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Poetry, Prose, and the Loss of Verse

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English Department

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“Poetic” Prose

Readers spend much of their time grasping for words to describe the way it feels to read a great piece of literature. Some of these words – “awesome,” “transcendental,” and “sublime,” for example – are deliberately vague, but we accept them nonetheless because most of us have long resigned ourselves to that fact that we will never fully comprehend, let alone define, the immensity of experience to which they point. Although our labels often betray us, we cannot do without them. In order to make sense of experience, we need labels. The critical enterprise as such might be thought of as one massive label-making mechanism, perpetually constructing, demolishing, and reconstructing terms to slap onto phenomena that will inevitably shed them.

A term which seems to me to be in the demolition phase – and which merits reconstruction – is “poetic.” “Poetic” and its corollary, “prosaic,” refer to the binary categories of “poetry” and “prose” which scholars have historically used to organize written works. That said, we mix these terms all the time. It is fairly common to hear a short story or a passage from a novel in prose described as “poetic,” or, more rarely, a piece of poetry described as “prosaic.” Such descriptions depend upon the assumption that the things we call “poetry” and “prose” belong to two distinct categories with their own definable attributes, associations, and functions, but that assumption has become somewhat old-fashioned as of late. Verse – comprised of rhythm, meter, and other sound organizations – has historically been the main attribute which poetry has that prose has not, but it is no longer a reliable metric.¹ Modern poetry demands a

¹ This seems as good a place as any to define verse. Stephen Booth provides a definition which I will replicate, with one alteration. He writes, “When we recognize something as verse, we recognize it as being organized in at least one non-substantive system, one system – traditionally a phonic one – other than the one composed of syntactic and semantic signals” (19). The “one non-substantive system” which verse operates within is the sonic system, consisting of rhythm, meter, rhyme, alliteration, and other sound organizations.

complete transformation of this definition of verse, and, if an expanded definition is not found, it threatens an unholy union of prose into poetry and poetry into prose.

Ever since free verse flew into the mainstream with Whitman in the late 19th century, oodles of “poetic” works have been published which show little trace of versification. The term “free-verse” can have a dual meaning: the best examples of free-verse poetry try to *free verse* from convention, mixing and melding meters while retaining sonic coherence and style; the worst examples seem to *free themselves from verse* entirely, making very little effort to play to the ear. Verse is completely optional in contemporary poetry, and without it there are no tangible characteristics which can distinguish one form of writing from the other. One conclusion which could be drawn from poetry’s shedding of verse is that there never was – and never will be – any substantive distinction between poetry and prose, and that these words are merely labels applied solely to make things easier for critics and teachers. But if this really were the case, the hundred plus years between the popularization of free verse and now ought to have been ample time for critics to cast these labels aside. If poetry is prose and prose poetry, to call prose “poetic” would be as redundant as to call poetry “poetic.” And yet, when we say, for example, that the closing paragraph of *Moby Dick* – with the gulls flying off and the sea swallowing the ship – feels “poetic,” *we still feel as if we’re saying something*.

Another famous prose passage which feels self-evidently “poetic” is the closing paragraph of Joyce’s “The Dead,” which scholar David Fishelov describes in terms of its “poeticity.” The passage is a famous one; it is the final statement of the final short story of Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Gabriel, the story’s protagonist, has just returned from a long party and finished a strenuous talk with his wife, Gretta, wherein she declines his sexual advances by embarking on a story about her ex-lover, Michael Furey, who died of illness after a grand

romantic gesture. She falls asleep, and Gabriel watches the snow – a recurring image throughout “The Dead” – through the window:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (225)

There are two qualities which Fishelov says contribute to the passage’s feeling of “poeticity”: 1.) formal and structural devices, which include linguistic patterns of parallelism, and 2.) deep semantic relations, which include incongruities and paradoxes. He argues that the combination of these qualities produces, in “an attentive reader,” the feeling of poeticity. The term “parallelism” refers to the kinds of sound repetitions we generally associate with poetry; he points to the repetition of the “s” and “f” sounds, the repetition of the words “falling,” “snow,” and “dark,” as well as the repetition of chiasmic phrases like “falling faintly/faintly falling” and “falling softly/softly falling.” What Fishelov calls the “deep semantic relations” are produced by the appearance of words associated with certain semantic fields; for example, he links words like

“dark,” “buried,” and “barren” to the “semantic field of death.” Juxtapositions of unlike concepts, such as “the living and the dead” in the final sentence, also contribute to the passage’s semantic potency and, subsequently, its “poeticity.”

