Training the ear, or: on learning to hear the *alexandrin*

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I would like to speak about ignorance, and about teaching. Specifically, about my ignorance, as both learner and teacher; about ignorance not as something overcome by learning/teaching, but as something channelled by learning/teaching, as something which facilitates, which energizes, learning/teaching. In part it is to reflect on the state of metrics—which, with its fondness for the Greekisms of foot metrics or the pseudo-scientific terminologies of linguistics, is one of the few subdisciplines within literature to pretend at some kind of specialist jargon. And hence also to reflect on how this jargon excludes, and is seemingly deployed in an exclusionary fashion, so that, in spite of the fact that the intuitions (a) that poems sound beautiful and (b) that this is worthy of our critical attention, are widely held ones, the subdiscipline of metrics, which might seem an appropriate place to account for this, has successfully marginalised itself and gained a not-entirely-undeserved reputation as a magnet for hobbyists and cranks. And it is in part to reflect on a different kind of 'metric'—namely, the standardization of teaching that is being imposed by the increasingly corporatized University sector. What metrists and the learning-and-teaching 'metric' share is a fixation on 'knowledge', to the detriment, as it seems to me, of thinking.

In my introduction to last year's 'Scansion' issue, I suggested that when we teach prosody, and metre, we should seek to move from the æsthetic to the technical, so as to effect our students' initiation into metre—what here I will

describe as 'training the ear'. As a continuation of this, and taking up Clive's invitation that we dwell on our own intellectual biographies whilst celebrating his, I will reflect on the training of my own ear, through two encounters with French poetry I have had over the last few years: firstly, the four years I spent working at the Université Paris Diderot, teaching an introductory course to English and American poetry to first year students, and the pedagogical challenges posed by their own intuitions about poetic rhythm, formed by the way they were taught at *lycée*, but also through their more general sense of what linguistic rhythms were, something conditioned by their inhabiting a language timed by syllables rather than by stress. And concurrently, my own experiences, as an adult learner of French, getting my head around this syllable-timed language. At the same time that I was trying to coax students into attuning themselves to the rhythmic potential of Shakespeare, Shelley, Stevens, I was trying to attune myself to the rhythmic repertoire of Racine, Rimbaud, Reverdy.

What is the difference between the question 'Why is this line an *alexandrin*?' and the question 'What is happening in this *alexandrin*?'? The latter apparently assumes the respondent's knowledge that the line *is* an *alexandrin*, of course, but it also absolves the respondent from having to prove such knowledge, imagining the interest to lie elsewhere. And this is a heuristic as well as ethical choice: that by asking 'what is happening?' we will necessarily reach a broader understanding of what the *alexandrin* is and can be, and how the line in question fits the criteria which allow it to be branded an *alexandrin* in the first place. That asking someone to explain how 'Ayant l'expansion de choses infinies' is an *alexandrin* is an almost mathematical question: make ten syllables fit into twelve (answer: *diérèse* in 'expansion' and *e atone* in 'choses'), whereas 'what is happening?' necessarily recasts the syllable-counting as interpretive questioning. But at the same time the mathematical challenge of making 'correct' *alexandrins* is something, I have learnt, central to the history of French verse practice. Below I will discuss some of Rimbaud's earliest poems (from October 1870, when he was just turning sixteen) where the rule-following dimension to the *alexandrin* is taken to almost parodic degree. We seem to be in a double bind: we need to be able to scan in order to 'hear', but it is only through the context of interpretive hearing that the

mathematical measurement of syllables becomes comprehensible. And it seems to be synæsthetic to some degree: in counting syllables we aim to 'see' them, rather than merely hear them, so that hearing is engendered by sight but sighting only becomes possible out of an auditory context.

But this is not something that can merely be worked out *a priori*. When I read a line of English verse which more or less follows a 'heroic' line (or 'five-beat line', or 'iambic pentameter'), but which is not made up solely of five iambs, I will do two things: firstly, I will tend to introduce contractions and catalexis in order to retain the overall sense of 'pulse' (to use what I realise is a term whose problematic essentialism has a long history), but will also attend to these divergences from the metrical set as rhythmically motivated. We find a double movement: verse-form shapes prose performance, and our sense of prose performance modifies what we take to be the verse-form itself—a relation more dynamic than the model that Wimsatt and Beardsley offer of an abstract metre in 'tension' with prose rhythm. To see this more clearly we could take some lines from Yeats. In the final couplet to the opening stanza of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'—'And never stoop to a mechanical / Or servile shape, at others' beck and call'—we find the half-rhyme of '-cal' and 'call' supported by the assonance of 'mech' and 'beck', and even the broader homophony of 'mechan' and 'beck an(d)'. But this is then complicated by the juxtaposition of rising and falling cadence, by 'mech' and 'beck' not quite falling into symmetry, by the disjuncture of the /æ/ and the /ə/ within the homophony. We could either shape performance to meet the demands of rhyme, which would demand a series of different voicings, both in terms of syllable stress and vowel length (a schwa becoming a long vowel); or we could take the half-rhyme and its anticipatory tremors to upset the closure the couplet seems to offer. As a matter of fact, this recurs throughout this section of 'Meditations' with the final couplets. Compare:

> O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
> Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
> And Childhood a delight for every sense,
> But take our greatness with our violence?

and:

> What if those things the greatest of mankind
> Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
> But take our greatness with our bitterness?

