except that the French military band has now been exchanged for a seemingly arrhythmic Chinese one. Its origins in national myth so distant as to be a mere outline, its meter for the most part unidentifiable and asymmetrical, and its sentiments far from sacrificial idealism, Cathay broke with the inherited patterns that we see so boastfully on display in Brooke’s sonnet. Cathay has been described as anti-war poetry.
It is so more than thematically: the repudiation of war goes so far as to rout marching cadences from the verse itself. A new technique of the body here clashes with poetic “rhythm” as understood by most English speakers of the time. As Virginia Woolf put it: “In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction.”

Whatever Pound was translating, he wasn't transferring Asian meter into English. Pound could hardly have had any idea of the Chinese metric of his original. Not only did he lack Chinese, he had access only to a Japanese transcription that rendered the last few lines just cited in this form:

Jū-sha, ki-ga / shi bo gyō gyō.  戎車既駕，四牡業業。
Gai kan tei kyo / ichi getsu san sho.  傑敢定居？一月三捷。
Ga hi shi bo / shi bo ki ki.  駕彼四牡，四牡騏騏。
Kon ga lai shi / wu setsu hi hi.  今我來思，雨雪霏霏。
Kō dō chi chi / sai katsu sai ki.  行道遙遙，載渴載飢。
Ga shin shō hi / baku chi ga ai.  我心傷悲，莫知我哀。

Nothing here to imitate, apparently. But the strange syllables may have suggested a heavy, hesitant step that broke the confident marching iambs of Brooke. In any case, Pound definitely saw and put aside a draft translation of the same poem by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa that began:

Picking the ferns, picking the ferns,
ferns that grow in the forest.
Speaking of home, speaking of home,
the year grows old in the desert.

Picking the ferns, picking the ferns,
Ferns that here are so tender,
Speaking of home, speaking of home,
Hardens the soul with its sorrow.

Sorrow of mind, tears of the mind,
and body in hunger and thirst—
But men return, don't ask to return
we must clear the enemy first.

Fenollosa (whose notebooks on Chinese poetry remained Pound's main source for his entire engagement with Asian models) had noted the verse form of the poem’s Chinese original, a four-syllable a b a b stanza, and tried to render it as a ballad stanza in English. Though he hadn't
worked out the rhyming words yet, Fenollosa had a definite rhythmic pattern in mind. Absurdly, it’s 4/3/4/3 ballad stanza that reads as a waltz in 6/8 time:

Pick-ing the ferns, (da da) picking the ferns, (da da)

Ferns (da) that here are so ten- (da da) der (da da) . . .

Although Fenollosa knew that the forms, rhymes, meters, and stanzas of Chinese poetry had histories of their own, and had systematic associations with other parts of Chinese culture, he must have thought that in order to make the documents from China look and sound like poetry, those cultural specificities had to be replaced with features of the English-language tradition that also coded positively for the quality of “being poetic.” This was exactly the wrong choice, a choice imposed by inertia, a mechanical tick-tock imposed by centuries of precedent. Pound’s breaking of the rhythm made the marching bodies wake up (“Here we are . . .”) and wonder what they were doing and when they could get back to their country. Stumbling was by far the more honorable thing to do, both as regards the war theme and the dignity of the Chinese classical poem. When Pound turned some forty years later to translate the three hundred and five Confucian Odes into ballad stanza and a simulacrum of Appalachian Volksdichtung peppered with blackface-minstrel japes, he may have done it out of sarcasm, or else sought to mark his own regression, as a guest of St. Elizabeths, to the state of Gummere’s throng.44

Comes a Vapour from the Margin

Manifestos for Imagism presented its prosody as psychological and individual, an alternative to the mechanical, collective drumming of traditional meter. As Pound put it variously between 1912 and 1917:

As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. . . .

I believe in an ‘absolute rhythm,’ a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly with the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man’s rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable. . . .

I think one should write vers libre . . . only when the ‘thing’ builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real,
more a part of the emotion of the ‘thing,’ more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accented verse . . .

Pound was simultaneously practitioner, theorist, and publicist. Some confusion of roles is to be expected. His calls for the breaking of traditional meter promise a rhythm that will be “germane, intimate, interpretative”—a musical reflection of personality. But his space of argument is polemically narrowed: in it, one must choose whether to write in obedience to “the musical phrase” or to “a metronome.”

