

A NEW ORGANICISM. LANGUAGE, FORM AND FLUX
IN TIMOTHY STEELE'S "PROFILS PERDUS"

Paul Scott Derrick, Universitat de València
Guillermo Peris Bautista, Instituto de Filosofía Edith Stein (Granada)

But there would be, and there is, the sole necessity, by thinking our way soberly into what (...) poetry says, to come to learn what is unspoken. That is the course of the history of Being. If we reach and enter that course, it will lead thinking into a dialogue with poetry, a dialogue that is of the history of Being. Scholars of literary history inevitably consider that dialogue to be an unscientific violation of what such scholarship takes to be the facts. Philosophers consider the dialogue to be a helpless aberration into fantasy. But destiny pursues its course untroubled by all that.

Martin Heidegger

1.

Martin Heidegger was undoubtedly one of the deepest thinkers on the relationship between language and silence that the culture of the West has produced. And we need to appreciate the extent to which his understanding of that relationship emerges directly from his German romantic heritage. The romantic drive to reformulate our concepts concerning how the mind is related to nature, how human being is related to the larger context of Being, inevitably came to focus on the distinguishing characteristic of mind – language – as the *nexus* between the two.

But the very idea of a nexus, a connection or an interface, is in itself problematic, since it expresses at the same time a continuity and a separation between the two “things” it links. We are both joined to and separated from the rest of the world by our bodies, through the senses that pervade them. The physical sensations and emotional responses that our immersion in the world produces constitute the origin of language; we are affected, moved by what we witness and feel to convert our experience into meaning, and in that way to safeguard it – and ourselves – from oblivion.

Their gradual recognition of this dimension of the nature of language is what made poetry such an important form of expression for the Romantics.

They realized that, depending on how it is used, language can either separate us from or connect us to the world, the overall totality of everything-that-is that Heidegger referred to as Being. They realized that the purest language, the language that traces itself back to its sources in the silence of Being, and thus becomes what Walt Whitman called “the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution” (Whitman, 1989: 1965), is inevitably poetic language.

This less orthodox way of thinking ourselves *as* language is what Heidegger elaborated from his romantic predecessors. Time and again, after writing his fundamental philosophical treatise, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), he talks about the difference between thinking and philosophy. For him, the important thing for the thinker in a destitute time, such as the middle and late twentieth century, is not to do philosophy but to follow the same historical pathway through thought and language as the poet. His profound reflections on the ineffable roots of human significance in the historical consciousness of the German language in such poets as Hölderlin, Rilke and Trakl are milestones in contemporary occidental thought¹, and have influenced a whole generation of philosophers and literary critics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, to name just a few).

According to Heidegger, language is what makes the world what it is for human knowledge. The universe is constant process, and as such its essence is perpetual vanishment. Whatever else Being may be, it is characterized by continual disappearance². Language makes it possible for the human mind to separate this seamless, flowing process into arbitrary “parts” that are extracted, as it were, from the constant metamorphosis. Indeed, only *after* things have been named, “elevated” by language out of the constantly disappearing flux of Being, can we even perceive the passage of time, since it consists in the difference between what is irrevocably going away – the physical phenomena beyond the mind – and what stays- the concept, the verbal sign that has raised constituent parts of flow into awareness, and granted them meaning. “After man has placed himself in the perpetual, then only can he expose himself to the changeable, to that which comes and goes, for only the persistent is changeable” (Heidegger, 1970: 279).

¹ For essays on Hölderlin, see “Remembrance of the Poet” (1970: 233-269) “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” (1970: 270-291), and “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .” (1975: 213-29). For Rilke, see “What Are Poets For?” (1975: 91-142); and for Trakl, see “Language” (1975: 189-210).

² This is the argument developed in his essay, “What Is Metaphysics?” (1970: 325-361). Asking the question, “What is nothing?”, he proposes that it is the essence of Being, a kind of active force (*Vernichtung*, translated into English as “nihilation”) that ceaselessly pulls what-is away into non-being.

