

# TRINACRIA

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TRINACRIA

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## MOVING RIGHT ALONG...

As we begin our third year of publication, it behooves us to look back in gratitude to the many poets, both known and unknown, whose contributions have helped make TRINACRIA the success that it is. I had thought to name specific names at this point, but after reflecting that this magazine is about *poetry* and not *personalities*, I decided against doing so. Our published issues speak for themselves, and we do not need the silly networking and name-dropping that less significant journals deem necessary to their self-promotion. Let them preen and posture if they want; we don't have to. I'll just say to all of our individual contributors "Thank you for your fine work. I was honored to publish it." As the great Flaubert said, *L'homme, c'est rien; l'oeuvre, c'est tout.*

I sense something seismic going on in the little world of formal poetry. Those cracks and fissures that were small and largely unnoticed in 1990 are now widening, and there is a distinct smell of mephitic gas in the air. Despite the frantic efforts of conciliatory types like Dana Gioia to prevent it, there is going to be a major split. And that split will divide the wimps, dilettantes, fence-sitters, and other Big-Umbrella types from the genuine partisans of genuinely metrical poetry. The former group will blend with and disappear into the haze of mainstream emotion-mongering and experimentalism (that's where their primary loyalties always were, anyway). The remaining remnant will be small, but purified.

As Lenin said, we should always call for a split, and welcome it. Division promotes clarity. Division isolates the enemy. Division re-focuses loyalty. When those in our movement who are still emotionally entangled with free-verse habits, modernist presuppositions, and surrealistic fakery are finally shown the door, we can set to work on the major restoration project before us: bringing poetry back to its senses. TRINACRIA is one small effort in that direction.

We are, of course, under constant attack. But that's hardly of any importance. Several friends and acquaintances have urged me to tone down those aspects of TRINACRIA that give the greatest offense to its

enemies, as a way to “build bridges” and “start conversations”—two metaphors that strike me as singularly apt tropes for gutless surrender. No—I prefer to take as my model Captain Smollett in Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, who when counseled to lower the British flag in the midst of a hostile cannonade said “*Strike my colors, sir? Never!*”

Some persons have inquired if we have any sort of editorial policy concerning stylistics, other than the stipulations in our Core Statement. Generally speaking, no—my main concern apart from metrics is that a poem be intelligent and literate, and free from any posturing idiosyncrasy or willful obscurity of expression. On the few occasions when I have asked contributors to revise submitted poems, it has always been in the direction of sharpness and clarity, or closer adherence to proper English idiom.

However, I can say that one of my concerns has been to publish good poems in meters other than iambic pentameter, and to avoid the preponderance of sonnets that seems to afflict too many formalist magazines. The astute metrical analyst T.S. Omond pointed out that, in the great divide of duple and triple meters, duple tended to predominate in English verse until the nineteenth century, when poets began to demonstrate that triple meters could also be used with remarkable effect. Nevertheless, there still lingers a hangover of prejudice against triple meters, even though we now have a considerable body of fine dactylic and anapestic work. This prejudice is based largely on tacit snobbery, as so many things are in the world of letters. Ask the typical academic conference-hopper about triple meters, and you will evoke a patronizing smile and a dismissive sniff about “light verse.”

Well, screw him. To counteract this snobbery, I try to print as many good non-iambic poems as I can find, such as the tightly wound limericks of Candace Ruggieri and Derek Burgoyne, or the dactyls of Peter Austin and Ann Drysdale, or Allen Tice’s Englishings of the classical hexameter, or the hard trochaics of Angelique Wellish and Juliana Beedy. That’s the one editorial tendency I acknowledge.

Once again we are pleased to announce the six Pushcart Prize nominees for Issue #4. Here are the authors and their poems, in alphabetical order:

- Douglas G. Brown for his “Dactylic Whimsies,” a playful excursion in triple meter on sexual interactions between persons of historical note, resting on a puckish comment-and-repartee structure.
- Richard O’Connell for his “Neropolis,” an English sonnet on the burning of Rome in Nero’s time, with a comic interplay that winds around the city’s destruction, the manic frenzy of Nero, and the mute boredom of Petronius Arbiter.
- E.M. Schorb for his “Today, Noon Traffic Crowding,” a sonnet on the sudden resurgence of memory at the sight of a familiar face—a memory which summons up resentment and a powerful sense of loss.
- Carol A. Taylor for her “The Polyglot Makes Love,” an amazingly adept macaronic poem that makes nimble use of French and Spanish in a sustained rhyme scheme, and that contrasts a speaker’s alleged incapacity to find words with her obvious multilingual command of them.
- Don Thackrey for his “Dream Lover,” a deftly composed rondeau of frank and uncomplicated desire, expressing not just appreciation of the female sex but an honest non-monogamous attitude concerning relationships.
- Frank White for his “Carolina Clay,” a series of subdued couplets in the elegiac mode on a family burial plot in a Carolina churchyard, expressing the speaker’s preparation for and acceptance of death.