Fishelov’s categories are not without merit, but the term “poeticity” in particular seems to be a product of desperation. Whereas the word “poetic” refers to poetry itself, “poeticity” seems to refer to the quality of being “poetic,” thus making its connection to poetry itself only indirect. By adding that extra degree of separation without changing the root word, Fishelov attempts to distance “poeticity” from the form of poetry while retaining some of its associations. His ambivalence toward the poetic form has its roots, I think, in his underlying confusion of the relationship between poetry and the two “poeticity” producing categories he lays out. Fishelov’s “poeticity” is purportedly derived *in equal part* from “linguistic parallelisms” and “semantic patterns,” but poetry itself has a *direct* relationship to “linguistic parallelisms” and only an *indirect* relationship to his “semantic patterns.”

Fishelov’s category of “linguistic” patterning is also in need of a slight alteration. When Fishelov speaks about “linguistic” patterning, he mentions many things which are expressly linguistic – that is, of or relating to language – such as the alliteration of single letter sounds, the repetition of words, and chiasmic phrases, but he also refers to patterns which are not expressly linguistic. Rhythm and meter, for example, are directly related to poetry and certainly help to produce a sense of “poeticity,” but they are not *inexorably* tied to language. Language is often the vehicle through which we deliver these patterns of sound, but they exist independent of language. The iamb, for example, is a staple of English poetry which we inevitably fail to define through language alone. Teachers attempting to explain the iamb to students almost always resort

to like sounds – the heartbeat is a common one. Attempts to explain the iamb on worksheets or blackboards lead to contortions such as the following:

so LONG / as MEN / can BREATHE / or EYES / can SEE

so LONG / lives THIS / and THIS / gives LIFE / to THEE (“What is an iamb...”)

or a more scholarly version of the same,

Whose woóds / these áre / I thínk / I knów (Vendler 593)

The first of these examples is from an online source – the top result if you google “what is an iamb” – and the second is from Helen Vendler’s “On Prosody.” Though their notation is different, their desired effect is the same. The capitalization and stress marks are both meant to turn one’s attention away from language and towards the sound patterns on which language rests. The linguistic category of prosody is the study of these sound patterns – stress, intonation, rhythm, and so on – insofar as they are manifest in language, but it is worth noting that there exists an entire discipline of sound patterning independent of language: music. Language is only incidental to the musical aspect of poetry. Attempts to communicate the effect of an iamb tend to look absurd on the page because verse is more fundamentally a musical phenomenon than it is a linguistic phenomenon. The move to label sound patterning in poetry or prose as expressly “linguistic” and place it opposed to “semantics” also neglects the fact that semantic organizations are as much a part of linguistics as sonic organizations. It makes more sense, then, to think of language and linguistics as the bridge between the two binary frameworks of sonic and semantic patterning which produce the thing Fishelov calls “poeticity.”

With this alteration, Fishelov’s framework is made viable. It should still register as a problem, however, that Fishelov’s term “poeticity” refers simultaneously to these two kinds of patterns – sonic and semantic – which have separate and distinct relationships to its root word,

“poetry.” Sonic patterning, particularly verse, is one of the metrics by which to determine the form of a text; semantic patterning, on the other hand, has no effect on the categorical form of a text. It makes sense to apply a word like “poeticity” to a moment of intense sonic patterning in “The Dead” because sonic patterns are much more integral to poetry than to prose. It is not so with semantics. In a technical sense, semantic complexity is equally compatible with poetry and prose, so we must make some account for the critics’ tendency to call moments of semantic clarity and elegance “poetic.”

In this essay I argue that the presence of verse in a text initiates a mutually generative relationship between a text’s sonic and semantic qualities, and that the critics’ tendency to praise great prose passages as “poetic” is a result of poetry’s historical connection to verse and the semantic elegance which said verse tends to inspire. In order to make this argument, I will lean on Fredrich Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which outlines a useful aesthetic lens with which we might reexamine the relationship between poetry and prose.

Nietzsche and Musicality in Tragedy

The Birth of Tragedy is, as its title suggests, about Attic tragedy, not poetry or prose, but the title is somewhat misleading. Over the course of its complicated publication history, *The Birth of Tragedy* has borne a number of names: Nietzsche's initial 1871 manuscript was called *Socrates and Greek Tragedy*; the 1886 edition was called *The Birth of Tragedy, Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*; but the truest to the content of the book, in my opinion, was the 1872 title: *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*.

