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## Prosody as Tradition

IT IS THE OBJECT OF this essay to explore the relationship between two concepts which it takes to raise problems currently insuperable by means of a simple definition. *Prosody* and *tradition* are explored separately, but with an eye to their interconnections. The first two sections of the essay consider what the idea of tradition means, and in what ways appeal can be made to it. They conclude by thinking about a familiar notion from the study of language, that of *arbitrariness*, from the standpoint of this investigation of the idea of tradition. The subsequent sections consider the difficulties and resources which this investigation might present to some of the ways in which prosody is thought about. It is argued that the difficulties currently faced by prosodic enquiry are not, as is sometimes thought, the result of too fond an attachment to tradition and too little professional rigour, but are rather connected to fundamental problems conditioned by the history of metaphysics. The essay concludes with a provisional attempt to think about some resources for the renewal of thinking about prosody; with an attempt, that is, to think about the consequences of prosody's character as tradition for the way in which prosody is conceptualized and interpreted.

### 1

"Tradition": the word readily conjures a poisonous landscape of the pseudo-venerable, from wholemeal bread to constitutional monarchies. What could free it from the obloquy which its misuse has merited? Almost everywhere the word shelters not only a monopolistic refusal to come to account, the stubborn defence of fixed privilege, injustice, and exclusion, but, in general, the new-minted forms of such a refusal got up in the drag of the Ancient

Constitution. From the womanless legislatures of the Taliban to the despairing tea-shoppes of Bourton-on-the-Water, traditions have almost everywhere come to seem “inventions,” whether for sale or for power, of an ersatz local authenticity which the sceptic would understand always already to be mediated by global capitalism. The cleverness which notes this and which refuses to be taken in, however, has also its own admixture of credulity, the superstition that there can (at least now, thank god, it murmurs, audibly or silently) be no other reality than that mediated by capital. This credulity expresses itself in the conversion of the opposition between tradition and modernity into an absolute. Although modernity is generally understood as the dissolution of tradition, as what makes anything solid melt into air, and although it undoubtedly can do this to particular traditions, the fate of traditions in modernity has perhaps no less often been to be internalized in mutant, damaged, unrecognizable forms; that is, to be internalized not as though they really were traditions but as though, instead, they were simply the features of rights or rationality themselves. A brief epitome of the character of modernity as misrecognized tradition can be found in the US gun lobby. The republican demand that kings should have no hired defenders of despotism (itself a complex mutation of Aristotle’s ethics of citizenship) mutates into the murderous *ressentiment* of an anticipatory retaliation. The path from Harrington’s *Oceania* to the National Rifle Association is one which is made unintelligible not only by a premature deployment of the concept of tradition, but also by its premature dismissal.

The a priori suspicion that all traditions must be invented, then, is a scepticism grounded in a deeper credulity, in what we might call *Kapitalismusgläubigkeit*, a superstitious faith in capitalism. One way of thinking about this credulity is to consider some early stages in the development of the concept of tradition. The Latin *traditio* has a number of senses. For the early Christian fathers the concept develops in part as a way of distinguishing orthodox from, for example, gnostic readings of sacred scripture. The latter, however closely concerned with the letter of the text, could not for the fathers hope to be accurate, since they were isolated from the single apostolic tradition of interpretation, a tradition stretching back to Christ himself, and whose guarantor was the one true Church. In this sense of the concept, *traditio*, a giving or handing over, is something which, when it is handed over, is nevertheless retained by the donor. When the elder passes on to a

novice the true reading of Luke 6.35 he nevertheless does not give it up himself. In Roman law, however, *traditio* is not to give over merely but to give *up*. When I surrender for good the keys of the house to the person to whom I have sold it, this is *traditio*. This also is the sense used by early Christians when they speak of those who have handed over sacred texts or artefacts to persecutors or to heretics: such a person is a *traditor*, a *traitor*. The concept of tradition thus from its very origins contains within itself not merely separate, but opposed senses: tradition can both be to give something in such a way as also to keep it for yourself; or it can be to give something in such a way as irrecoverably to lose it.

Tradition in the first sense—a gift which is also retained—is amongst those phenomena towards which modern folk theories of exchange are most alertly sceptical. The genealogy of modernity is characterized, as I have argued elsewhere, by a long struggle to separate the gift from exchange, a struggle motivated less by a need to preserve the pure altruism of gifts than by a wish to enforce the sheer interestedness of exchanges.<sup>1</sup> The modern free gift and the modern interested exchange converge in their conviction of the absolute alienatedness of the objects donated or exchanged. They are gone for ever, whether gifts or payment; to demand them back is an offence against ethics (which regulates the sphere of gifts) or law (which regulates that of exchange). A gift which is also retained makes no sense within such a scheme because it contravenes what we might think of as the pseudo-physics of classical political economy. For such a pseudo-physics a gift which is not entirely alienated from the donor is not really a gift at all. It conceives of tradition rather differently: so that what is alienated in the handing down of a tradition is not really the knowledge contained in that tradition, but, rather, the labour involved in teaching it. Any tradition which continues to provide such labour without turning it into a commodity can then be fitted into the category of free gifts, a category generally regarded in practice as irrelevant, chimerical, ideological or mendacious. What can be seen even from so summary an analysis is that aprioristic insistences upon the “invented” character of all tradition testify to credulity as well as, in another sense, to scepticism. The difficulty of imagining exchanges which cannot be computed through the dogma of the separation of gift from exchange is solved by reconceptualizing tradition so