All of these poems are well deserving of honor, and I hope that their authors will continue to grace our pages with the fruits of their literary labor. As for this current issue, we are happy to place in print, for the very first time, a previously unknown eighteenth-century love lyric by Reginald Stafford, taken directly from a holograph manuscript. We are also publishing a large chunk of Pietro Aretino’s *Sonetti Lussuriosi* of 1525, in English translation accompanied by the original Italian.

Joseph S. Salemi  
Woodside, New York

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Frederick Turner

## Elegy

The spring could only start to bloom,  
The light bulbs brightened in the room,  
The deadlines lost their air of doom,  
When Osama died.

The strawberries were strangely sweet,  
The music had a quicker beat,  
The litter vanished from the street,  
When Osama died.

The politicians for one day  
Forgot the lies they planned to say,  
The clouds began to blow away,  
When Osama died.

And postal workers smiled, and rain  
Did not soak through the News again,  
And there were upgrades on the plane  
When Osama died.

And no disk crashed, and no key stuck,  
And no official passed the buck,  
And hyped-up movies didn't suck  
When Osama died.

So thank you, dear bin Laden, for  
Not being present any more,  
And pardon us, and don't be sore  
If no-one cried.

Paul Lake

## Plumber's Song

“No matter what your time or place is  
The hero with a thousand faces  
Enacts your fate from the world's storehouse of myths.”  
So, Joseph Campbell, please explain  
Why I'm now snaking out a drain  
To free the sewage of the Johnsons and the Smiths.

Though every sage of the Greek nation  
Said a life of contemplation  
Is the path to virtue, truth, and happiness,  
In my present situation  
But for two weeks' paid vacation,  
What's to contemplate but daily crappiness?

Flipping burgers, digging ditches  
Would teach all those sons of bitches  
Who proclaim we should be following our bliss  
That life's an open septic tank  
We teeter over on a plank  
And our sole quest, to keep from plunging into piss.

X.J. Kennedy

## Japanese Beetles

### *Snail Mail*

The preening picture postcard that you sent  
Two or three weeks ago from Bangladesh  
Arrived today. At least it proves you went,  
And now you're here, poor postscript, in the flesh.

### *To the Committee on Tenure and Promotion*

Professor Figg should rise above Assistant.  
Let him no longer sit below the salt.  
His published work's so dry it's drought-resistant.  
Nobody having drunk it, who'll find fault?

### *Award*

Luckman has won a ton of gold: a prize  
Named after some rich nincompoop. But when  
Will Luckman launch a line of verse that flies?  
Not while it pays to push an earthbound pen.

### *A Further Word from an Army of Mercenaries*

Your sum of things we saved. But beds of lime  
Are piss-poor pay. You owe us overtime.

*Gettysburg*

If Lee had triumphed and if Pickett's troops  
Had made it over Cemetery Hill,  
Today we'd all house slaves in chicken coops,  
Jeff Davis might adorn our dollar bill.

*Post Coitum*

After coition every man is sad  
Especially if coition has been bad  
And he may even feel a wee bit wistful  
When onanism leaves him with a fistful.

*At a Reading of Poems of a Poet's Agonies*

We sit and listen, writhing in our chairs,  
Pierced by a pain far worse than what he shares.

Claudia Gary

## Storm Warning

“Stay home! The road spells danger!”  
On such a morning, ice,  
old landscape rearranger  
indifferent and precise,

encapsulates each grass stalk  
and leaf of tiny shrub,  
the pattern on each sidewalk,  
bicycle spoke and hub.

The streets are well deserted.  
Peril is absolute  
where rain and freeze have flirted.  
And yet my salt-stained boot

finds still another doily  
of frost-begotten lace  
whose edges crackle royally  
in danger’s frozen face.