This way of thinking clarifies what the term Transcendentalism really expresses. Language permits the world to transcend itself, through mind, and in that way *opens* the world *out* from pure transient Being into *ex*-istence. Heidegger calls this the “unconcealedness of language” (Heidegger, 1970: 306). How we use our language, then, is crucial. It determines how we know our world, and therefore, how the world will be. The most authentic use of language is a kind of communion with all-that-is. His original term for this more receptive use of the mind was “letting-be”³; he later talked about it as reflection. This kind of language permits the world to be what it already is, as opposed to manipulating it, imposing the self and changing it into what we would like it to be⁴. Both the poet and thinker, Heidegger recommends, should cultivate this kind of authentic speech that emerges most immediately into awareness from the silent flow of Being.

This is clearly a later, and even more sophisticated version of what the Romantics thought of as organicism, and it helps us to understand how such concepts inevitably led to the development of free verse⁵. The romantic “turn to nature” was, on its deepest level, a complex attempt on the part of occidental culture to bring the mind back into a more harmonious and propitious relationship with the overall environment of which it forms a privileged part. The key to this attempt was to suppress, or to direct, what Nietzsche would later identify as the “Will to Power” – that all-too-human temptation to impose our own desires on the world – and thus let ourselves knowingly participate in, and express, the flow of natural forces and processes.

One of the most effective explicators of this poetic link between consciousness and nature is the American Transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson. His essay “The Poet”, published in 1844, is generally agreed to have been Walt Whitman’s stepping-stone to his “breakthrough” into free verse in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Considering such passages as the following, it is easy to see why:

[Poetic] insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path (...) of things through forms, and so

³ He first introduces the term in *Being and Time* (see esp. 114-22) and elaborates on the concept in “On the Essence of Truth” (1970: 292-324).

⁴ See “Science and Reflection” (1977: 155-182).

⁵ For what is still one of the best discussions of the evolution of romantic theories of organicism, see Abrams, especially Chapters VII, “The Psychology of Literary Invention: Mechanical and Organic Theories” (126-55) and VIII, “The Psychology of Literary Invention: Unconscious Genius and Organic Growth” (156-83).

making them translucent to others. The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendence of their own nature, – him they will suffer. The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that (Emerson, 1989: 993).

The intellect being where and what it sees: could we find a clearer anticipation of Heidegger's reflection? Things transcend their own nature through the poet's naming, and the condition of true (or authentic) naming is a wise resignation of the self to the divine aura that flows through the world. Nature will not suffer a spy, who aims, like the scientist, to discover its most intimate secrets. Instead, the poet is a lover, who respectfully accompanies nature in its mystery and permits it to be, in poetic language, what it already is. This more open and receptive attitude is, in itself, inspiration:

It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that, beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things (...) The poet knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, "with the flower of the mind"; not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with with the intellect released from all service, and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; or, as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone, but the intellect inebriated by nectar (Emerson, 1989: 993).

To learn how to speak with the flower of the mind. This is the course, initiated by early German romantic theories of organic form, masterfully assimilated and expressed for American Romanticism by Emerson and brilliantly put into practice in the work of Walt Whitman, which eventually led to the predominance of free verse in the American poetry of the 20th century.

2.

The initial qualms voiced by Modernists like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams on the issue of traditional meter took on an immense protagonism later in the century, in the context of the approach to poetry of writers like Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley or John Ashbery. James Breslin's manual, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965*, recaptures just this historical moment and draws a precise picture of the basic assumptions shared by many American poets of the mid-20th century.

He argues that, following the Modernist generation, a large number of American poets' reasons for abandoning meter went well beyond mere stylistic preferences and adopted a decidedly epistemic character, at the center of which there is an understanding of reality as an array of particulars. Poetry is very much the record of the changing configurations of this array, of the possible shapes that arise from *within* flux (Breslin, 1984: 62). Traditional poetry, on the other hand, prescribes a variety of formal patterns that have not reckoned with the changing material contexts of experience. It is an imposed frame that tends to absorb the motion of felt life into its own ideally conceived order. In this sense, meter is a pre-established arrangement that results in confinement. Poets of "open form" decided that neat patterns of meter and rhyme are incapable of capturing, or reflecting, the sudden shifts in focus, indecisions, or the overall *unconnectedness* of experience. Form, writes Breslin, echoing Emerson and his romantic predecessors, should grow in the mind of the poet parallel to what he or she wishes to convey, free of any preconceptions. This has the advantage of liberating the notion of form from a mere observance of rhetorical rules, and making it synonymous with the shape of the poets' impressions, like an imprint of the processes through which we relate with reality. In metered poetry these processes must be accommodated into designs that are "prior to its specific occasion" and thus, "hermetically sealed" from life (Breslin, 1984: 59, 30).