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Jarvis, “The Gift in Theory,” *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 201–22.

that it must classify itself according to this logic. The oblivion of human relation which is repeated and confirmed in every act of commodity exchange is to an important extent modelled on the forgetting of tradition; the intolerably painful thought that even thought does not make itself from scratch, that it depends upon something outside itself, is to be suppressed by an ever more ruthless insistence on wiping the slate clean.

Modern investigation of tradition, then, has as one of its central features this paradox, that the gesture by which it seeks to disabuse itself of its illusions with respect to tradition can also become the gesture by which the most important among such illusions—the illusion of making a fresh start free from traditional assumptions—is not merely confirmed but rendered inaccessible to questioning. In particular, the kind of account of tradition which begins by constructing it as a sociological, historical, philosophical or philological object standing over against a rational inquisitor has already settled in advance one of the most important issues which it is to investigate, because with this construction the tradition-free character of the inquisition itself has already been silently presupposed. That a very wide variety of instances could be selected to exemplify this process indicates the extent to which the problem of understanding the concept of tradition is co-extensive with that of understanding modernity itself. The professionalization of intellectual life has been in important respects inextricable from this process of the objectification of tradition. Tradition is taken as a mark of pre-enlightened *auctoritas*. It is detached from the enquirer's own approach. It is expelled to the realm of the enquirer's studied objects.

For this reason the least self-blinded understandings of tradition in the modern epoch have been offered by those philosophies which have understood themselves as inevitably entangled with traditions rather than as surveying them from a great height; and which, nonetheless, have done this not so as to pretend, falsely, that there is nothing new under the sun, but rather towards just the opposite end, of imagining how a really new thinking, a thinking which would not merely be a recapitulation of ancient ontologies, might in fact be imaginable. We might think of one decisive transition in attitudes to tradition as taking place in the "transcendental dialectic" of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and subsequently in Hegel's speculative re-reading of that work. The crucial advance which Kant makes is that certain kinds of philosophical error are taken to

be more than either mere innocent mistakes or interested lies; they are rather mistakes naturally incident to reason which, even once they have been put right, nevertheless continue to recur.<sup>2</sup> Hegel's dialectic follows the logic of this insight through so that truth can no longer be understood as walking free from the history of error from which it emerges and with whose languages and shapes of feeling it is necessarily contaminated; indeed such contamination can be seen as a condition, rather than a defect, of truth itself; and Hegel understands the difference between "truth" and "certainty" to lie in part in just this, that certainty thinks of itself as free from the history of error upon which it is in truth dependent and with which it is in truth entangled.<sup>3</sup> Even where later thinkers have deliberately disassociated themselves from this kind of dialectical understanding of the relationship between truth and tradition, they are deeply indebted to it; so that, for example, Heidegger's incomparably keen sensorium for the ghosts of archaic ontologies prowling around inside apparently non-metaphysical systems, methods and sciences would have been unthinkable without the educative trajectory through tradition taken by the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

## 2

It is out of this tradition of admitting our own inculpateness with tradition that the following insight into the character of tradition emerges:

The traditional is quasi-transcendental, not a point-like subjectivity, but what is genuinely constitutive, the mechanism which Kant refers to as deeply hidden in the soul. Amongst the variants of the all-too-narrowly framed questions at the start of the *Critique of Pure Reason* might have been included the question as to how a thinking which must relinquish tradition, can preserve it by transforming it; spiritual [*geistig*] experience consists in this. The philosophy of Bergson, and still more Proust's

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Guyer and Wood, 368–87 (A 298/B354–55).

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for example, G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 2, 104.

novel, gave themselves up to it, but, in their case, under the spell of immediacy, out of repugnance for that bourgeois timelessness which anticipates not merely the elimination of the concept's mechanism, but the elimination of life itself. Philosophy's methexis [*participation*] in tradition, however, could only be one of determinate negation. Philosophy is supported by the texts which it criticizes. It is in dealing with those texts, which are brought to philosophy by the tradition they embody, that philosophy's conduct becomes commensurable with tradition. This justifies philosophy's transition to an interpretation which raises neither what is interpreted nor the symbol to an absolute, but seeks what is true where thought secularizes the irrecoverable archetype of sacred texts.<sup>4</sup>