Sally Cook

## Making All Things Orderly

Stare at grey clapboards in unbroken rows  
That seem to follow the unceasing sound  
Of thrumming traffic, with no vibrant red  
Or swaying leaves to soften sunlight's blows.

Poems of air and chlorophyll's repose  
Have gone; the smallest traces can't be found;  
Destroyed, as some fool's sense of order fed  
On massacre of hollyhock and rose.

For you and I know there are always those  
Who come to slash and dig and curse the ground  
Where fantasy has bloomed, and plant instead  
Their awful dragon's teeth. And I suppose

What grows from them is vigilant, and toes  
Its dull unthinking line, but pound for pound  
Cannot compare to one small flower bed  
Of buds, rough stalks, and silken furbelows.

Douglas G. Brown

## Father Arnold

Arnold Schwarzenegger appears on a TV talk show with a female interviewer, his estranged wife Maria, and his former housekeeper, Mrs. Baena.

*“You are old, Father Arnold, the newswoman said,  
And your housekeeper’s son looks like you.  
Oh why did you screw, when you could have got head?  
Don’t you think that was risky to do?”*

*“When I was on steroids, my testicles shrank  
To a very diminutive size.  
I wrongly concluded my ammo was blank;  
So I fired at targets, unwise.”*

*“You are old, Father Arnold, and you seem somewhat weak  
For women besides your Maria.  
Your love-child’s exposed, from a tabloid-style leak.  
Don’t you think this will ruin your career?”*

*“My gubernatorial term has run out,  
And I’m smeared with political shame.  
But Hollywood beckons, where there’s not a doubt  
I will soon be returning to fame.”*

*“You’re a jerk, Father Arnold!” Maria proclaimed,  
“With a bastard son out of that cow.  
And everyone else but yourself you have blamed.  
Would you kindly explain yourself, now?”*

“When I wed you, my dear, you were hearty and hale,  
With the firm solid flesh of your youth.  
Now, like an old witch, you are scrawny and pale,  
And excessively long in the tooth.”

*“You are scum, Father Arnold!” Mrs. Baena exclaimed.  
“Why, you’re turning your back on me, too!  
When Maria had dumped you, we’d marry, you claimed;  
But now you are saying we’re through.”*

“I gave you a job, and I bought you a house,  
And financially fixed you for life.  
I know that you think I’m a horrible louse,  
But I’m on the prowl for a new wife.”

*All three of these women, in unison, said  
“Father Arnold, it’s sooner or later  
You’ll be riddled with bullets until you are dead  
With a woman as your Terminator.”*

“Mere servants and women should stay in their place.  
You were put on this earth, it is true,  
For the prurient needs of my Aryan race.  
Now, it’s *hasta la vista* to you.”

Daniel Fernandez

## Beyond Binary Systems

The universe is odd or maybe even:  
Arms, legs, and lungs; testes and ovaries;  
Eyes, ears, and breasts, etcetera. One heaven,  
One God, one soul, one trunk for men and trees.  
Most of us are bewitched by number two—  
Striving with mind and body to be paired,  
Forever stuck together with love's glue  
From shopping to the opera—all things shared.  
Still life's great crises force us to be one—  
Sickness and death, the tumult of career,  
And widowed years spent in oblivion  
With none beside us to wipe off a tear.  
And there may be a second universe  
Beyond our laws and numbers—faced alone—  
Beyond computer count and breaths of verse,  
When we approach infinity split from bone.

T. S. Kerrigan

## The Remorse of Paris

*Lying wounded by Philoctetes' poisoned arrow, Paris  
reflects on the consequences of his abduction of Helen.*

My longing, passage to your lips,  
I traced the long cascade of hair  
That trailed halfway from breasts to hips.  
What man who saw such beauty there  
Would take a breath, appraise the cost  
Of sullen, half-disdainful eyes  
Or sense what he'd already lost?  
Whoever called Athena true,  
Her sister Aphrodite wise?  
If goddesses are rarely good,  
Would more could I expect of you?  
So much to come I didn't know,  
So much of you misunderstood,  
The passive kiss, the crushing blow.

C.B. Anderson

## Late-Fifties Lament

The shuttered ivory tower  
Leans gently toward the night,  
And old dominions cower  
Beneath its shadow, right  
Beside the withered flower  
Of youth. The erudite,  
Unmindful of the hour  
At hand, can shed no light  
On why we must devour,  
Though lacking appetite,  
Stale bread and wine gone sour,  
Our table grace now trite.