_Cathay_ rejects the metronome, but its “absolute rhythm” is not purely psychological and interpretive either: its mimesis of emotional states is complicated by reminiscences of French free verse, American prose transcribing Japanese glosses on Chinese poems, and some faintly heard Sino-Japanese meters. Rhythm becomes palimpsestic. It becomes, to cite Pound again, “an ‘Image,’ [or] that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

Note that there is nothing necessarily visual in this definition of the “Image.” It is rather a psychophysical apparatus through which the memory of past events can be fixed and transmitted, as Bergson proposed in _Matière et mémoire_:

Here I am in the midst of images, in the vaguest sense that can be given to the word, images that are perceived when I open my senses, unperceived when I close them. . . . It is entirely as if, in this collection of images that I call the universe, nothing really new could ever be produced save through the intermediation of certain particular images, of which the pattern is given me by my body. . . .

The body, interposed between those objects acting on it and those on which it exerts influence, is no more than a conductor, disposed to collect movements, and to send them on, when it does not halt them, to certain motor mechanisms. . . . It must therefore be as if an independent facility of memory gathered up images along the course of time as they are produced, and as if our body, with its environment, was only one of these images: the ultimate image. . . . So it is in the form of motor apparatus, and of motor apparatus alone, that [the body] can store up past actions.

Poetic rhythm, a “technique of the body” involving stored and repeated schemata, is an “image” in this sense. Visual imagery projects representation into space, which, in the Bergsonian language used by T. E. Hulme in articulating the Imagist poetic and emulated by Pound, is the realm of mechanistic causality and stereotyped language, as opposed to time,
where creative freedom can occur. “It is important to see that the inability under which we suffer, of being unable to conceive the existence of a real change in which absolutely new and unpredictable things can happen, is entirely due to that fixed habit of the intellect which insists that we shall analyse things into elements, and insists on that because it will have a picture in spatial terms.” Thus the common etymology of the term “Imagism” is based on a faux ami, as is the usual explanation for the popularity of “imagistic” Chinese poetry as a model for modernist poetry in English.

Verse, like dance, transmits a pattern of movement from body to body, or from a body at time T to the same body at time T+1. The transmission process does not simply go from inside to outside (the assumption imported into Imagist rhetoric from Bergsonian vitalism); since all bodies receive rhythms from outside, and there are many such rhythms (relayed, for example, by different languages and poetic traditions), verse can and must be perturbed even while seeking an “absolute rhythm.” Our understanding of the history of poetry could do with less thematics and more attention to the contagious, repetitive logic of inscription.

Laudable attention has been paid in recent years to prosody, rhythm and meter in English. Unfortunately the discussion has too often been provincial. By neglecting the foreign contributions to English verse we risk giving credence to the idea that a nation’s poetry “progresses” straightforwardly from initial homogeneity to a later heterogeneity (with this heterogeneity being always decomposable into pure elements, as was the choral counterpoint of Spencer’s example). Pound with his customary abruptness stated in 1913 that “The history of English poetic glory is a history of successful steals from the French.” This is a general truth—substitute what national labels you like. “The history of X’s poetic glory is a history of successful steals from Y.” French vers libre was a successful steal from various sources, including Whitman. In the case of Whitman, as soon as the French had stolen him away, a group of American poets led by Pound and Eliot stole him back, in the guise of Laforgue, whose rhyme and meter, along with a great deal else, are unmistakable in “Pru-frock” and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. And Cathay is a storehouse of steals from France, China, and Japan. Pound’s lines are bent and dented by the irreversible impact of the foreign.

If we recognize poetry as being “the most provincial of the arts,” the verbal art with the least easily broken commitments to the language in which it is written, cross-linguistic influence is going to pose a problem. And nonetheless it happens. How? As with the hapless soldiers of the Worcestershire Regiment, any prosodic influence across languages
is going to involve at least four overlapping systems. To understand, for example, how Whitman could affect French versification one needs to understand, at a minimum, how Whitman’s prosody works; how French prosody at the time of contact or importation worked; then how Whitman’s prosody seemed to work to French speakers (which may not be the same thing as how Whitman’s prosody works for English speakers); then how the effects of one registered on the other. Contact between languages in verse form is a contact not between objects in themselves, but between the forms they take through comparison and reflexivity. The forms taken over from other languages will necessarily make the receiving language stumble, will break the inertia of its forward movement. This is not easy to understand without a commitment to the foreign languages, and it suggests, at least as far as poetry is concerned, that “English” is a mirage. At its historical turning points, verse is a technique of the stumbling body led on by alien bands.