The passage comes at a crucial point of *Negative Dialectics*, towards the close of the long introduction in which Adorno has been setting out the ways in which his own philosophical enquiry exceeds the tradition, the tradition of Kant and Hegel, in which it nevertheless participates. The passage is valuable for its statement of an aporia of tradition which has become more, not less, acute since these words were first published in 1966. The traditional is something like a condition of the possibility of philosophical experience. It is quasi-transcendental in the specific sense that it is something which we cannot choose not to participate in. To think is to think within a tradition, whether we like it or not. The aporetic question which this induces is this: how can thought come to terms with its own situatedness in a tradition without turning this into a despairing prohibition on really new thinking? Part of Adorno's own answer to this question, of course, came through a renunciation of the fresh start, a recognition that it was time not for first philosophy but for last philosophy, an insistence that the really new as opposed to the merely apparently new could *only* emerge from a determinate negation of tradition, and by what he called a "transition to interpretation": an attempt to make the truth-content of existing philosophical authorships speak from a patient scrutiny of the way in which they both sedimented and distorted historical

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<sup>4</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) 64 (my trans.).

human experience. But another part of his answer concerns the artifice of articulation which no philosophical text can dispense with, an artifice which is misrecognized if it is simply regarded as “rhetoric,” because such an expression already presupposed a deforming separation between a more or less portable content and a more or less indifferent vehicle of expression:

By being bound to texts, either openly or latently, philosophy admits, what it in vain belies in the ideal of method, its linguistic nature. In its more recent history this linguistic character has been outlawed as “rhetoric.” Once peeled away and converted into a means to an effect, rhetoric became the bearer of the lie in philosophy .... Only as language can like know like. The permanent denunciation of rhetoric in nominalism, for which the name is devoid of the least likeness with what it names, cannot, however, be ignored; the rhetorical moment cannot be summoned up unrefracted against that denunciation. Dialectic—the expression means *language as the organon of thought*—would be the attempt critically to salvage the rhetorical moment: to approximate expression and the thing to each other to the point of indifference. Dialectic appropriates the never utterly destructible connection of thought with language, the power of thinking, which, historically, appeared as a blot upon thought. This was what inspired phenomenology when, as naïve as ever, it wished to be assured of truth by analyzing words. In this rhetorical quality thought is inspired by culture, society, tradition; the blankly anti-rhetorical is in league with the barbarism in which bourgeois thought culminates. The defamation of Cicero, and even Hegel’s antipathy towards Diderot, testify to the *ressentiment* of those whose freedom to revolt has been blocked off by the necessities of life, and for whom the body of language counts as something sinful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Negative Dialektik* 65–66 (my trans.).

The notion of a dialectic free from any “economy” of thinking—in which the books always balance—depends for Adorno on an understanding of the linguistic nature of philosophy. Philosophy has to understand that its language is not merely a vehicle for thinking but part of the very substance of such thinking; that this centrality of language can never adequately be treated simply by considering a series of monad-like definitions of individual key terms, but that it also extends to the syntax of a sentence, the order within which words are placed in a sentence and within which sentences are placed in a paragraph, the order within which paragraphs are placed in an argument and arguments within an authorship, a life’s work. Thinking is this artifice of articulation, whose possible truth, however, lies not in its coherence within a totalized or self-sufficient system, but rather in the extent to which such an artifice can know that in the object which classificatory thinking cuts out of it. For Adorno, philosophy’s ineliminable participation in tradition and its ineliminable artifice of articulation are intimately connected.

This quickly takes us into some very difficult territory. A single issue crystallizes some of these difficulties, the issue of names. These thoughts are aporetically suspended between what are, for Adorno, two equally mythical ways of thinking about the name. The first is the model of Adamic language: the myth of a language in which names are naturally and necessarily fitted to their recipients. The second is the model of the arbitrariness of the name. This would not be understood as a myth by many of its proponents. “There is nothing London-like about the name ‘London’.” Yes; but this does not mean that the name is “arbitrary.” On the contrary, such a claim is the mythical suppression of the whole history by which the name London has come to be attached to the city. The term “arbitrary” truncates that history by confidently assigning it to the sphere of culture, that is to say, to the fiction of a founding contract, a conventional agreement about the connection of name and place—or, beyond this, to the still more nihilistic elevation of incuriosity to an absolute. That the name London has come to be attached to these streets and squares is in truth no more really *arbitrary* than the fact that the city indeed stands there; the judgment of “arbitrariness” merely marks the limit of *our* patience for enquiring into the question, our instrumentalist willingness to suppose that if something appears very difficult to find out, this is likely to be because it is in principle unknowable. Yet the history of nomenclature can no more confidently be assigned to pure cul-



ture than it can to pure nature. Like language itself, the name displays the necessary implicatedness of the two terms: “no nature, no culture.”<sup>6</sup> The dogma of Adamic language is mythical naturalism; the dogma of the arbitrariness of the signifier is mythical culturalism. The former mythically naturalizes tradition; the latter mythically deletes it.

## 3

We are very close here to some of the fundamental problems besetting prosody.