Where once a higher power  
Determined black and white,  
Low clouds have loosed a shower  
Obscuring lines of sight  
Long cherished; dazed, we scour  
A grey horizon. Dwight,  
*Du warst der Eisenhauer,*  
Assurance at its height.

Leo Yankevich

## Ezra Pound Enters the Tent

No, this is not a station in the metro,  
this is an open cage outside of Pisa.  
Ezra Pound now sits inside of it,  
his beard a burning bush of grief made new.  
Gazing at the moon, and looking retro,  
the better craftsman grins to bars, and sees a  
night of stars implode, his touched eyes lit  
and posed for labor. If not he, then who  
will scribble truth into a timeless croon?  
Twenty-five days will pass before the good  
guys offer him a tent, his face now wood,  
his psyche worn by rain and sun and moon.  
He leaves the cage, and is assisted in,  
his mouth ajar, his grin not quite a grin.

Jennifer Reeser

## Non Omnis Moriar

*Not all of me shall die...*

—Horace

This is my grief in secret: he is gone  
Who lies against me twilight until dawn.  
I breathe in pollen with his body's vapors.  
I shelve his books and organize old papers,  
Retrieve his Wall Street Journals from the lawn,

Brew coffee and pretend to hear him yawn,  
Reprove some fashion magazine, or fawn  
Over "Faust." I dredge his cress with Spanish capers.  
This is my grief in secret.  
No longer are the curtains ever drawn;

No longer are the wall lamps ever on.  
I rub his limp hands, light the bees' wax tapers,  
Remembering he called them "stamen rapers."  
"My heart in halves," I tell him, "has been sawn."  
This is my grief in secret.

His warmth and vigor lost, I took him cold.  
His heart at rest, the hurried last bell tolled,  
I hushed his *rigor mortis*, and the hearse  
Averted, took him as I vowed: for worse—  
Past even sickness and disease, to hold.

In flesh, the sedulous maggot goes enrolled—  
But when the flies arrived, how could I fold  
The sheet across his face, which grew more terse,  
His warmth and vigor lost?  
Jaundiced to a learned, mosaic gold.

My solace being unseen and controlled,  
Those acts of satisfaction that immerse  
My pain in pleasure—how could he curse  
What was consensual? To be consoled,  
His warmth and vigor lost.

His half being known now as The Other Side,  
I roll and question him: hard-boiled or fried  
The eggs? Then slide my fingers round a bone,  
Evening my voice to monotone.  
*Subside*, the motion cautions me, *subside*.

The white rose eulogizing him, beside  
The lilies in the upper hall, has dried—  
Funereal perfumes much like my own.  
His half being known,  
I clip the blooms and bring them like a bride

To emptiness which I must climb astride.  
There are my rose, my cloying French cologne.  
I wave the first, pretend to hear him groan,  
His half being known.  
One slip and suddenly, it is inside.

In intimacy not fulfilled before,  
One wonders what corruption holds in store,  
Now I am free, and he is unaware  
Of how the strands of his still-growing hair  
Are traced, and how explored his every pore;

How, entering the room, I slam the door  
To strain against bereavement more and more,  
Gripping the posts and rocking like a chair  
In intimacy,  
My boring, furthest love brought to the fore;

How he knows neither sovereignty nor  
What it is like to feel the tendons tear,  
Nor has capacity now to compare,  
But seeps—like me, until the lungs are sore  
In intimacy.

I will still kiss that Other Side until  
My passions, like his own, becoming still,  
I have surrendered dumbly to the dead—  
A crossed romantic on a creaking bed,  
Ecstatic with a stiffened mouth to fill.

Ambitious, arch, each afternoon, I will  
Be teased by weeds beyond the windowsill,  
Flourishing beyond that withered head  
I will still kiss;  
At dusk, I will select a sedge to kill,

Symbolic of the puritan. What shrill,  
Long, crying winds might be destroyed, instead,  
When night descends, the trickle of blood red  
From chill lips, mocking mine—a dreaded thrill  
I will still kiss.

Frank White

## ‘What He Would Call Them’

*And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.*

—Genesis 2:19

I walk encased within a caul:  
This life of seven decades plus,  
Compounded of its own recall—  
The things that build and furnish us.