Nietzsche is not overly interested in analyzing Attic tragedy itself.² Instead, he uses the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as lenses through which he can peer into the underlying artistic forces which animate them. His goal in *The Birth of Tragedy* is to develop an aesthetic framework which properly defines those underlying artistic forces. What he achieves is a long, meandering tribute to the artistic dichotomy of the Apolline and Dionysiac, terms derived from the two Greek art gods Apollo and Dionysus. The Apolline and Dionysiac, which seem semi-permeable and nebulous at times, are nonetheless potent tools for the analysis of art.³ By calling back to Nietzsche's framework here, I hope to demonstrate how it can be usefully applied to the analysis of poetry and prose dynamics.

The Apolline and Dionysiac are probably best described as spirits. Nietzsche emphasizes that the two precede humanity, springing from the earth urgently "*without the mediation of the*

² This, among other reasons, is why his debut was lambasted by basically everyone in the critical community. Though he does claim to want to gain much "for the science of aesthetics" in the opening paragraph of the book, he does not achieve anything approaching rigorous scholarship. The book is an outstanding aesthetic and philosophical achievement, but, as Descartes said about philosophy in general, it "contains nothing that is not disputed and consequently doubtful" despite being written by one of the "best minds that [has] appeared over many centuries" (9).

³ The terms "Apolline" and "Dionysiac" are substantively interchangeable with "Apollonian" and "Dionysian," but I use the former pair in order to remain consistent with the Penguin Classics edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Shaun Whiteside.

human artist” (18, emphasis Nietzsche’s). In Nietzsche’s view, these are the primeval urges of “nature itself,” and the binary encompasses the whole of universal experience. Given the incomprehensible scope of the two categories, it is difficult to speak about them precisely. One is tempted to explain them by pointing to other all-encompassing binary frameworks – for example, Aristotelianism v. Platonism, id v. superego, and nature v. artifice all mirror the Dionysiac and Apolline respectively – but such analogs carry their own epistemological baggage and may do more harm than good. The problem of category limitation is a constant throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, but Nietzsche never seems particularly concerned with it.⁴ He deals with the problem by drawing from a great host of similes and metaphors which allow the reader to infer, by their synthesis, working definitions for the Apolline and Dionysiac. He is most coherent, however, when he speaks about their respective manifestations in works of art, and it is in art that we can see the two most clearly.

At the opening of the book, Nietzsche tries a rough definition of the two dueling spirits by identifying the purest artistic manifestation of each:

To the two gods of art, Apollo and Dionysus, we owe our recognition that in the Greek world there is a tremendous opposition, as regards both origins and aims, between the Apolline art of the sculptor and the non-visual, Dionysiac art of music. These two very different tendencies walk side by side, usually in violent opposition to one another, inciting one another to ever more powerful births,

⁴ In his later years, Nietzsche came to resent his younger self for, among other things, his lack of category limitation. In 1886, fifteen years after the initial manuscript was finished, Nietzsche penned a preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* entitled “An Attempt at Self-Criticism.” His attempt succeeds. He calls *The Birth of Tragedy* an “impossible book – badly written, clumsy and embarrassing, its images frenzied and confused, sentimental, in some places saccharine-sweet to the point of effeminacy, uneven in pace, lacking in any desire for logical purity, so sure of its convictions that it is above any need for proof, and even suspicious of the *propriety* of proof ... (5, emphasis Nietzsche’s). He goes on, but needless to say, Nietzsche did not remain blind to the book’s lack of scholarly restraint.

perpetuating the struggle of the opposition only apparently bridged by the word
‘art’ (14)

Sculpture, which is strictly visual, and music, which is strictly non-visual, are the purest manifestations of the Apolline and Dionysiac impulses respectively. To further elaborate their origin within the artists, Nietzsche also likens the Apolline and Dionysiac to the two psychological states of “*dream*” and “*intoxication*” (14, emphasis Nietzsche’s), the first of which inspires shades, shapes, images, and forms, and the second of which inspires ecstasy, revelry, and song. In Nietzsche’s estimation, the Apolline and Dionysiac inspire two distinct urges which the artist transmutes into what we call forms of art – sculpture, music, painting, poetry, pottery, and so on – each with its own unique intermixture of the two inspiring spirits.

The irresolvable tension between the Apolline and Dionysiac appears to resolve when the distance between them is “bridged” by their presence in a piece of art. Like the sexes, the two spirits are inherently contrary to one another, and yet, by their unison, they become mutually cooperative and invigorating.⁵ Nietzsche sees Attic tragedy “as the Dionysiac chorus, continuously discharging itself in an Apolline world of images” (43); in other words, the Dionysiac chorus is the primary artistic force, and it animates the Apolline vision represented in the “action” of the play – that is, the tone, dialogue, character, and so on. The simultaneous presence of the Dionysiac and Apolline forces are the key, in Nietzsche’s view, to the greatness of the prime era of Attic tragedy represented best in the works of Aeschylus (*Prometheus Bound*, *Agamemnon*) and Sophocles (*Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*).