One more word about poetry so that you don't misunderstand what I have just said. Poetry simply must attempt to elevate its arbitrary signs to the status of natural signs; only in this way does it differentiate itself from prose and become poetry. The means through which it does this are tone, words, the position of the words, the meter, figures and tropes, similes, etc. All these things allow arbitrary signs to approach natural signs.<sup>7</sup>

In another essay I have tried to show how the difficulties standing in the way of the formulation of a satisfactory prosodic method were much more substantial than professional prosodists were sometimes willing to concede, because the often-remarked inadequacies of prosodic analysis testified less to the lack of an insufficiently precise vocabulary than to the way in which prosody, like other aspects of philological and philosophical enquiry, remains couched in a language whose ontological presuppositions are themselves questionable.<sup>8</sup> I argued, that is, that it was in certain respects the very notion of providing a satisfactory *method* for prosody which

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase (applied rather differently) occurs in Marilyn Strathern, “No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case,” in *Nature, Culture and Gender*, ed. C. McCormack and M. Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> From a letter by Lessing to Nicolai, quoted in David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 226. My thanks to Catrin Williams for bringing this letter, and this passage from it, to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> “Prosody as Cognition,” *Critical Quarterly* 40.3 (Autumn 1998): 1–14.

blocked the possibility of taking seriously the idea that what is misrecognized as the “form” of poetry, as well as what is misrecognized as its “content,” might have a cognitive significance. It was not at all that essay’s intention to attack “formalist” attention to poetry in favour of the much more institutionally dominant neglect of poetry’s sounding printed body; instead, it wished to show how these apparently inimical kinds of criticism were in fact sworn friends.

It will be clear, then, that it could in no way have been that essay’s result to suggest that some brisk sweeping away either of traditional or of contemporary linguistic vocabularies for writing about prosody could have any beneficial effects; its whole tendency was indeed the reverse, because it wished to indicate why the continually repeated scientific gesture of making an absolutely fresh start was itself part of the problem, rather than the beginning of a solution. Part of the problem, because it missed the way in which supposed defects of taxonomy were in truth hardly separable from much more intractable aporiai embedded not merely in dateless ontologies but also in lived theories which have become a kind of second nature to us: and in particular the lived theory, given its most systematic expression in the division of Kant’s mature philosophy into three critiques, that the true, the good, and the beautiful are modes of judgment which are categorically separate from each other. Kant’s categorical separation is one especially trenchant formulation of what might be described as a central lived theory of modern scientific inquiry, the theory that such enquiry depends upon a perfected separation between description and prescription, between facts and values, between *is* and *ought*.

How this works in prosody can be seen if we look at one of the most impressive attempts in recent years to understand the prosody of a single poetic authorship, Brendan O’Donnell’s recent study of Wordsworth’s use of metre.<sup>9</sup> Central to O’Donnell’s approach is the analytical division between metre and rhythm. In this schema, the rhythm of a line is determinable only by the ways in which individual readers actually do read it. There is thus in one sense no such thing as “the” rhythm of a line; there are instead only the rhythms of the individual readings given by readers. Rhythm

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<sup>9</sup> Brendan O’Donnell, *The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth’s Metrical Art* (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1995). O’Donnell’s approach is strongly informed by Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982).

is thus not a property of lines but of readings. Rhythms cannot be measured a priori, on the basis of the properties of lines, but only a posteriori, by recording individual readings and by finding some device for measuring these recordings (Douglas Oliver was amongst the first to take this empirical requirement as seriously as it deserved).<sup>10</sup>

The category of rhythm, then, is widely agreed to be a purely descriptive category. You determine it by measuring particular acoustic objects. The category of metre, on the other hand, is a much more ambiguous one. Metre *is* held to apply to lines. For this reason it has a necessary abstractness. Metre cannot meaningfully be used to measure acoustic objects. And since a line may, indeed must, be read in many different ways, it cannot properly be said to “measure” the line either. Indeed, as O’Donnell argues, it must be understood not primarily as a description at all, but as a normative “set.”<sup>11</sup> The necessary abstraction of metrical analysis, on this view, is just its point. The norm involved is derived from a collectively shared and traditionally handed down pattern of expectations. Here one salient advantage of this method becomes clear. It is able to show how the bluntness of traditional metrical categories when considered as a measure, categories such as “iambic pentameter,” is from one point of view hardly a disadvantage, because they are not really measurements at all. Were they able to chart every least shading of rhythm, they would be incapable of serving the conventional and normative function of metrical abstraction. O’Donnell is thus able to develop, in part following Attridge, a poetics of the interplay between the metrical abstract and the individual reading, and to argue that an acutely attuned sense of the conditions required to preserve that interplay is central to what has in the past been seen as Wordsworth’s metrical “conservatism.” The schema thus makes a place within its own apparatus for tradition; the division between metre and rhythm allows the full significance of tradition for metrical analysis to emerge. Metre is not merely informed by or influenced by tradition, it *is* a tradition in the sense that it is not an exact measurement of anything but a pattern of collectively preformed expectations. The line is neither pure rhythm nor pure metre but the interplay of both: “the verse line is a complex com-

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> *The Passion of Meter* 181; O’Donnell also argues that this was Wordsworth’s own view.