But hard to entertain the new  
In pristine freshness, as the stalks  
Of grass stretch up to taste the dew  
That silences our morning walks.

Yet what does learning signify,  
Acquired by labor and by games,  
Except to face with Adam-eye  
Each new day’s doings needing names?

Karen Kelsay

## The Courtship Hour

I love the hour that hangs its weightless haze  
Of yawn across my bed. An ivory wrap  
Of humming stillness, spectral dance embossed  
In thimble-light. I love the wentletrap

Of thoughts and gurgled chants that twist before  
White shoals of sleep. The bend and blur of night  
With loveliness and brokenness inside  
Soft vagaries that pivot in the light.

I love the hour subservient to dreams,  
When day's satiety leaves remnant sky.  
And all beheaded moments shed their wings  
Into a hushed reluctance as they die.

David W. Landrum

## Jack's Farm

Earth is a randy girl who'll give it up,  
move in with you (she's not the guilty kind),  
open her long legs willingly enough  
and thrill you—yet she has things on her mind

and things to do. The fecund place you toil,  
her tangled root, forever moist and slick,  
the yielding flesh you plow (which is like soil),  
her sprawling body, offer you a trick,

a furrow for your lust, but you're the one  
who's screwed and who's exploited in the end.  
You realize, when your short affair is done,  
you got no gain for all she made you spend.

Jared Carter

## At the Château

*The painter Rosa Bonheur took up residence in the Château de By, in the Forest of Fontainebleau, in 1859 and remained there until her death in 1899. Her studio was to survive unchanged for another seventy years and today is preserved as a museum.*

Up those dark stairs we ventured, in a time  
That had no end. Neither your foot nor mine  
Could pace those halls again, or enter still  
That shuttered room in which her vanished will  
Announced its presence by those broken signs—

The half-completed oils, the headless tines  
Of antlers on the wall, the scattered lines  
Of drawings, papers, dust that seemed to spill

up those dark stairs.

How innocent we were—our little mime  
Of exploration like an abstract mind  
That knows but cannot feel. What could instill  
In either of us what this woman's skill  
Revealed, that we too might begin to climb

up those dark stairs?

# Dismantling Metrical Structure: The Modernist Project Revisited

by

Edward Fisher

*(This is an abridged version of a much longer paper given at The New York Poetry Forum on May 14, 2011.)*

Why did modern poets abandon meter in favor of free verse? That is the question Timothy Steele addresses in his book *Missing Measures*. Borrowing the term “free verse” from the French *vers libre*, which featured a mix of conventional meters and avoidance of rhyme, the modernists decided to overthrow meter altogether, dismissing nearly three millennia of conventional craft, freeing poetry from its own history and bequeathing to their heirs an increasing anxiety about the nature and status of poetry.

Since the international success of *The Waste Land* free verse has been elevated to a position of virtual orthodoxy. Eliot felt the distinction between metrical and non-metrical was trivial and his editor, Ezra Pound, confused idiom and metric, suggesting that metrical composition was outmoded and should be abandoned. Others identified meter with antiquated diction unsuitable to modern sensibilities, arguing that free verse allowed greater genuineness of expression, and some even went so far as to insist that serious poetry could no longer be written in conformity to the poetic line.

Many of the innovations touted by the moderns were simply recycled from the past. Both Euripides and Horace were staunchly opposed to the elevated rhetoric and literary conservatism of their day, feeling that periodic renovations of language were necessary and healthy in order to keep pace with living speech. Much later, Wordsworth stressed the value of an unaffected poetic style, with the stated goal of relating situations from common life in a language actually used by real people. Still, however innovative in their treatment of subject matter and form, writers of the past remained

masters of traditional craft, believing those who had difficulty with it should blame themselves and not the medium.

Steele is especially critical of Pound for his confusion of scansion with metrical practice. This confusion resulted from a method developed in nineteenth-century schools that entailed speaking lines of verse in a pronounced and sing-song manner. Such so-called “emphatic readings” ignored the infinite rhythmical contours that exist in conventional pentameter, producing highly artificial effects. Pound thus mistakenly concluded that the only way to lend distinction to verse involved the violation of metrical norms, rather than skilled variation within them. He defended the ridiculous idea of the “unavoidable foot” (i.e. that anything written in syllables was inescapably metrical). Still, after all the dust settled, the leaders of poetic modernism worried that their revolution had not been followed up by a period of consolidation, instead of by increasingly casual and incoherent experimentation with form.