⁵ For more on this idea, see Camille Paglia’s book *Sexual Personae*, which explores how the Apolline and Dionysiac (the latter of which she refers to as Chthonic) can map on to the sexes.

One of the recurring subjects in *The Birth of Tragedy* is Nietzsche's relentless hatred for Euripides, who diminished the role of the chorus and, thus, the Dionysiac influence in Attic tragedy, effectively killing the art. Nietzsche says, as if speaking to the ghost of Euripides, "because you abandoned Dionysus, Apollo in his turn abandoned you" (54). In his view, Euripides's neglect of the Dionysiac force, traditionally represented by the chorus, pulled the bottom out from drama as a whole, and in spite of how carefully crafted Euripides's work may be, his characters, their passions, and their speeches seem "counterfeit" because they lack a connection to that Dionysiac quality which would endow them with a sort of mythic significance (54).⁶

To further explain the Apolline-Dionysiac interdependence in the theater, Nietzsche refers back to the purportedly "uncontested tradition" of tragedy where Dionysus himself is the hero and his suffering the subject portrayed through the Apolline images on the stage:

"The one real Dionysus appears in a multiplicity of figures, in the mask of a warrior hero and, we might say, entangled in the net of individual will. As the god on stage speaks and acts, he resembles an erring, striving, suffering individual: and the fact that he *appears* with this precision and clarity is the effect of Apollo, interpreter of dreams, who shows the chorus its Dionysiac state through this symbolic appearance. (52)

The figure to which the chorus sings their praises and laments is, simultaneously, an individual – referred to as Oedipus, Prometheus, or any other such name – and the Dionysiac spirit itself, representing the entire catastrophe of being as such. For Dionysus himself to appear on stage, he

⁶ This view of Euripides is, admittedly, peculiar. I will make no defense for Nietzsche on this point other than to say that, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, he is more focused on the development of the genre than any specific work. He acknowledges Euripides as a talented playwright, but he doesn't like the direction Euripides led the genre as a whole.

must accept the “*principium individuationis*,” or individuation, which Nietzsche describes as contrary to the Dionysiac state; according to Nietzsche, the Dionysiac spirit continually reveals the primal oneness and singularity of existence in the face of which the Apolline illusion reflexively constructs the self, fragmenting that oneness into a multiplicity. The self, in Nietzsche’s view, is an Apolline construct, and yet, on the stage, Dionysus appears as one being among many. The Dionysiac spirit here depends on the Apolline illusion for form and substance just as the Apolline depends on the Dionysiac to animate its images. The Dionysiac is primary – Dionysus himself being the star of the show and his suffering the subject – but in order for it to be perceived by the eye it must spill into and occupy the vestiges of the Apolline.

Also implicit in Nietzsche’s critique of Euripides is the idea that, in the theater and elsewhere, the Apolline and Dionysiac forces activate one another, and the absence of one will snuff the other out just as the presence of one will kindle the other into being. The interdependence of the Apolline and Dionysiac is most evident in forms of art which appeal to both visual and auditory perception. A form such as tragedy, for example, which takes advantage of both sight and sound through the action and the chorus, has room for the Apolline and Dionysiac to manifest themselves simultaneously. But because tragedy as perceived by the audience is a finished composite of the two spirits, the process of their generation is concealed. However, by the analysis of other, single-sense forms such as sculpture and music, which are, to Nietzsche, the unfiltered outpourings of Apolline and Dionysiac respectively, one can feel the process of mutual generation in real time. He gives a good and pertinent example of this phenomenon by working off a bit of Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation*. Nietzsche says,

According to Schopenhauer's theory, then, we must see music as the immediate language of the will, and feel our imagination impelled to give form to the spirit world that speaks to us, invisible and yet vitally stirring, and embody it in an analogous example. On the other hand, image and concept, influenced by a truly corresponding music, attain a higher level of significance. (79)

The experience of music which Nietzsche describes here is fairly common. One certainly could not argue that music produces *specific* images in the listener, but it could be said to imply or inspire them. A particularly soothing piece of music might bring to mind, for example, the image of a stream or a meadow. Or, if the listener is not particularly image oriented, music could at least be said to stir them to action. As consumers of art, we often speak about being *moved*. Music often moves us in a literal sense; a runner might use music as a source of inspiration, finding that they run farther and faster with it than without it. In which case, the runner is, in a sense, the Apolline image animated by the Dionysiac spirit. In either the case of the passive or active listeners, the purely Dionysiac music, perceived through a single sense, generates in its listener an Apolline counterbalance of "symbolic intuition" which manifests itself in image and/or action (79). Despite the fact that some forms are purely Apolline or Dionysiac, the artist is not, during the process of creation, oblivious to the presence of the counterimpulse. In fact, certain artists begin with one spirit and actively incorporate the counter-spirit it produces. There are many tools with which an artist might link the primary spirit to the secondary; language, being one of the most accessible, is also one of the most ubiquitous.