bination of an unrealized and unrealizable repeating abstract pattern and a unique and widely variable phonetic instance.”<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, however, this does not resolve all the problems. Metre remains a constitutively ambiguous category, stranded between description and prescription, *is* and *ought*. On the one hand, it is supposed to be a normative abstract rather than a description. O'Donnell's language here is eerily reminiscent of that which Kant uses to describe the categorical imperative. The metrical pattern is “unrealized and unrealizable,” yet something which we must strive to realize: just as the moral law is something with which we can never fully coincide, but to which we may move closer by asymptotic progression, that is to say, analogously with the way in which two lines converge to infinity without ever meeting.<sup>13</sup> The normative, rather than descriptive status of the metrical pattern would seem to be so radically insisted upon as to convert it into a regulative ideal. Yet unlike the categorical imperative, of which, being a real a priori norm, there is only one, metre is also, unavoidably, descriptive. Different lines “have” different metrical patterns which are to be separated out from the lines by analysis; even though the patterns are unrealized and unrealizable, they do not emerge from a transcendental deduction, but by analyzing the lines. It is in this sense that the metre of a line is constitutively amphibious, both descriptive and normative.

I hope it is clear by now that none of these reflections is introduced in order to suggest that O'Donnell's fine book is merely guilty of some conceptual confusions. In particular, what is not being recommended here is that in place of this equivocally prescriptive and descriptive concept of metre, we should delete the notion of metre altogether in favour of merely measuring the phonetic instances. Any attempt to measure rhythms by recording vocalized readings has already decided that *rhythm* pertains to the line read aloud; yet it is possible that the line read aloud is a less frequent event, and by no means necessarily a more significant event, than the line read silently, yet read with an understood rhythm for all that. The point already indicates that it is hardly possible to take more than a couple of steps within prosody before running into the most fundamental issues in the philosophy of mind. The

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<sup>12</sup> *The Passion of Meter* 31.

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Practical Reason,” in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 166.

question as to whether a silent reading may possess rhythm has the whole history of western metaphysics in the background. This is no reason at all to think that the question itself does not deserve an answer, or that it can abruptly be forgotten about, which has in practice been the approach of an anti-formalism which is in truth no less metaphysically compromised than its intended target; but it does mean that whilst fundamental issues in the dismantling of metaphysics remain to be settled, as they do, it is no good for prosody briskly to get on with its job, as though it could be in the least clear what its job is without the clarification of its ontological foundations. In deleting the problem of the relations between metre and rhythm, phonetic approaches delete the whole field. This can be seen if we question the divide between a descriptive rhythmic and a prescriptive metre from the other side of the divide, that of rhythm. It is not in fact the case that all the normative expectations may be placed on the side of metre. The individual spoken utterance is itself deeply preformed by such expectations; not merely expectations about good verse-reading but also about how the language is rightly to be pronounced. If phonetics manages to convert such an utterance into a purely describable object, that is not because such utterances really are such objects, but because phonetics has made them so by considering them from one aspect only. There is no thing in nature like a pure phonetic datum, any more than there can be the colour red without something that is red. Such "data" are products preformed by the taxonomic activity of phonetics.

Prosody's drives towards scientificity are thus governed by a comedy of enlightenment. The more the conceptual equivocations of prosodic theory are pointed out, the more energetically theorists strive to eliminate them. Yet the field is a field only because of those equivocations. The need for professional good behaviour demands that prosody present its warrant. This means preparing a set of value-free facts. It means presenting a set of techniques whereby the field's objects can be described. But the field does not consist of objects. It consists of experiences. These experiences are not the passive, still less the collectively identical, consumption of sheer data. They are experiences in which suffering, desiring, thinking, and judging are complicatedly, perhaps inextricably, intertwined; experiences in which personal history, and the history of collective experience which is sedimented in the materials experienced, collide. For this very reason, prosody cannot regard tradition simply

as its object. The aporia of tradition is, rather, something much more like the condition of the possibility of prosodic enquiry. It matters that tradition is understood aporetically, because tradition cannot legitimately be invoked in order to delete our experiences of verse in favour of an authoritative discourse, no matter whether this is understood as literally authoritative, as in classicizing metrics, or as a form of ideology, as in the sociology of culture.

The intolerably equivocal, less than fully scientific character of prosodic concepts is thus not an accident; it is essential to the nature of the field of interest. For this reason, it is not at all my point that the existing prosodic lexicon is inadequate. Quite the reverse: what is inadequate is the belief that in order to sort out prosody's problems what is required above all is a new lexicon. Any imaginable future prosody will want to draw on the whole history of the patient labour of description of poetic language, and to add some more such labour of its own, for the very reason that the difficulties outlined above are by no means accidental but bound up with fundamental aporias of human experience in modernity. It is not only the languages for describing our experience of prosody which are damaged by the modern suppression of metaphysics, but those experiences themselves.