Notes

I am grateful to the editors of this volume and to the reviewers for many suggestions. Conversations with Timothy Billings and Lucas Klein helped me work through the argument here, and invitations from Justyna Beinek and David Damrosch gave it shape.

1. On this “throng,” see Francis Barton Gummere, _The Beginnings of Poetry_ (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 139. By the late twentieth century, “the imaginary singing and dancing throng was a joke among folklore students in the United States” (Lee Haring, “The Oral Literature Researcher as a Foreign Expert,” _Cahiers de littérature orale_ 63–64 [2008]: 428. For the emergence of ideas of collective authorship in German romanticism (Herder, Grimm), and their role in debates of the early twentieth century, see Louise Pound, _Poetic Origins and the Ballad_ (New York: Macmillan, 1921) and Haun Saussy, _The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and Its Technologies_ (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 47–56.


4. Ibid., 30, 32.


8. Ibid., 266.


10. On Saxon onomatopoeia, see Spencer, “The Philosophy of Style,” in _Essays_, vol. 2: 333–369. Writers in English should choose “Saxon” over “Latin” terms in the interest of psychological efficiency: “Regarding language as an apparatus of symbols for the conveyance of thought, we may say that, as in a mechanical apparatus, the more
simple and the better arranged its parts, the greater will be the effect produced. . . .
The greater forcibleness of Saxon English, or rather non-Latin English, first claims our
attention” (338).

(Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950), 367; original publication in Journal de
Psychologie normale et pathologique 32 (1936). An English translation appears in In-
corporations, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992),
455–77; here I venture my own. See also Jean-François Bert, ed., “Les techniques du

12. On this episode, see Marcel Fournier, Marcel Mauss (Paris: Fayard, 1994),
528–31.


14. On the “onioi” as presented in Mauss, see Carrie Noland, Agency and
Embodiment: Performing Gestures / Producing Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: Har-
vard University Press, 2009), 26–29. For the film, see https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=u4_XaswoBmM.


16. André Leroi-Gourhan, Le Geste et la parole, I: Technique et langage. II: La Mé-

17. Ibid., 372.

so that he will move around himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illu-
sory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.”
“Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung” (1844), in Karl Marx and

19. “Verse is . . . speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sound.” “Po-
etry and Verse,” in The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Humphrey
House and Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 289. This phrase
becomes a key refrain in Roman Jakobson’s famous “Closing Statement: Linguistics

Shklovsky: A Reader (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 80.

of Reading (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 12.

22. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduc-
ibility,” second version, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in Benjamin, The
Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,
ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Har-

23. On Marey’s wider circles of influence, see Robert Brain, The Pulse of Modern-
ism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe (Seattle: University of Washing-
ton Press, 2016).

24. See Edward Tufte, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information (Cheshire,


26. See Laura Otis, “‘The Metaphoric Circuit: Organic and Technological Com-
105–28; Robert Brain and W. Norton Wise, “Muscles and Engines: Indicator Diagrams


43. Ernest Fenollosa, draft translation of “Cai wei” (Shi jing 167), from the Ezra Pound Papers (Yale University Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library), box 100, folder 4228.


46. Ibid., 4.


50. See for example Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter; Golston, Rhythm and Race; Simon Jarvis, “Prosody as Cognition,” Critical Quarterly 40, no. 4 (1998): 3–15. The selections included in Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), bear almost exclusively on theme and genre. My contention here is that theme and genre do not determine rhythm. Or perhaps theme and genre are supposed to do so in periods of “normal” (Spencer might have said “homogeneous”) poetic development. But (and this is the noteworthy thing) formal features such as rhythm periodically upset the dominance of such top-down determinants. If I were writing literary history, the clashes would dominate and the periods of stability be reduced to parentheses.