The Dionysiac and Apolline in Language

As established in my critique of Fishelov, language works as a bridge between the two binary frameworks of sonic and semantic; it can likewise serve as a bridge between the Dionysiac and Apolline. Take, for example, the figure of the musician: inspired initially by the Dionysiac spirit, the musician produces first a piece of music that can stand on its own. That music then naturally inspires some Apolline fragment or phantom of a concept or image that cannot be represented with clarity through the sonic framework alone, and so – if he is to represent the Apolline image in his work – the musician must find a way to access the semantic framework without completely compromising his work’s sonic quality. Because language is simultaneously a sound phenomenon and a vector for symbolic representation, it can access both the sonic and semantic frameworks, allowing the musician to tack the Apolline symbol onto his Dionysiac musical base.

Nietzsche sees the modern lyric poet as operating along these same artistic lines but lacking a certain musical potency. He says that, in antiquity, the identity of the poet is necessarily merged with the identity of the musician, but, in modernity, the poet is a figure fallen from that higher state; having abandoned certain musical qualities such as melody and harmony, the modern lyric poet “appears as the headless statue of a god” (29) – the god, in this case, would be Dionysus. The musician and the modern lyric poet function by the same parameters, sharing their dependence on a Dionysiac base, but they do not depend on it to the same degree. The verse of lyric poetry uses far fewer sonic faculties than song, diminishing the role of the Dionysiac spirit. If one takes that a step further and subtracts verse from poetry, diminishing the role of the Dionysiac once again, the result is something which resembles prose.

The key distinguishing factor which differentiates poetry from prose, then, is the comparative potency of the Dionysiac spirit, which can be determined by measuring the degree

to which the language is animated by music – or, more specifically, the degree to which a text is versified. If we consider musicality the defining factor, one might draw a continuum which stretches from high to low musicality, at the high and low poles of which we might place the Attic chorus and plain prose respectively; the chorus employs all the sonic faculties available to it, imitating the full intensity of the Dionysiac spirit, whereas prose generally employs the bare minimum. Nietzsche uses Greek tragedy as a lens through which to observe the Dionysiac and Apolline partly because it is a mixed form. By employing the chorus in opposition to verse dialogue, the form of Greek tragedy imitates the split between the Dionysiac and Apolline. It is only by setting one against the other that Nietzsche is able to approach acceptable definitions for the two spirits; so, if we are to apply his framework to poetry, it makes sense to set it against prose. Just as heightened musicality establishes the Greek chorus as the proxy for the Dionysiac spirit when opposed to the less musical verse dialogue, so too does heightened musicality establish poetry as a proxy for the Dionysiac spirit when opposed to the less musical prose.

Prosimetrum and the *Principium Individuationis*

As long as there has been a distinction between poetry and prose, there has been the prosimetrum. Prosimetrum is, like Attic tragedy, a mixed form; its earliest known definition was coined by Hugh of Bologna, in the twelfth century CE, who said that a composition becomes “a *prosimetrum* when a part is expressed in verse and a part in prose” (Dronke 2). Hugh’s definition has stood unchallenged for nearly a millennium; Peter Dronke, the twentieth-century’s leading scholar of prosimetrum, cites Hugh’s definition without critique at the beginning of his seminal book on the subject, *Verse with Prose from Petronius to Dante*. The definition of prosimetrum hasn’t required an update in the past thousand years because the genre, like the distinction which defines it, has fallen out of fashion. Though there are a few modern exceptions, the prosimetrum is no longer the living, breathing genre it was in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Still, though the genre is, for the most part, a relic, it does provide a good opportunity to analyze how the Dionysiac and Apolline forces – which are very much alive – tend to operate through verse and prose respectively.