Both rhyme a rising cadence in the penultimate line landing on a monosyllable with a falling cadence with a polysyllable whose primary stress is at the beginning of the word. And both leave the reader with a choice: do we alter our voicing, so 'violence' becomes 'vi-o-lence', and 'bitterness' 'bitt-er-ness', or do we retain speech stress and undermine the couplet? It is also worth noting that, given that rhymes always happen in time, and a forward-directed time, this will happen retrospectively, and will indeed be an interruption to such a conception of time, as repetitions and differences (important here that rhyme is *both* repetition *and* difference) open up different temporal dimensions.

But does the same thing happen in Baudelaire's line quoted above, 'Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies'? Or what about in the last line to Mallarmé's 'Sainte', his celebration of Saint Cecilia: 'Musicienne de silence', where six spoken syllables become an octosyllable? My (incomplete) understanding of French verse is that we would never *not* voice this line without eight syllables—the *diérèse* and *e atone* are in this respect non-negotiable. It is crucial that Baudelaire expands 'expansion', as Deguy says, to register the infinite within the count of the finite syllable; similarly it is crucial that the 'music of silence' Mallarmé would depict involves placing sound where we normally would not, so that the tension between these two modes of pronunciation comes to stand for the very silence St Cecilia's music allows us to hear, both as it compresses the line (in experiential, if not metrical, time), but also insofar as the metrical effect both demands vocal performance and—the two vocalizations mutually excluding one another—denies it. But the place of the metrical rule within the history of French versification dictates a different interpretive response, because the possibilities it engenders themselves arise out of a history, just as the abstractions of metre are not metaphysical abstractions but rather lived, historical abstractions, and in this sense never wholly abstract.

When working between two languages, these questions become further complicated. For how can one train a student's ear to expressive gestures in a language other than one's mother tongue? For the poetry I was teaching did not employ the *e atone* or the *diérèse*, but rather contractions, syncopations between metrical beat and linguistic stress, counterpoints of duple and triple time (as a general rule, the French extend syllables, filling up the line of verse, we contract them, to fit with the ictus-based foot). But if a student cannot hear *word stress* or *sentence stress*, then how can they recognise where the metre might require contraction, syncopation or counterpoint? One cannot rely on their inherent sense of the language as a starting point, from which to elicit a broader attunement towards metre (this was the basic premiss of my 'Scansion' introduction), because no such sense will inhere. This suggests the great pedagogical power of nursery rhymes, doggerel, limericks, and particularly hip-hop. Indeed, the second that students could see linguistic 'beats' placed alongside, or against, musical beats, they could sense something of how linguistic rhythms worked in English, in contrast to French (alas the music analogy only goes one way). It was also significant in this regard that I was teaching poetry to students who were also studying oral expression, phonetics and phonology, meaning that poetry—where all the phonetic and phonological material of the English language is deployed so as to become conspicuous, and indeed often becomes the poetry's most readily identifiable subject matter—afforded a way in to the phenomenological stuff of the language as a whole.

Another way of approaching this is to ask—are intuitions the kind of thing that can ever be *learned*? And by the same token, *unlearned*? They must be. This is the moral I take from my own experience of learning, albeit slowly and incompletely, an 'intuitive' feel for a language which I only started to study at 22, by when my linguistic intuitions must have been pretty much formed; attuning one's ears to new rhythmic habits also entails deafening oneself to a whole array of rhythmic habits to which, by that stage, one has become rather attached. But also it also means embedding oneself—and this is far harder—into a cultural history of the deployments of sound to which one is even *more* foreign than one is to the words and sounds themselves. Much easier in this sense to become a historian of French

verse, even an analyst of French verse, than a listener to French verse. If anything marks Clive's extraordinary achievement as a critic, theorist, translator, of French poetry, it must be the degree to which he always demonstrates himself to be a listener in this sense. This might imply a different understanding of the 'polyglot' reader than Clive has in mind in his most recent work on translation—that is, it might be that a foreign ear will pick up rhythmic latencies to which the native-speaking ear is inured. Which, of course, also suggests, although less immodestly, that the eye and ear made polyglot will pick up latencies previously uncharted in, and by, its native tongue. Something no doubt particularly pertinent for such a bastard hybrid tongue as English.