Steele points out that ancient prose writers looked to poetry for structure, so much so that critics had difficulty maintaining the distinction between verse and prose. Orators and rhetoricians in Cicero’s day were obsessed with establishing quasi-metrical procedures for prose that would lend it the integrity and attractiveness of verse. He and others developed very carefully crafted structures of patterned speech. Aristotle had argued that prose should possess perceptible rhythmical qualities and hint at metrics, but be more variable and diffuse, and not embrace the metrical line. The practical reason behind this was that orators desired to appeal movingly and memorably without allowing their art to become too obvious. Easily predictable rhythms would appear contrived and suggest an absence of conviction.

During the Middle Ages, writers of prose began borrowing resources from verse in order to organize and elevate their work. These authors were not merely attempting to make prose poetic; they were trying to compose prose fiction that possessed the dignity of verse fiction, because fiction in antiquity had more prestige if written in meter. Not until the Renaissance does an interest in prose as a medium for serious imaginative literature become widespread, partly because the vernacular was regarded as the proper vehicle for drama, and partly because of the later development of the “novel of manners”

which became increasingly popular and gradually absorbed much of the material and audience formerly devoted to poetry.

As the novel triumphed and came into its own, poets reacted by exploring new areas of experience and producing a kind of spontaneous lyricism that ultimately proved detrimental to the epic. This narrowing of range to the lyric resulted in a literary vacuum that the novel successfully filled. As Pound put it: "Poetry was the superior art up to 1750 when writers with a keen sense of actuality noticed that for all its sonorous qualities, poetry was greatly inferior to prose for clearly conveying diverse states of consciousness." Modern poets were thus forced to come to grips with an impressive and unprecedented body of prose fiction, and to compare their art—then in a state of decline—with an ascendant form without any meter.

Free verse theorists advised writers to avoid meter and rhyme on the same grounds as the ancients—to keep from sounding artificial. In his essay on Kipling (whom he regarded as a mere "balladeer") Eliot suggested that metrical writing was too simply constructed to be considered on the same level as more difficult art forms and should be called "verse," while writing that is musically elusive and esoteric in structure was more genuinely deserving of the name "poetry." He believed that poets should be more concerned with overall movement than with the structure of individual lines, and that meter had to be sacrificed in the interests of a larger rhythmical arrangement. Thus the age-old debate was stood on its head. Rather than prose emulating the metrical order of poetry, poetry began to emulate the rhythmical freedom of prose. The argument that verse should be at least as well-written as prose was slowly converted to the idea that poetry could be written without any meter at all. Many poets today therefore ignore it altogether, and turn to free verse as a matter of course.

In addition, for contemporary critics the word "verse" indicates composition that, while metrically proficient, lacks certain fundamental properties of art. "Poetry" by contrast, though deficient in conventional versification, possesses certain aesthetic qualities considered essential. Implied in this verse-poetry distinction is the feeling that fine poetry involves other things than mere technical expertise, such as a richness of emotion, a startling justness of expression, or an impressive exposition.

The original distinction was formed in the sixteenth century in the wake of the recovery of Aristotle's *Poetics*. This distinction did not exist in any ancient texts, and emerged as a result of a Renaissance misreading of Quintilian and Plutarch, who describe certain ancient writers disparagingly as *versificators* (i.e. technical writers who employed poetic artifice). But for the Greeks, poetry *was* metrical composition, of which there was an abundance. In Aristotle's time there existed a vast body of didactic literature in verse. Aristotle himself greatly admired Empedocles, whom he considered a man of Homeric genius, but as a science writer only, *because he did not imitate*.

Metrical composition was regarded as *imitation*, meaning "the miming of human action," as epitomized by dramatic literature. But the *Poetics* was incomplete. What survived of it was ambiguous, and mostly devoted to tragedy. When the *Poetics* was recovered, scholars systematically tried to "harmonize" Aristotle with the other ancient critics, especially Horace, in an effort to extract a coherent set of principles to serve the practices of the day. These scholars, Steele asserts, misinterpreted Aristotle, arguing that verse was not essential to poetry. The Aristotelian position was that imitation, not verse, was the essence of poetry. Advocates argued that, while poetry can exist without verse, the best poetry was imitation with verse. After the sixteenth century, the doctrine that poetry is imitation fell out of favor. In the seventeenth century, poetry was associated more and more with "sublimity." Poets were no longer makers of plausible, coherent plots, but of sublime arguments involving brief, obscure, or remote traditions.