It is somewhat difficult to speak on the “genre” of prosimetrum – and few critics do – because, though there are many prosimetric works to speak about, they often bear resemblance to one another only in that they combine verse and prose, relying on a clear distinction between the two. Examples of prosimetrum in the strict sense include *Satyricon*, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, *Vita Nuova*, almost all of Icelandic saga, and many more. Given the genre’s great scope, critics looking to speak about prosimetrum per se must find ways to delimit their discourse. Dronke deals with the limitation problem by discussing prosimetric narrative separately from prosimetric allegory, which effectively splits the genre in two. This seems to me a wise approach. Given that Nietzsche’s framework is adapted to Attic tragedy, a narrative-based

form, I will for the sake of this essay set aside prosimetric allegory and look only to prosimetric narrative. My hope is that insights unveiled here may be usefully repurposed for the analysis of prosimetric allegory as well, but for the sake of brevity I will not venture to prove it. Instead, I will discuss a few examples of prosimetric narrative – especially *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* – and attempt to set them in terms of Nietzsche’s framework, providing a glimpse into how the Dionysiac spirit, through the Dionysiac figure, animates prosimetric works.

Tolkien and The Bagginses

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) remains the most notable modern iteration of prosimetrum. Though the poetry of the novel certainly does not seem central to its popular appeal, Tolkien himself viewed verse as “an integral part of the narrative... and not a separable ‘decoration’ like pictures by another artist...” (Scull and Hammond 768). There is a critical ambivalence toward Tolkien’s verse in general; some critics find it “well-crafted and beautiful,” while others find it “excruciatingly bad” (Rawls 1).⁷ In *The Lord of the Rings*, the poems range from deliberately silly songs about nothing – bath songs, drinking songs, and the ecstatic nonsense of Tom Bombadil – to haltingly solemn odes and elegies about life’s journey, loss, and the passage of time.

The critics who dismiss Tolkien’s verse for its jingly, clichéd, and derivative qualities are often correct in their assessment of his style, but they tend to miss Tolkien’s larger point. Unlike

⁷ I will only comment on the debate about the quality of Tolkien’s verse to say that there is an excess of passion in the subject. Most academics are too harsh on Tolkien. Because he is so popular, they feel it is uncool to like him, and they generally turn their noses up as a social signal rather than as a matter of taste. On the other hand, amateurs, casual readers, and a minority of professional literary critics are overeager to defend Tolkien’s poetry because of how much they love his prose. I understand and reject both instincts. Tolkien’s poems are not great, but they work well within the novel, which is all we should really ask of a novelist.

the modernist milieu which dominated his era, Tolkien was never remotely interested in developing the art of poetry. At his heart, Tolkien is a scholar of poetry and an amateur poet.⁸ None of the poems in *The Lord of the Rings* are standalone masterpieces, but, taken together, they do offer some insight into how verse is able to transcend time, putting the present in the light of the past and vice versa, always with an eye toward the future. Tolkien's poetry, wherever it is intelligible (and often where it is not), almost always points backward and/or forward in time. Take, for example, Gimli's song, which chronicles the history of the race of the dwarves and foretells its future; or take Treebeard's song, which tells of the time when the Ents and the Entwives were together, the time when they parted, and a future reunion which may or may not come to pass; or take the lament for the Rohirrim, which Aragorn translates from the fictional ancient language of the Rohirrim to the common tongue:

Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?

Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?

Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?

Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?

They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;

The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.

Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,

Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning? (1-8)

Notice that as the poem progresses, the focus turns from the past to the present and then to the future: the opening four lines point back to the glory of the ancient civilization; lines 5-6 show

⁸ It's worth noting that Tolkien was, in fact, a distinguished scholar who worked at Oxford, first as a Professor of Anglo-Saxon and later as a Merton Professor of English Language and Literature. He specialized in medieval literature and languages.

how that glory has been obscured, resulting in the hopeless state of the present; lines 7-8 point ahead to a vague and uncertain future – its images are vivid but incoherent. Tolkien provides an intra-narrative commentary as well as an extra-narrative commentary here; in the same way that novel’s characters point back to the history of their fictional world, Tolkien, by his use of verse in the novel, points back to the history of English literature. The song of the Rohirrim is an obvious callback to the Old English poem “The Wanderer,” which makes use of the “where” repetition in much the same way:

Where has the horse gone? Where the man? Where the giver of gold?
 Where is the feasting-place? And where the pleasures of the hall
 I mourn the gleaming cup, the warrior in his corslet,
 the glory of the prince. How that time has passed away,
 Darkened under the shadow of night as if it had never been. (175)

This echo of medieval poetic style is not an anomaly in the novel. Kullman notes that Tolkien avoids iambic pentameter as well as other metric patterns associated with the “canonized and anthologized poetry from Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare to Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson” in favor of meters associated with older English folksong (287). In “Where Now the Horse and The Rider,” Tolkien uses the alliterative patterns common in Old English works such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and so on. As Kullman mentions, Tolkien does add somewhat of a modern twist to many of his poems – in “Where Now the Horse and The Rider,” lines 7-8 are deliberately unclear, which is not typical of medieval poetry or medieval prosimetrum – but for the most part, Tolkien insists on staying true to his roots in Western medieval literature.