This, moreover, unsettles a series of positions about linguistic rhythm which show themselves to be perhaps fatally embedded in monolingualism. To take a single example, and one which I have always found most persuasive: when Henri Meschonnic claimed that rhythm 'forms subjects' (cf. 'The Rhythm Party Manifesto', which I translated for *Thinking Verse* I), does this entail that the subject formed is radically different depending on how a particular language measures time? This strikes me as a very different question to the idea that languages form the subject through reference or cultural connotation ('forty different words for snow', etc.), and more language-essentialist because rooted in a body irreducible to discourse. Francophone subjectivity is then fundamentally different to Anglophone subjectivity, let alone taking into account Mandarin or Swahili or whatever else subjectivity. Given Meschonnic's major contributions both to the theory and practice of translation, this monolingualism strikes me as deeply problematic. It is true that he stipulates that he is speaking about *le langage*, not *la langue*, but where rhythm is concerned, and as a result a particular paralanguage, a particular history/ideology of paralanguage and its deployments and interpretations, it strikes me equally that the opposition between the two is not wholly tenable, and that the incursions of *la langue* into *le langage* lead to a messier subjectivity than Meschonnic had envisaged. This, incidentally, is precisely what he accuses Heidegger of.

My question, then is what it might mean for an ear brought up to hear linguistic rhythms as accentual, not simply because of the tradition of accentual-syllabic

English verse, which means that one has been trained to wonder what the feet are and how many there are, but because of the peculiarities of a 'stress-timed' language, what it might mean for such an ear to orient itself within a language where speech rhythm is timed by syllables. It also means that one asks how one listens to *stress* in French versification, given that stress is hardly absent from French speech, nor from poems, but it sounds both out of a different history (and different relation to, and application of, Latin and Greek models of metre), and a different material medium. One of the things I did not realise I would discover, was that in French verse stress will work to different expressive and rhythmic ends. The question of how the respective languages measure time will say something about how one hears stress: length, accent, pitch, and the way the three interrelate.

And to address this question, I will turn to the first poem I learnt in French class, back in 2003: 'Le Dormeur du val' by Arthur Rimbaud. I remember my confusion at how to scan the first stanza:

> C'est un trou de verdure où chante une rivière
> Accrochant follement aux herbes des haillons
> D'argent ; où le soleil, de la montagne fière,
> Luit : c'est un petit val qui mousse de rayons.

My untrained English ear immediately scanned this in terms of individual feet: I heard it roughly as a triple rather than a duple rhythm, with some unvoiced syllables (e.g. *où chante*). But the heavy stresses after the enjambments of ll. 2-3 and 3-4 (*D'argent* and *Luit*) immediately indicated that this wasn't right—and that's before one takes into account the *e atone* that I had ignored (*une rivière, herbes, montagne, mousse*). In order to hear how the *line* might be the basic rhythmic unit, rather than the individual measure, meant ceasing to segment the stresses of the words in one's head according to measure: it meant ceasing to equate rhythmicity with periodicity. But then this makes it even more complicated: because, as I have already mentioned, there still *is* stress, and indeed there are still 'feet' (or groupings around stressed syllables), even if stress is not aligned with an ictus. The first hemistich of each of the opening lines can be scanned as anapests, and this sets up

a prosodic parallelism which affords a powerful rhythmic effect in the second hemistich of the lines: both hemistichs are divided 2 + 4, but the two *es atone* take different syllables (tenth and ninth respectively), and so upset the parallel in the very gesture through which it is established. And indeed, there are internal rhymes deployed in order to mark out these stresses: notably 'Accroch**ant** follem**ent** aux herbes des haill**ons** / D'arg**ent**' (/ɑ̃/, /ɑ̃/, /ɔ̃/ /ɑ̃/ respectively). When one stops listening to stress as ictus or beat, other possibilities of stress become audible. But by the same token, it may well be that the Anglophone ear, so attuned to stress through its own lived experience of linguistic time, will make more of these stresses than would a Francophone ear, and thereby draw out latencies in the French that only become possible when the poem encounters foreign ears. Again, I think of Clive's own work, and how his attentiveness to French versification is allied to an awareness of all the future possibilities of a poem when released into translation—which always means, into translation*s*.

But there was one intuition from my first reading of this poem that I feel I got wholly *right*—which is to say that each time I revisit the poem this intuition, now embedded in, and emboldened by, a decade and more of reading, and voicing, and discussing, French poetry, is ever more compelling and urgent: that the final line dissolves programmatically into prose, not, as Agamben says of Dante's 'Cosí nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro', because it 'collapses into silence, so to speak, in an endless falling' (*The End of the Poem*, p. 115), but rather the opposite: it becomes pointedly flat and finite. The final tercet reads:

> Les parfums ne font pas frissonner sa narine ;
> Il dort dans le soleil, la main sur sa poitrine
> Tranquille. Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit.

