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Postscript

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Postscript

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
And spedde as wel in love as men now do;
Ek for to wynnen love in sondry ages,
In sondry londes, sondry ben usages.

Chaucer's meditative, rhyme royal stanza, his beautifully modulated and flowing lines in iambic pentameter (from the opening of Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*), takes up the theme of the book under review here, Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures*.^{*} But whereas Chaucer seems philosophical about change and inclined to wonder but not complain about how different the ways of speech and of speeding in love have been, Steele is considerably less relaxed. It is true that Chaucer may not be speaking expressly of poetry at this moment—though his linkage of speech to speeding in love hints otherwise—and he certainly had no reason to count the loss of meter among those changes. His prospect, instead, seems to have been one from which he could survey difference rather than lament loss. For “loss” usually turns out to be an expression of vested interest—which Chaucer avoids with his even-handed regard for past and present—and Steele, whose reading is wide and synthesis of learning impressive, might have arrived at a wiser book had he found occasion, somewhere along the way, to murmur over and over to himself Chaucer's lines.

Missing Measures is a brave book in its willingness to stand against what Steele must often see, but is too polite to call, a “blood-dimmed tide.” It is also impressively learned but finally a rather sad piece of work. Comprehensive, clearly written, and handsomely produced by The University of Arkansas Press, it is a volume worthy of lasting in one's personal library. It is a book that reads best as an expansion of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of*

^{*} *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter*. University of Arkansas Press, 1990. 327 pp. + index.

Poetry and Poetics, for its assemblage and synthesis of information is more valuable than its critical stance. Steele wears his heart on his sleeve, and his overview of the loss of measure in our time intends clearly to suggest that unlike whoever it was who said, “too much of a good thing is not nearly enough,” we have in this instance gone way too far. Such beliefs, reiterated almost rhythmically throughout his book, hardly come as the reasonable conclusions brought from the history herein examined. They arise instead as beliefs given weight and color by the deep background he has filled in. Indeed, there is a certain unintentional irony to the volume, in that the history of poetics Steele reviews, from Aristotelian seeds of doubt about meter, giving it at best second place to plot and material in what makes a poem, to the modernist revolution dismissing traditional meter as “verse,” could have given impetus as easily to a volume called, say, *Opening Fields*, with conclusions as predictable as the cliché of that title suggests, and of course a lot more friendly to a broad range of contemporary practice.

In saying so much, I do not wish to deny Mr. Steele his forceful moments. Here are a few passages that give you his flavor, beginning with a thought on our post-romantic allegiance to “organic” structures:

Natural organisms do not “originate” their own laws. . . . An aspen, for instance, does not freely elect, when a seedling, to grow up to be a medium-sized tree with a smooth, light-colored trunk and fine-toothed leaves. (196)

It seems terribly simple-minded to say of a medium that allowed for the poems of Homer and Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare that it is a straitjacket. (285)

It would be absurd to call Sophocles, Petrarch, or Keats a “formalist.” (290)

Or, quoting Hulme, “I object even to the best of the romantics. . . . I object to the sloppiness which doesn’t consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other” (300). Or, again, see the note on p. 307 that traces Williams’s theory of the variable foot, “possibly,” to Winters’s essay, “The Scansion of Free Verse.”

But it would be perverse to reduce consideration of *Missing Measures* to a

recitation of its values more or less sharply expressed. It is a fact that Steele's overall attitude is that of lament and that it would have been a very different book had its title not suggested "paradise lost" so much as, perhaps, "the world was all before them." But it is surely a more important fact that whether one sees loss or gain, measures are mostly missing from contemporary poetry, and the story of how that occurred is full of lore about poetry that should matter to any serious practitioner or reader.

This is a story that Steele gives himself to with surpassing dedication. As he is fond of quoting classical authors, he must surely know "that a big book is a big evil," being the more certain to preserve error. His citations, however, are generous enough for suspicious readers to look further for themselves. It is a story that begins in the classical world, that is refracted through the prism of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that branches, then, through the realms of seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century science and prose fiction, and that coalesces in the great modernists at the head of our century. It is a story that refers repeatedly to Aristotle, Plato, Quintillian, and Cicero, to Servius, Severus, and Sidney, to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Dryden, and Kant, to Coleridge, Wordsworth, Poe, and Mallarmé, to Eliot, Pound, Ford, Lewis, Williams, and many more. It is a long story that traces an incipient distinction between verse and poetry until a judgment of the ancient world's, that verse is less intrinsic to poetry than plot and content, becomes an antithesis in our century. For the ancients, to say that verse was less crucial to poetry than plot was not to deny the central part of verse in the whole. But for Eliot, writing of Kipling, verse was to be distinguished from poetry largely on the basis of its content being too clear. It is one of the distinctions of this volume, that when Steele deals with the modernists, whose children we still are, he does so with considerable sympathy so that their desires to write poetry as fine as prose, to speak of "writing," not just of poetry, to obscure the formal elements of poetry by deflecting our eyes (and ears) from them, and to arrive at a new metrics all seem natural, indeed inevitable developments, as inevitable as the fact that in the form of speech there will be change.