Unfortunately, definitions such as these lack a deep insight into the romantic roots they derive from. Breslin's argument for free verse depends on the basic assumption that the ultimate purpose of poetic language should be to express the perception, or the experience of constant flux. But Heidegger's late romantic thinking makes it clear that the issue is much more complex than that. Merely to deliver language to flux would be to negate its essential function – to transcend the flux, to salvage what we can know as world, to "translate" Being into existence. To submerge thinking back into natural processes through language is tantamount to abdicating our responsibility, negating the special role that accrues to consciousness.

Robert Frost, one of the most ambivalent of Modernist poets, also recognized this necessity. This is why, in his life-long defense of the use of traditional forms, he often described poetry as "one step backward taken" (Baym II, 1989: 1082), not into the disorder of life, which he often spoke of as "decay" or "confusion", but out of it, into a responsible awareness. In his famous formulation from "The Figure a Poem Makes", Frost writes that "It [the poem] begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion" (Frost,

1989: 1112). He is, wisely, advocating here both a yielding and a resistance to process. That backward step into speech, that momentary stay against confusion – reflected in a controlled prosodic form – is what commemorates human existence and grants us meaning.

In its ultimate implications, this concept of poetry is not that different from what Heidegger intends when he proposes that language, because it also “steps back” from the flow of Being, opens time out for human awareness and makes the world what it is for human understanding. It should therefore be no surprise at all that Heidegger also suggested that normal, everyday speech – the kind to which so much recent free verse aspires – simply lacks the depth, and spiritual resonance, which are essential for human language to be poetic:

Mortal speech is a calling that names, a bidding which (...) bids things and world to come. What is purely bidden in mortal speech is what is spoken in the poem. Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse. Everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer (Heidegger, 1977: 208).

3.

It could be that Frost and Heidegger were right. We are not alone in arguing that, by the second half of the 20th century, most of the free verse written in the United States had indeed become “a used-up poem”. As a result, a number of younger poets in the last few decades – who have come to be referred to as “New Formalists” (for example, Molly Peacock, Sydney Lea, Wyatt Prunty, Greg Williamson) – have decided to return to the use of meter and rhyme in an effort to rediscover the expressive possibilities inherent in traditional poetic forms.

Keith Maillard has given a good summary of the attitudes that led these poets to reject what he identifies as the “exhausted dominant style”. In his opinion, those poems most often written in poetry journals and discussed in classrooms “so strongly resemble each other as to constitute a dominant mode, a generic free verse that is not so much naked as denuded”. This mode, as opposed to increasingly rare instances of “the free verse that crackles and leaps off the page” in the “good old Doc Williams” style, pays “little attention to line breaks”, is not only devoid of any true formal elements, but is “often without even the faintest suggestion of rhythm”, and is “written in a flat, colloquial language and a severely limited vocabulary”. New Formalism, on the other hand, has grown out of the conviction that whatever made free verse poetry interesting in the past, its contemporary practitioners are now

making rather predictable “short essays[s] arbitrarily broken into lines, building toward an arresting image, or an epiphany, or a joke-like punchline – or at least something that will provide a sense of closure”. In their search for new sound patterns and a richer fund of technical resources, the Neo-formalists inevitably turn their attention once again to the importance of craft in poetic composition. If the “exhaustion of the dominant style is one of the primary reasons for the resurgence of formalism”, it is because the “generic free verse poem is what we have after twenty years of not studying prosody” (Maillard, 1999: 64).

Timothy Steele is one of the most interesting and best-regarded poet-scholars of that loose group of writers that are often called the New Formalists. He has lucidly set out his ideas on the need to restore the formal structure of meter and rhyme to poetry in the book, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter* (1990). But rather than discussing his theoretical work, we would like to finish this brief essay by considering one of his poems, which we hope will provide an effective illustration of all the ideas we have presented above. It is entitled “Profils Perdus” and it was first published in 1979, in Steele’s book, *Uncertainties and Rest*⁶.