With the modern free verse movement, Aristotle's idea that poetry is *something more* than meter is transformed into the notion that it is something *other than or opposed to* meter. Eliot defined "verse" as presenting a clearly articulated, straightforward message with adroit handling of simple rhythms, while "poetry" by contrast communicates indirectly, is more intuitive and musically elusive, and more radical in form. This argument seems reasonable, until we consider that Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays and 150 sonnets of exceptional poetry largely in iambic pentameter.

Besides the impact of the novel and the misunderstanding of certain ancient texts, Steele identifies two other historical factors that

helped undermine metrical practice—namely, science and aesthetics. The pioneers of aesthetic theory helped elevate all the arts to the status of autonomous pursuits. Imagination was seen as essentially subjective, independent of rational and moral faculties. This was not simply the doctrine of “art for art’s sake,” but a much deeper conviction that art is a self-determining enterprise. Once fine art became identified exclusively with beauty and away from goodness and truth, poetry began moving toward a kind of solipsistic liberation. As a result, many poets began to approach versification as a purely personal matter not bound by objective principles, and to regard each poem as a unique, self-contained little universe with its own inner unity. Structure was no longer to be imposed from the outside, but to grow organically from within.

For much of literary history, writers had argued that poetry required both native gifts and craftsman-like training. In the past two centuries, however, poets have been encouraged to disregard standards of craft, and to judge each poem solely in the light of its own properties. This protean doctrine of artistic autonomy exercises an almost hypnotic influence on modernist thinking, encouraging the view that the poet’s chief aim is to escape restraints and create his own conventions. Poets thus began to see themselves as agents of anonymous emanations from the collective unconscious, expressing the mysterious inner processes of growth and change.

Moreover, an argument had been brewing among philosophers about the relative superiority of one art over another. These polemics laid the groundwork for the modernist view that para-musical structure could replace metrical form. Poets aspiring to musicality sought to appropriate the principles of musical notation, treating words and syllables like musical notes and suggesting a musical score typographically, with the layout of the page resembling a music sheet. Using instrumental music as their model, the moderns not only escaped meter, but the discursive quality of words as well. In its modern form, the lyric substitutes “musical indefiniteness” for meter, and perfects its opacity to a point where meaning reaches us only by means untraceable to understanding. Aesthetic theory thus inevitably gave rise to spontaneous automatic writing, free from rational controls and moral preoccupations, and this in turn contributed to the trend

toward a pseudo-scientific “experimentation,” in the vain hope of revitalizing poetry’s claim to a place of importance in the modern world.

The idea that science is progressive and poetry is stagnant goes back as far as the seventeenth century. During the Romantic period, a love-hate relationship developed between the two, with some writers suggesting that scientific progress had made poetry obsolete. Poe, Hawthorne, and Shelley all issued prophetic warnings that science, left unchecked, would threaten the very foundations of life itself. At the same time, Romantic writers were haunted by the possibility of securing scientific validation. Coleridge’s doctrine of organic form reflected an interest in evolutionary ideas. Later, the surrealists and others turned to psychoanalytic theory to explain their art. All hoped that poetry, liberated from the claims of tradition, would achieve insights comparable to those of science.

Modern poets have sought novelty with unprecedented zeal. Pound’s rallying cry “Make it new!” became the modernist motto. For poets of the past, the obligation to be morally instructive outweighed the claims of novelty. In our age, however, the discovery of new techniques and the rejection of old procedures are specifically demanded. Some favored the complete destruction of all verse more than twenty years old, hoping to produce technical innovations and “breakthroughs,” as if the practice of literature were comparable to work in a laboratory. Science also provided a model for the pursuit of that which is recondite and abstruse, and which employs esoteric vocabulary, reinforcing the view that poetry should be difficult and resistant to the easy understanding of non-specialists. New techniques were seen as analogous to advances in scientific instrumentation. William Carlos Williams even appropriated Einstein’s relativity theory as a justification for free verse.

Like scientists in a laboratory, poets were now expected to adopt an attitude of impersonal detachment and skepticism. The production of “pure poetry” implies the disappearance of the ego altogether, ceding the initiative to words that are spontaneously mobilized on the page without conscious interference or regulation. The scientist-poet holds himself aloof, not only from moral judgments, but from the

literary past, regarding it as a repository of antiquated procedures unworthy of emulation. This notion has emboldened its adherents to treat with scorn and disdain those who defend metrical convention.