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In the final section of my paper, then, I want to make two attempts, from different angles, to imagine what a better prosody might look like. The first starts out from the reflection that prosody cannot be modelled on the measurement of an object. It then asks whether, given this, there is any way past sheer philodoxy, the opinionated assertion of taste. It thus addresses the reconception of subjectivity which would be a precondition of rethinking prosodic experience. The second proceeds from an analogy with work in the philosophy of music. It asks on what conditions works which cannot be detached from the historical experience which makes them possible, can be interpreted as having a truth-content. It thus addresses the reconception of the object which would be a precondition of rethinking prosodic experience, a reconception which could understand that the object is never a sheer datum, always a constellation of experiences. The paper concludes by suggesting that it since it is hardly possible harmoniously to combine the two approaches, it will be necessary to make them discordantly collide

with each other. In both cases part of the point will be to understand the aporia of tradition as central, rather than incidental, to prosodic enquiry.

If prosodic enquiry cannot be modelled on the measurement of an object, to what kind of truth might it nevertheless conceivably lay claim? There has in the twentieth century been a whole tradition of philosophy, whose central task is conceived as a stringent elaboration of the place of the subject in experience: phenomenology. Phenomenology has occasionally attempted to investigate music, more rarely to address prosody. In the latter case the results to date have been unpromising. One set of studies which initially appears to offer much is that by the phenomenologist-psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham.<sup>14</sup> But the study disappoints because Abraham's subtle critical and analytic mind is in this study operating within a framework set by an orthodox Husserlian phenomenology in which an epochal reduction to a pure consciousness defined as intentionality is understood as the epistemological ground. One familiar set of conclusions which could be drawn from this disappointment would run along Heideggerian or deconstructive lines. We could conclude that phenomenology (and indeed prosody) is simply too overdetermined by the ghost of metaphysics, whether this is understood as a forgetting of the question of being or as a logocentric metaphysics of presence, to offer any illumination of the question of the music of poetry. This conclusion would settle the issue too quickly, however. If we examine the authorships of Heidegger and Derrida we can see that, there, the question of prosody lies largely in oblivion. This is not only because neither of these writers thought (or have so far thought) it a question especially important to them, but rather because the whole field of interest is taken to have been displaced by the more fundamental dismantling and self-dismantling of the metaphysics of presence.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms. On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas T. Rand and Maria Torok, trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most significant work on prosody done along post-Heideggerian (though not deconstructive) lines can be found in the work of the (if he will permit this title) Italian philosopher-philologist Giorgio Agamben, in particular the fine studies of Italian poetry collected in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999).

The diagnosis from fundamental ontology or deconstruction would not be the only one available, however. The inadequacy of Husserlian phenomenology for dealing with the question of prosody is evident. But this may not be because too much weight has been placed on subjectivity. It may be that too little, or rather, the wrong kind of, emphasis has been placed on the subject. Here some hitherto little exploited resources are offered by the project of the French phenomenologist Michel Henry. In a series of monographs from his early thesis *The Essence of Manifestation* to the more recent *Material Phenomenology*, Henry has offered a phenomenological rethinking of what is meant by materialism. It is sometimes imagined, by proponents as well as by opponents, that materialism is the simplest of all philosophical creeds and the easiest to articulate, requiring above all the liquidation of all references to illusory entities. In particular materialism has been imagined to imply a destruction of any lingering tendency to believe in the reality of human subjectivity, and the provision of a theory of the ideological and/or metaphysical character of that illusory entity. For Henry, a materialist philosophy (or what he would prefer to call a "material phenomenology") has remained unrealized not because too much attention has been paid to the ontology of the subject, but because too little, and the wrong kind of, attention has been paid to it. Aspirant materialisms, Henry argues, have started out from a terrain already determined in advance by the idealisms which they would supposedly oppose. They have thought that the illusion which they must destroy is the illusion of the independent reality of consciousness. Consciousness must be shown to be nothing at all, whether the idea of it is taken to be a "category-mistake," an "ideology," or a piece of residual metaphysics. Such materialisms thus take for their target an evacuated ontology of the subject provided to them in advance by idealism. For Henry, however, what characterizes idealism is not that it grants too important a foundational role to the subject, but that the subject to which such a role has been granted has been deprived in advance of all its properties. It is the *failure* to provide an ontology of the subject, not an excessive preoccupation with providing such an ontology, which is the mark of idealism. Idealism's account of the subject (and here it is the thought of Kant and Hegel which Henry particularly has in mind) is in fact marked by its terror of relapsing into dogmatic metaphysics and its continual insistence that the subject *is* nothing at all by itself. The Kantian paralogsms remain decisive



for idealism: the categories are concepts which we cannot not think with, but they can provide no ontological information of themselves until they are combined with intuition, whether of an a priori or of an a posteriori kind. For Henry idealism's subject is produced by expelling all the ontological content of what I am—my fear or my desire or my pain—into the realm of appearance, so that affectivity of whatever kind appears as a data-set which is to be processed by consciousness. When "materialism" then sets itself to tilt at the idol of "consciousness," it too often simply accepts unawares the other kind of idol which is the result of idealism, the conversion of my bodily experience into an unconscious data-set, an idea no less idealist than the illusory "pure consciousness" which determines it. Material phenomenology, instead, involves providing a phenomenology of what he calls the "subjective body," an expression whose meaning can be simply understood by recollecting that I *am* my body rather than just *having* it. No one can show me a fear, a hunger, a pain. No one can get me to understand what hunger and fear and pain are like by explaining them to me, or by defining them. Yet hunger and fear and pain are real experiences. When "materialism" decides that its job is to smash or dismantle the idol of subjectivity, it is completing, rather than reversing, the project of idealism: *la mise à mort philosophique de la vie*.<sup>16</sup>