If verse, as classical writers decided, is not the essence of poetry, it follows that poetry might be found in prose. This turns out to have been a classical idea, applied to Plato long before others thought to apply it to *Don Quixote* or *Moby-Dick*. This correlation of the two forms has nothing

essentially to do with meter. Still, early prose, Steele explains, sought much of its order “on the model of poetry,” seeking rhythm but not meter; and then, in the evolution of things, we find poetry in our own century “seeking freedom on the model of prose.”

Though this is a large story and Steele’s treatment of it admirably comprehensive, there are portions of it that he seems oddly to have left out. Given his focus on the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it seems strange that he refers to Shakespeare rather rarely, and abruptly, only as an occasional, hortatory example of how one can write well in meter, or of how the really “great writers” eschewed experiment, and that he all but leaves Chaucer out. Steele does mention in passing Chaucer’s slighting reference to his own “rym doggeral,” but he doesn’t reflect as he might on Chaucer’s history of writing an increasingly looser verse, moving from a four-beat line to the intricate fluency of his rhyme royal stanzas, to the iambic pentameter couplets of *The Canterbury Tales*. In those shifts alone one might sense a lowering threshold for what begins to hint of doggeral, all of which puts pressure on later writers. Shakespeare’s case is still more persuasive, as he moved from the tightly metered and extensively rhymed comedies of his early years to a mix of prose and verse in *Hamlet*, with a few of the more “poetic” passages being in prose, to the frequent extra syllables and more relaxed pentameters of his later romances, with their occasional thirteen and fourteen syllable lines. In both poets we hear hints, just faint, then bolder, of an urge, over time, to relax the metrical standard, a hint of moving toward prose. Thus if phylogeny expands upon ontogeny, the seed of free verse in our own tongue germinated long ago. Or as Henri Coulette, a poet generously acknowledged here has written, “When we were naming the beasts, that was Paradise; when we started counting them, it was the modern world.” Counting implies extension, which brings us onto the pathways of prose.

In leaning his strong shoulder against the wheel of change, Steele resorts, unfortunately, to some misrepresentation, or perhaps he simply allows his bias to overcome his better judgment. Here, for example, is a passage that seems to state his central belief so clearly that I felt sure I’d read it at least twice until, skimming the whole book two or three more times, I was unable to find a second instance:

Aristotle believed no less firmly than Plato that measure is a fundamental need of the human spirit and that one of the purposes of poetry is to answer this need. As Aristotle says in *Rhetoric* 3.8.2–3, “that which is unlimited is unpleasant and unknowable. Now all things are limited by number, and the number belonging to the form of diction is rhythm, of which the meters are divisions.” (169)

It is the “measure as a fundamental need of the human spirit” part that feels the most urgent here, and that is ascribed to Plato; but you will notice that it is at best a paraphrase of whatever Plato wrote. Steele doesn’t lead us directly to his source, but his notes on a related passage (113) refer to *Timeaus* 47 d–e:

Music too, in so far as it uses audible sound, was bestowed for the sake of harmony. And harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions of the Soul within us, was given by the Muses to him who makes intelligent use of the Muses, not as an aid to irrational pleasure, as is now supposed, but as an auxiliary to the inner revolution of the Soul, when it has lost its harmony, to assist it in restoring it to order and concord with itself.

Now whereas Steele establishes early the equivalence of “measure” and “meter” (21), neither is in evidence here. “Harmony” is as close as we get, with “rhythm” making an appearance in the next sentence. This passage remains at some distance from any explicit notion about meter. It is in a sequence of passages discussing the relative value of our senses, with sight coming first, because it allows us to see the sun, and the heavens, and thus deduce universal order. Hearing is the next aid to be enlisted in correcting “irrational pleasure”; the sentences quoted above come just *after* Plato notes the contributions of speech. “Music too” is in addition to speech, not the primary thing, but a supplement. And though meter, or measure, surely bears close relation to music, it is the subject of this passage only by interpretation or metaphoric extension. I can well imagine an inspiring lecturer, an Ion, bringing this passage under discussion and saying, “What Plato is really getting at here is that measure is a fundamental need of the human spirit, and by ‘intelligent use of the Muses,’ he means writing

poetry well, which means in meter, which counters 'irrational pleasure' and restores us to 'the inner revolution of the Soul,' by which means we answer to that need." But an inspired lecturer would take responsibility for such a passage as his or her own interpretation, not try to pass it off as precisely what Plato believed.

Unfortunately, we can go further. The passage Steele does quote is from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and is as he quotes it, from the Loeb edition as I have used for Plato. The only inconvenience is its context which is in a discussion of using rhythm but not meter in speech. The context doesn't alter Aristotle's observations about meter itself, but the two passages together, Plato's and Aristotle's, are at least a little eerily uncomfortable for Steele's purposes, given their prior attention to aspects of speech. That is part of what I mean when I say the same evidence as assembled here might have led to a very different and more Chaucerian or Williamsesque sort of story. Here is the lead-in to what Steele quotes:

The form of diction should be neither metrical nor without rhythm. If it is metrical, it lacks persuasiveness, for it appears artificial, and at the same time it distracts the hearer's attention, since it sets him on the watch for the recurrence of such and such a cadence; just as, when the public criers ask, "Whom does the emancipated choose for his patron?" the children shout "Creon." If it is without rhythm, it is unlimited, whereas it ought to be limited (but not by meter); for that which is unlimited is unpleasant and unknowable. . . .