When I will first have read this line, I will have had little idea that I was meant to introduce an *e atone* in 'rouges', or that I ought to mark a hemistich after 'trous'. But what I will have noticed was the internal symmetry of lines 12 and 13 (3 + 3 | 3 + 3; followed by 2 + 4 | 2 + 4). And in addition this is the moment at which the suspension between sleep and death is broken, the symbolic register dissolved; it is where the bucolic idyll is destroyed: less *Et in arcadia ego* than the incursion of the

Franco-Prussian war into poetic arcadianism, prosaic fact into the 'poeticism' of the poem thus far. But even if I did not know to look out for the hemistich, the entire poem thus far is organised around the medial caesura, whereas the three stresses of 'deux trous rouges' straddle this caesura, and indeed the intonation contour would gravitate towards the third of these stresses, not just as the nucleus, or the most semantically prominent word, and specifically because it is with 'rouges' that we realise that he is not asleep but dead, that these holes are bullet wounds, but also because of the assonance binding them, which militates against pause for physical expedience (*never* underestimate the æsthetic power of physical expedience—one way in which poetry explores the finitude of its material support).

Over a decade later, I can provide greater context to this. Rimbaud only occasionally employs an intonation contour which breaches the medial caesura (but which also minimally satisfies it: 'trous' is a stress, after all), and when he does so it is for a particular destabilizing effect. To restrict myself to examples from his 'Douai notebooks' of 1870:

Piqué d'une mauvaise | étoile, qui se fond

['Roman', l. 11]

C'est que la voix des mers | folles, immense râle,

['Ophélie', l. 25]

Un bourgeois à boutons | clairs, bedaine flamande

['A la musique', l. 18]

Eh bien, n'est-ce pas, vous | tous? Merde à ces chiens-là!

['Le Forgeron', l. 170]

Au CABARET-VERT: je | demandai des tartines
Quand la fille aux tétons | énormes, aux yeux vifs

['Au Cabaret-Vert', ll. 3, 8]

Dans la salle à manger | brune, à parfumer

['La Maline', l. 1]

On some occasions Rimbaud breaks up an adjective-noun composite (mauvaise étoile, boutons clairs, mers folles, tétons énormes), but also broader intonation contours, often involving compound nouns, possessives, or metaphors (la voix des mers | folles, bourgeois à boutons | clairs, fille aux tétons | énormes, salle à

manger | brune). The two most interesting are also moments where the discrepancy between the content and its *alexandrin* context is pointedly glaring: the blacksmith railing against his companions and Rimbaud ordering a ham sandwich at the Cabaret-Vert (surely 'je' cannot be stressed? surely this is self-reflexive rule-breaking?).

This returns us to the disjuncture of prose speech and the measured syllables of the *alexandrin*. Because, if Rimbaud is asking for us to register the divergence from the medial caesura, to follow the intonation contour of the phrase *il a deux trous rouges*, then it is equally the case that in prose delivery we would not voice the *e atone* (French friends I have asked bear me out on this, although they hardly reflect colloquial habits of 1870). And this not simply because, by definition, the *e* is *atone*, but also because we would not voice the *liaison* before 'au'. The verse context does not simply determine the number of syllables stressed, but also the pronunciation of consonants. So we either perform it as a correct *alexandrin* by distorting sentence stress, or we keep to sentence stress and it ceases to be an *alexandrin*, indeed ceases to be a twelve-syllable line. Both readings are wrong in a powerful sense: the choice in performance is what kind of wrongness we wish to embrace. Rimbaud is insisting that we confront wrongness: this is what, to my mind, makes this line, and retrospectively this poem, quite so compelling. But also what makes it so important for understanding how reading and voicing operate. Because wrongness is not simply a question of the correct or incorrect following of rules: it is an intuition which guides one's æsthetic sensory-motor attunements.

Which returns me to ignorance. The not yet sixteen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud breaking rules because he could be purposefully stupid in order to imagine what these rules did not allow him to know, and thereby initiate, some 130 plus years later, the twenty-three-year-old David Nowell Smith into a vague sense of what these rules might be, what possibilities they afforded, and what further possibilities were awaiting when they were then subsequently, if not cast aside, then at least destabilized. And however much one might subsequently attain a facility with these rules, might internalize the language and paralanguage these rules segment, and from which (in whatever complicated, unpredictable ways) they issue, this initial sense of what might be continues to govern how our ears are trained by the poems

they attend to, how they train themselves, how they are trained through discussion, through argument, reading, recitation. Ignorance does not only facilitate knowledge, it facilitates an attuned thinking which is not satisfied simply with knowing.