Tolkien repeatedly uses verse to gesture toward history. He does so on a macro level by echoing medieval verse patterns in his modern novel, but the same technique appears in microcosm within the fictional timeline of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's poem "The Road Goes Ever On and On" – or "the walking song" – appears at multiple points and in multiple forms throughout the novel. Within the fictional timeline, the poem is written by Bilbo Baggins, who recites it at the end of *The Hobbit* (1937).⁹ It reappears about sixty years later in the very first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, once again spoken by Bilbo, who chants it to himself as he starts off on his final journey:

The Road goes ever on and on
 Down from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,
 And I must follow, if I can,
 Pursuing it with eager feet,
 Until it joins some larger way
 Where many paths and errands meet.
 And whither then? I cannot say. (1-8)

The meter is standard iambic tetrameter, which is common in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the themes are also typical of Tolkien. Like so much of the novel, the poem is about travel. Bilbo thinks of "The Road" as an endless distance, which he follows insofar as he is able, but which inevitably continues far beyond where his travels will end. In this way, "the road" mirrors time itself; in the same way that Bilbo's lifetime is a small piece of time in total, the road he travels is

⁹ Those unfamiliar with Tolkien's work should note that *The Hobbit* is set in the same fictional world as *The Lord of the Rings*. It follows the adventure of Bilbo, Frodo's uncle, and it is set many years before the events of *The Lord of the Rings*.

a small piece of “The Road” in total. “The Road” itself also works as an active agent in the poem. Bilbo speaks of “pursuing it” as if it itself is moving; he says that “it joins some larger way” despite the fact that the larger way it joins must necessarily be a part of it. “The Road” which he refers to is, at once, all roads as well as the particular piece of road which his feet follow.

Similarly, the poem is derived from Bilbo’s particular experience, but it also transcends him, in a sense, by remaining relevant once his particular journey is done. “The Road” reappears when Frodo – Bilbo’s nephew and heir – recites it at the start of his journey, exactly mimicking Bilbo’s version save one word:

The Road goes ever on and on
 Down from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,
 And I must follow, if I can,
 Pursuing it with *weary* feet,
 Until it joins some larger way
 Where many paths and errands meet.

And whither then? I cannot say. (1-8, emphasis mine)

Frodo’s version is identical to Bilbo’s except that the word “weary” replaces “eager”; whereas Bilbo walks happily into retirement, Frodo, having taken on the burden of the Ring, walks with the weight of the quest on his shoulders. With that slight alteration, Frodo adds a touch of his own particular experience to a poem which, by also applying to Bilbo’s experience, transcends him. One might view Frodo’s recitation as merely an imitation of Bilbo – indeed, one of Frodo’s traveling companions suggests just that, saying “That sounds like a bit of old Bilbo’s rhyming...

or is it one of your imitations?” Frodo replies, “I don’t know... it came to me then, as if I was making it up; but I may have heard it long ago” (72). Whether or not Frodo had heard the poem before is uncertain, but the fact that he extemporizes it on the spot without having previously set it to memory establishes him as an author in his own right. Just as the poem emerges naturally from Bilbo’s experience, so too does it emerge from Frodo’s, and it is clear within the context of the narrative that the poem – or at least the spirit of the poem – belongs to Frodo inasmuch as it does to Bilbo.

By applying their own particular touches to a common song, Bilbo and Frodo embody the *principium individuationis* which Nietzsche says the heroes of Attic tragedy must also undergo. For Nietzsche, Dionysus is the figure behind the varied masks which appear in the works of Sophocles and Aeschylus; Oedipus, Prometheus, Ajax, and Agamemnon all seem to be individuals, but the common “erring, striving, suffering” spirit which they embody is that of Dionysus, and their parts are worth playing insofar as they embody his spirit (Nietzsche 52). The chorus of tragedy sings directly to that spirit, and the self-image, an Apolline construction, exists in denial of that spirit until it is overcome by the death of the individual – whether literal or figurative. In the same way, though Bilbo and Frodo are individuals, they are each animated by the same Dionysiac spirit, which manifests itself through a common song.

It may perhaps still be unclear where the spirit of the poem originates or what the “spirit of the poem” even refers to. I have claimed that, as demonstrated in Attic tragedy, the spirit in question is derived from the Dionysiac, invoked through the various sonic faculties available in the poetic medium. But this is perhaps not self-evident, since, after all, certain images and ideas appear in both iterations of the poem which elicit the kind of semantic meaning which I’ve

aligned with the Apolline spirit. How is one to tell whether the sonic (Dionysiac) or semantic (Apolline) qualities manifested in the poem is more integral to its spirit?