Beginning his own quotation just after that parenthesis, not to mention after those other remarks, which foresee our difficulty with meter so precisely, is, to say the least, adroit.

Even were these passages not in doubt as to Steele's use of them, they could be challenged from another point of view. Arguments from authority are best raised to be questioned, which Steele does too little of here, unless his authorities are Pound, Eliot, and Williams and those who have come after them. But even Plato and Aristotle said their silly things and stated claims as universals which we have come to see as limited at best. Assume, for a moment, that Plato believed in the need of measure as Steele suggests. Is all this really true? Is measure a *fundamental* need of the *human* spirit?

What of Hebrew poetry? The Psalms have their formal aspects too, their “*parallelismus membrorum*” (*Princeton Encyclopedia*) of “sameness, antithesis, and complement.” But is that “measure” or is that something else? And if Hebrew poetry might place a wedge in our story, opening it up a little to other influences, to other kinds of cadence, why not risk some speculation beyond all that?

In short, what I find disappointing about *Missing Measures*, in spite of its learning and patient exposition, is that it fails in a degree of generous speculation that it could confidently risk. To be sure, Steele mentions the Psalms as an example for Whitman, but he is happier to point out Martin Tupper’s “Rhythmics” (16, 298 n.) as a model. The Psalms, however, remain a plausible model for poetry in our time. Might they not suggest the possibility, now and in the future, of an unmetred poetry in English? Might not experimentation with such forms lead to a poetry neither metered nor adequately defined as “free verse” that it would be premature to discount? And if Hebrew poetry provides such hints, well, we all know of other non-western examples from which other forms of verse, rich in rhythm but not meter, could develop.

Another possibility that Steele could at least acknowledge is that women writing now might have reason enough to eschew an inherited metrics. Not all women need feel that. Some obviously do. But rather than observing only that the expected discovery of a new metrics that the modernists had predicted hasn’t come about and so is a dead idea, it might be fairer to say that its hypothetical discovery has just begun. Such speculation might erode a little the importance of meter that Steele seeks to defend, but it would hardly detract from the achievements of meter in the tradition we still know best. It would simply tend to make that tradition a poetry among poetries rather than Poetry itself.

Steele could also be more daring in extending ideas he does advance, as when he challenges the familiar assertion that poets who write in meter are un-American or anti-democratic, or its counterpart, that free verse is “intrinsically ‘democratic.’” Not only does this claim run blindly against the anti-democratic attitudes of several of the great modernists, but also,

In one key sense, free versification is more “dictatorial” than traditional versification. I will do what I will do, the free verse poet says to his [*sic*] audience, and it is not yours to wonder

why. He versifies by fiat. In contrast, meter is, as Wordsworth eloquently observes, like common law. Its basic statutes are few and clear; it asks obedience of and offers rewards to all poets equally. (283)

Here is an instance in which Steele could be less gentle than he is and argue that meter and forms scarcely define a domain of pride and assertive, masculine control of the earth. The notion that they do is another tiresome, contemporary suggestion. Wordsworth's notion is at least as probable. In meter and forms one can find the means of submitting to something larger than the self and the chance to be both a conduit for tradition and an example of tradition's capacity for renewal. Similarly, an ecological poet of the moment, one who "acts globally and thinks locally," might be at least as interested in recycling older forms as in thrusting forward new ones, if only because the mnemonic advantages of the older forms could save a few trees. So Steele could counterattack and even argue that some free verse makers, who insist on systems all their own, who ask you not to study poetry but to study them, would be the more plausible models of egotistical assertiveness, and that we might show more discomfort than we are likely to witness soon by the parallel between their ambitions, which sometimes seem to include sweeping all other poets aside as pointless to read once *The Daring New Poet* is on the scene, and the finger-waving, "we're-number-one" form of American assertiveness that they themselves would often be among the first to belittle.

But perhaps I've presumed too much. Perhaps Steele would not be drawn to such an argument. By way of conclusion, instead, he restates his central claim, that our loss of meter is a grievous loss, and quotes Frost's "The Aim Was Song." That would seem to be the aim of poetry that Steele would most admire. My own sense is that a more fitting final note would come from Henri Coulette, who has already been cited, and whose *Collected Poems* also came out from Arkansas last year. Take for example these final two stanzas of a late poem called "Newfangleness":

The young are writing what they call free verse.
Their fingers have forgotten how to count,
Those delicate long fingers.
No Anne Boleyn now would sigh,
Struck by the cunning of her Wyatt's measure.

Old rooms, old tunes, old loves—all of them gone.
The watch is relentless, but its chime is sweet.
Take up the minus sign—
Go, run with the Abyss:
You lose what you must love, yet you must love.

I loved that poem when I first saw it. We ran it and seven more of Coulette's later poems, all now in this fine volume. And by the way, the title word there, "newfangledness," was Chaucer's word before it was Wyatt's.

D.H.