It does not matter if in Rome that fall
You, leaning on the rail of the balcony,
Watched a young woman pace the yard below,
Her parasol
Now raised, now shouldered. Nor need you feel, see

More in the sudden rain which, in Marseilles,
Forced you into that church than the stained glass,
Or the four white candles, or the vast stillness,
Or the way
The marble echoes rippled through the Mass.

Nostalgia is your last, your perfect, fate.
In the vague wash of circumstance, you know
That any instant can in you assume
All the weight
And feeling of the absolute. And so,

What matters, simply, is that you contain
Both past and future; and sometime, somewhere,

⁶ It is also included in his later volume, *Sapphics and Uncertainties: Poems 1970-1986*.

You will yourself become the moment – an
 Indefinite rain,
 A profile disappearing in the air.

Alan Shapiro says of this poem that it is about “someone so given over to sheer process, uninformed or shaped by the discriminating powers of the mind, that he is nothing but his own ephemeral sensations” (Shapiro, 1987: 210). This is an interesting observation; but of course, it is only the first step: the poem itself is a result of the discriminating powers of the mind “informing” sheer process. The speaker can hardly be thought of as “nothing but his own ephemeral sensations”. In that case, there would be no speech, no poem at all. He is, more accurately, the language that commemorates his awareness of loss. “Perfils Perdus” establishes, therefore, a moving tension between the permanence of its words and the evanescence of the experiences they describe.

That tension is, in addition, manifested through the poem’s uneasy formal balance. Its “dialogue” with its own structure enacts the theme as much as any other aspect.

The poem itself seems to be struggling to maintain an order that is threatened in various ways. It is written primarily in lines with five stressed syllables, and the foot employed is predominantly iambic. The obvious structural exception is the truncated fourth line of every stanza. While these lines present a disruption of our visual expectations, their repetition in the same location of every stanza establishes a sort of ordered disorder, which suggests a cyclical effect of breakdown and recovery.

Looking more closely at the rhythm, we can also see how Steele’s variations on the iambic foot contribute to the tension the poem expresses. Notice that the first line, “It does not matter if in Rome that fall”, can be scanned as an iambic pentameter, even though the spoken rhythm of this phrase pulls against its iambic structure. But after this beginning, lines 2 through 9 (with the brief exception of line 4) almost completely abandon the iambic foot. In fact, there seems to be a rising sense of rhythmic disorder as the poem progresses, a growing unbalance that reaches its climax in the central lines of stanza two. The irregular turbulence of 7 and 8 (‘ - ‘ - ‘ - - ‘ ‘ / - - ‘ ‘ - - ‘ ‘ -) is suddenly cut short by the simple trochee of line 9, which leads to what is probably the strongest iambic pentameter of the whole poem: “The marble echoes rippled through the Mass”.

Thus, the stanza, and the first half of the poem, end with an insistent beat in whose regularity one may interpret an attempt to make its own rhythmic structure resonate with a new protagonist, as if impelled by the very reference to the experience of sounds replying to one another. From this point

on, the rhythm becomes much more regular and the iambic pentameter is maintained – with the sole exceptions of lines 12, 14 and 19 – throughout the second half of the poem.

Rhyme scheme, perhaps the most binding aural element in poetry, also has a role in this design. Looking at the poem for the first time, one will probably assume that the fourth line of each stanza is the odd one out in every respect. But in fact, it rhymes with the starting line. Throughout the poem, it is the third line of every stanza that is left isolated by its lack of rhyme, despite being identical to the other ones from the point of view of syllable count. Some stanzas capitalize on this structure. The word “stillness” (line eight) is in just this isolated position. But in this case, the word’s isolation is not complete. There is a chance that the reader, taking nothing for granted while looking for equivalences that may frustrate or repeat the previous pattern, could briefly consider the word’s visual similarity with “Marseilles”: “-lles” and “-ness” seem, at first glance, not too different from the paired “glass” and “Mass”. The fact that the rhyme of “Marseilles” is obscured by its spelling, and that its pair is an unlikely – from a typographical point of view – “way” is probably only a game: it fools no one after the first reading. Nevertheless, it is a game that forces the reader to go back and recompose a structural thread, and this serves well the thematic end proposed by the poem. The effect while reading it is one of a continuous compensation, of trying to recover a balance that is at the same time lost and enforced by the form.