Experimental poets also attempted to adopt scientific methods by imitating detailed data-gathering procedures, and by mistrusting all conventional wisdom. The Imagists rejected any mental operations that follow up the action of the senses. Williams' famous credo "No ideas but in things" in effect elevates unmediated sense perception over abstract thought. This minimalist approach supports the aesthetics of "suggestiveness," laying claim to scientific precision while eluding definite meaning. The age-old belief that poets should explore the moral implications of the human condition is crucially different from the modern view that simply arrests perception at the level of objective observation. Pound's characterization of poetry as "a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations...for human emotions" is repeated in different terms by Eliot's assertion that emotions cannot be expressed directly, but require an "objective correlative."

Artistic understanding of science is limited to analogies. No reliable or verifiable means exist for determining when literary innovations produce good results. Imposing on poetry the scientific doctrine that the newest is the truest, and urging contemporary poets to concentrate attention on the latest works in the field, denies them the best guides for composition—those great works of the past that have endured over time owing to their power to instruct, uplift, and console. Attempts to make poetry over in the image of science have divorced it from its most scientifically quantifiable quality—meter—and divided it from its most vital and distinctive function: the in-depth examination of human experience.

The makers of the modern movement did not expect free verse to last, regarding it as a temporary expedient, an interlude in which versification would be refreshed and renewed and a new metric emerge. Inheritors of this legacy, however, simply went on writing without meter until free verse itself became the dominant form, undermining metrical tradition and awareness. Antipathy for meter grew even more vehement during the 1960s. Creative writing programs in the universities helped give rise to powerful groups with a

vested interest in the view that poetry and even consciousness itself had undergone irreversible changes, and that anyone who questioned the new status quo should be ostracized from the literary community.

Aesthetic emphasis on subjective experience has contributed to the belief that free verse is “liberating” and intrinsically more “democratic.” American poets in particular seem almost obliged to write in free verse. Robert Bly, echoing William Carlos Williams, has even expressed the opinion that rhymed, metered poetry is so tied to the stratified society of feudal England that it is impossible to blend well with the American experience. This view ignores the fact that meter is common to the poetry of many different peoples all over the world and goes all the way back to prehistoric times. It is wrong to suggest that free verse is distinctively American, or that American poets have no choice in prosody. That the meters of Dickinson and Frost are the same as those used by Auden and Yeats is a phenomenon due less to national identity than to the fact of a common language. Finally, Steele also feels it is misleading to tell young writers that meter is no longer viable. The time has come to admit that free verse is no longer novel. Free verse has become “official” art, and its reactionary intolerance toward those who would chart another course is misinformed and unbecoming. Poets who claim that their subject is too urgent to submit to meter may therefore be deceiving themselves, and cheating their readers.

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## Translated Writers

Pietro Aretino (1492-1556)  
Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)  
Gottfried Benn (1886-1956)  
Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)  
George Buchanan (1506-1582)  
Julianus, Prefect of Egypt (*eodem tempore Justiniani*)  
Jan Andrzej Morsztyn (1621-1693)  
Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821-1883)  
Rufinus (*aevum incertum*)  
Paulus Silentarius (*eodem tempore Justiniani*)

We do not publish poems that are primarily quoted dialogue, nor poems that make extensive use of quotation marks.

We judge poems primarily by their inherent craftsmanship, not their subject matter. We see no reason to publish a mediocre poem just because it trumpets virtuous sentiments, or expresses sincere feelings. We specifically refuse to evaluate any poem by the yardstick of political correctness.

At the same time, we believe that subject matter is another ingredient that goes into the overall aesthetic effect of a poem. For that reason we will reject metrically excellent poems if we find their subject matter boring or trivial or fatuous; or if the subject matter is handled ineptly; or if the subject matter does not suit the chosen poetic vehicle.

We believe that poems are fictive artifacts of a self-contained nature. For us, any poem that pretends to a bogus authenticity; or that consciously cultivates dissonance and asymmetry; or that deliberately avoids aesthetic closure, is *ipso facto* a failure.

We have taken as our watchword the sentence of Charles Maurras: *Voulant des clartés, vous en faites.* We believe that the primary task of a poet is not to discover beauty, but to create it with his own skill and energy.