Here, then, would be the beginning of what we might think of as 'Ideas towards an impure phenomenology and a phenomenological prosody.' Some of the possible implications of this project for prosody can be understood by looking at Henry's reading, in *Material Phenomenology*, of Husserl's 1905 lectures on the phenomenology of the internal consciousness of time. Like Heidegger before him, Henry points out that the idea of time imagined there is unable to free itself from the metaphor of time as a series of dimensionless points. But whereas for Heidegger this is a symptom of a metaphysics of presence, for Henry it rather indicates a metaphysics of absence, a nihilism, for the very good reason that if these are *dimensionless* points no moment can ever be in place for long enough to be real. Because Henry's own phenomenology of the subjective body, instead of corralling the body as an objective data-set, offers us a model in which not intentionality, but affectivity, the suffering-desiring-thinking body, is the deci-

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. in particular Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990).

sive feature of subjectivity, it also begins to hold out the possibility of a different kind of phenomenology of time, one which would be founded not on the analogy with measuring space which has so often governed the way time is thought, but founded instead upon the rhythms of this "subjective body." Henry's project is a long way from providing this yet. His book, *Material Phenomenology*, is not the digest of a completed science, but a set of essays announcing the discovery of a problem. Yet this problem is not unlike that which the acutest critics of the metaphysics behind scientific prosody have already begun to discover: the problem that the most fundamental prosodic concepts, such as the concept of a stress, remain inadequate.

One example may be useful here. The concept of *stress* is ubiquitously deployed in readings of poems as though everyone knew what it meant. It is supposed to be a measure of a particular level of acoustic intensity. Yet, as advanced linguistics has long known, the concept of stress cannot merely be confined to acoustics. It is crucially determined by, for example, the syntactical structure of sentences. It is not therefore merely a property of the supposed sound-patterns of lines, it is also a cognitive matter, no less than are the semantic reference and syntactical organization of sentences. For this reason, the concept of stress, so central to metrical analysis, offers us another instance of the way in which prosody must fail if it orders itself according to the model of what it is like to measure an object. Douglas Oliver's illuminating "preliminary definition of stress in performance" runs thus: "A poetic stress is apparently an instant when we unify into a single conception some of our sense of the form of a poetic line's sound as it has been developing over a small period of time. It necessarily involves unifying with our perception of the sound some conception of the meaning and emotional significance of the stress-bearing syllable in relation to the overall meaning and emotional significance of the poem."<sup>17</sup> Oliver himself, with a perhaps surprising persuasiveness, later develops a more thoroughgoing theory of stress using the analysis of time developed by Augustine, who was himself a notable theorist of prosody. Clive Scott, who has seen a not unconnected set of problems, turns to Bergson.<sup>18</sup> What this indicates to

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<sup>17</sup> *Poetry and Narrative* 5. His "revised definition of stress" is offered on 112–14.

<sup>18</sup> Clive Scott, "The Reading of Verse," in *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 82–104.

me is that because so many problems are caused in prosody by the misapplication of the model of measuring an object, one necessary component of a rethought prosody is likely to be a phenomenology of subjective corporeal experience.

My second angle of attack, one which stands in complementary tension to this idea for an impure phenomenology, sets out from considering some problems in the philosophy of music. In recent years a number of musicologists have been able to question the disabling divide that has afflicted the study of music still more severely than that of literature: that between music history and the aesthetics of music. Naïvely scientific attempts to establish the relationship between an entity known as “the” human brain and other entities known, for example, as “the C major triad” or “the diminished seventh,” have increasingly been challenged by an approach which can understand both these pseudo-entities as, rather, themselves historical. When we find that the whole vocabulary of musical production and consumption in a given epoch or even in a given court or coterie is not merely radically divergent from those currently used to describe its musical objects, but also has its own internal logic in which historical and social experience lies sedimented, it becomes clear that our own vocabulary for understanding those objects, which are not data but constellations of experiences, will need to learn to speak a different language if it is ever to know with what it is dealing. This does not mean replacing our own aesthetic experience with a historicist stuffed replica, but rather understanding that part of the history of our aesthetic experience has become unintelligible to us through the repeated acts of suppression and forgetting which have founded modernity as an ersatz “overcoming” of tradition. To take an example from still another branch of aesthetic enquiry, when Michael Baxandall used the most surprising kinds of contemporary documents to rethink the relation between *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, the result was very far from a historicist deletion of our aesthetic experience; it rather showed viewers how far they had lost the objects which they thought themselves to be experiencing, having lost the traditions, the practices, which in part constituted those objects.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972). The philosophy of music which I principally have