It is also important to recall that the lack of fixity Shapiro read as the general theme of “Profils Perdus” is engraved in its form, so that the poem is not only “about” an awareness of transience, but it enacts the feeling and thereby induces the reader to share it. Apart from the aspects that have been mentioned, another instance of how this is enacted by the form at a syntactical level may be the way the verb “see” in the fifth line triggers a mechanism that bears on the overall theme. The unexpected enjambment already separates it from its complement “more”, but even that separation is partial, since the complement is comparative and the “than” only comes after a further line and a half of images. The expectation of finding one among a number of customary grammatical complements that may clear the meaning includes different possibilities: “see more of/in”, etc. Instead, we get a set of circumstances that involve this action: rain, a town, and a church in rapid succession before even learning (with “than”) that “see more” is the first term of a gradation. The reader’s expectation of a grammatical complement dominates this section until this requirement is satisfied, a satisfaction that is withheld by the arrangement of the language. Thus, the form briefly complicates the discovery of the grammatical object, enacting the overall

theme of confusion with a process of its own. Significantly, this convoluted syntactical structure also corresponds with the most ungainly rhythms of the poem: lines 6 through 8.

Thus, both syntax and meter have produced in us a sensation later recalled in the next stanza: the feeling of “a vague wash of circumstance”. Neither the speaker nor the reader finally “sees more” beyond the mentioned circumstances. The point Steele seems to be making is that an existential drive that assumes that some special awareness or disclosure of reality (and of one’s place in it) can only arise as a fleeting “moment”, also assumes a sort of self-consumption within that chain as its own identity. Only “nostalgia” may then remain; hence the second-person pronoun “you”, with which the speaker differentiates the self that stays, in language and memory, from the self that disintegrates in a moment’s passing.

Perhaps in this respect the crucial word is “contain” (line 16), which, by the end of the last stanza, contrasts with the idea of someone being “A profile disappearing in the air”. The poem then, has become a reformulation, or a reordering, of traditional form, which struggles to keep within bounds the transience of the world the speaker perceives and acknowledges. In effect, and in accord with Heidegger’s concept of language, it is our awareness of a recognizable formal design that makes the flow understandable as a drive towards formlessness. The form manages to “contain” in a restrictive sense, but for the same reason, provides the disappearing “profile”, the contours that make visible what would otherwise be undifferentiated, shapeless flow. The very sense of ceaseless movement would hardly be intelligible without this formal counterpoint. As Shapiro keenly points out, the arrangement of language in this poem

give[s] the illusion of freedom (...) as if the dictates of the moment itself were governing the movement of the verse. And yet Steele achieves this effect by means of the *strict elements of the form*. It’s the metrical pattern that gives point to the variations he plays across it, just as it’s the fixed stanzaic structure that makes the formlessness, *as formlessness*, perceptible [our italics] (Shapiro, 1987: 211).

It seems then that Steele has reversed the terms in which form relates with the understanding of reality as flux. The traditional pattern (albeit modulated into a nonce form) is used to allow us to envision (and to some extent, to experience) one such awareness at work. For example, to perform the task of giving this impression, the poem counts on our recognition that “an” in line 18 is filling a position demanded by the pattern. The line does not break at will: it struggles to fulfil a metrical form (the iambic pentameter), and breaks

immediately after doing so, producing an enjambment. It is our awareness of this tension between the demands of form and movement that is meaningful. And that is because we know why “an” is there, in formal terms. The abstract elements of meter become “the occasion”, the possibility for conveying an awareness of the flow of reality as particulars because the position of words is formally justified.

It cannot be credibly said that “Profils Perdus” becomes one with the “occasion”, with the real or imagined moment from which it arises. Behind the notions that have inspired many characteristic peculiarities of contemporary poetry there is the dream of complete immediacy between language and experience. But, construed this way, language would recover nothing from experience, since experience, by its very immediacy, would be untranslatable. Meaningful speech would cease, absorbed in unapprehensible movement. This formlessness of the world is “molded”, in a sense, by controlled, poetic language. This may be the ultimate point made by “Profils Perdus”: elaborated forms provide a context, a frame, that houses the phenomenon of disappearance and permits us to feel the passage of time.

Heidegger says that “Language speaks as the peal of stillness” (Heidegger, 1977: 207). What “Profils Perdus” brilliantly reveals, on every one of its complex levels, is that the deepest language, poetry, always tells us what we most profoundly are.

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