How might this work in the case of a particular prosodic example? A central desideratum would be to avoid choosing a method whose consistency would arbitrarily rule out any individual terminological resource as “unscientific.” If we imagine the possibility of an interesting essay on the prosody of Alexander Pope, what we are imagining, I think, could not be an enquiry which began by rounding up all the relevant supposed prosodic objects, subjecting these to measurement on the basis of one or another pseudo-descriptive contemporary ruler, and then reconnecting them to the wounded historical experience from which they had in the first place been torn away. A prior requirement would instead be the alert and flexible artificing of a provisional language with which to talk about the prosody of Pope’s poetry. This would be best served by refusing to rule out any possible source. It would be essential to begin recovering, not merely vocabularies of reception and production, but some sense of the experiences which might have been implied by those vocabularies. Because lengthy explicit commentary on prosodic matters is rather rarely found, a good deal of attention would need to be paid to those brief passing judgements of taste which in fact index whole icebergs of coterie and broader public reception beneath them. If we take only the most familiar and outworn judgement about Pope’s poetry, that it is “polished,” decoding the significance of this judgement could not only be a matter of looking at the verse as though it were data and trying to see what is meant, but would mean decoding the significance of polish itself at this peculiar historical moment, a moment at which polished combs and boxes on a table could serve not merely to breathe all Arabia into a dressing room, but to breathe also a sense of a newly self-systematizing credit economy hardening into its polished carapace. Or, to take another entry point apparently trodden into mud, the perpetual comparison of style to clothing; since it is now of course well understood that clothing is itself by no means a simple matter, neither a question of conveniently fixed rules nor an expression of individual taste, but rather a series of meaningful and possibly risky acts within discontinuous and unstable coteries and publics, an understanding of what this meant for prosody would need to have some sense of

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in mind is that of Theodor W. Adorno. Cf. especially Adorno, “Music and Language: A Fragment” in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 1–8.

the phenomenology of the sartorial field of production: so that prosodic coat in which the poet chooses to appear in public will bear many messages upon it about the poet, including, perhaps, the message of refusing to give messages, of an attempt to produce a utopianly unmarked surface from which whatever would make the poet embarrassingly locatable, within classes or sects or coteries, has been erased. The modern male business uniform of lounge suit and tie had its prehistory in the ferocious competition of Regency dandies to evade the possibility of social pigeonholing; to what parallel heroisms of impeccability might the fantasy of the perfectly irreproachable pentameter attest? Of course new historicist approaches, themselves deeply indebted to, for example, the memory of Benjamin's incomplete Arcades project, with its fascination with the historical meaning of shop-windows, iron balconies, plush, have done much to broaden the kinds of cultural artefact thought relevant to literary enquiry. Yet at the same time they have, for all their surface of theoretical complexity, stood in an essentially simple sociological relationship to the anecdotes, texts, fetishes, fortuitously assembled: a blank value-neutrality shows up in the suppression of fundamental philosophical questions, on the grounds that the latter are simply obsolete. A philosophy of modern prosody would differ here in understanding that, since any artefact with a meaning is thereby cognitively significant, it may bear a truth-content no less than a range of so-called ideological functions. It would be able to understand how something which has come to be historically can nevertheless tell the truth about the historical experience from which it cannot be detached. The philosophical interpretation of that truth would depend, not at all upon cutting out everything thought to be merely historical in the object, but, to the contrary, on a decoding of the historical knowledge sedimented in its minutely material particulars.

This entails a still more difficult set of problems. The mantra that everything is culturally mediated began life as a justified protest against pseudo-scientific anthropologies: the idea that the C major triad just sounds right to the human brain, or the idea that "iambic pentameter" naturally has an especially flowing, or heroic, or conversational, feel to it. But as dogma, it can only cancel itself out. For this reason the concept of nature is in the strict sense aporetic, a concept which we can neither delete nor satisfactorily define. Both the approaches which I have canvassed have at their basis an understanding that the currently aporetic status of the

concept of nature implies that the concept of culture, and everything which that concept is currently allowed to found in its professional disciplines, stands in an equally aporetic condition.

It ought to be quite evident that these two approaches, the ideas for an impure phenomenology and for a philosophy of modern prosody, do not comfortably add up. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I think that this is not only my fault. What they return us to is something like the aporia of tradition which I sketched in the opening sections of this paper. An aporia is only truly such if the contradiction stated is not one that can be obviated by a more precise formulation. In this case, the aporia is induced by the wish for real undeludedness rather than its scientific mock-up. Because the aporia is a real one, the study of prosodic tradition demands, not a new method, or a new vocabulary, or a new system, but something which could only more loosely be called a new approach; requires, that is, a form of critical enquiry in which the uncertain, the subjunctive, the optative, can be understood as possible moods of truth. It may be that it is in this that the possibility of the truth of a tradition itself resides, too; as that truth not modelled on the deletion of all that is not absolutely certain, the correctness which forgets its own history of error; as that truth which is not the propositional abridgement of an experience, but a composition bearing an affinity to that experience's whole ineliminably affective personal and historical course.