“The Road Goes Ever On and On” appears twice more, toward the very end of the novel, spoken by both Bilbo and Frodo on separate occasions. Just before Bilbo drifts off to sleep, sitting in the comfort of Rivendell, he murmurs,

The Road goes ever on and on
 Out from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,
 Let others follow it who can!
 Let them a journey new begin,
 But I at last with weary feet
 Will turn towards the lighted inn,
 My evening-rest and sleep to meet. (1-8)

And Frodo, at the end of his journey, sings to the same tune:

Still round the corner there may wait
 A new road or a secret gate;
 And though I oft have passed them by
 A day will come at last when I
 Shall take the hidden paths that run
 West of the Moon, East of the Sun. (1-6)

Given these new iterations, it may be better from now on to refer to “The Road Goes Ever On and On” as only “The Walking Song”; since the words are so changeable, one cannot rely on the poem’s first line for a title. The text very clearly states that the song Frodo sings here is the same

“old walking-song” which appears at the start of the novel, but, crucially, “the words were not quite the same” (1005). Neither, therefore, are the images, ideas, and semantic meanings consistent with the those established in the previous iterations. In this case, the Apolline appears temporal and unreliable, whereas the Dionysiac remains stable across the poem’s iterations.

Verse, once composed and distributed, has the habit of reemerging altered but essentially – that is, musically - unchanged after long years unsung, and it is that quality of endurance which Tolkien especially emphasizes in *Lord of the Rings*. He is not, however, the first to notice it. In his use of verse, Tolkien calls back to the long-acknowledged roots of the literary tradition – that is, the history of poetry as an oral phenomenon and a product of the memory. If poetry is, as we so often treat it, a vehicle designed to carry ideas through great stretches of time, verse is its chassis, the load-bearing frame without which the engine, the Dionysiac will, would burn fuel to no other end. Before the written word, the degree to which a poem was fit to replicate itself over time was almost entirely determined by its capacity to stick in the ear, which is determined in major part by the quality of its verse. The capacity to be remembered is in fact the major factor by which we ought to judge whether verse is good or bad.¹⁰

Verse, the Dionysiac, musical aspect of poetry, is more fundamental to the poems of the *The Lord of the Rings* than even the ideas which they work to support and which often appear to be the central subjects in question. And, in the same way, the speakers of poetry – in this case, Frodo and Bilbo – are defined by their connection with the animating Dionysiac spirit, manifested through verse, even more than with the various images, concepts, and other semantic meanings which each poem conjures up. When Frodo and Bilbo invoke verse – which, as I have

¹⁰ This statement may seem reductionist, so I will take this opportunity to reiterate my definition of verse and distinguish it from poetry. Verse is *only* the various sonic organizations that appear in a piece of written language. Poetry is the combination of verse with other systems – syntactic, semantic, and so on. A thing can be a good piece of verse *and* a bad piece of poetry just as “Sugar, Sugar” by The Archies is a catchy tune *and* a bad song.

argued, strips them of their particularity and reveals their confluence with Dionysus himself – they align themselves not only with the figure of Dionysus but also with other Dionysiac figures which invoke verse in the same way.

The Poets of Saga

The pool of sources from which Tolkien drew inspiration for *The Lord of the Rings* is vast and, at this point, very well documented. As evidenced by his word-for-word imitation of “The Wanderer,” Tolkien never made a special effort to hide his influences, and the influence of Norse-Icelandic saga literature on his prosimetrum is no exception. Even without supplemental evidence from Tolkien’s biography, one can find obvious traces of the Norse-Icelandic influence in *The Lord of the Rings* itself. For example, the reforging of a broken sword, the figure of the shield-maiden, and the sacrifice of immortality for mortal love are all ideas which Tolkien borrows directly from just one of the Norse-Icelandic sagas, *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Though he was particularly fond of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, it does not represent the extent of his Norse-Icelandic influence. As an undergraduate at Oxford, Old Norse was a “special subject” of Tolkien’s (Carpenter 63), and his exposure to the genre of Norse-Icelandic saga clearly had a major influence on not only his ideas but also his narrative form.

The genre is not by any measure mainstream, however, so it bears introducing. Norse-Icelandic saga is a subgenre of prosimetrum consisting of works of narrative fiction/nonfiction from the medieval period (9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries CE).¹¹ The vast majority of saga authors are unknown or anonymous, but Snorri Sturluson is an exception, and he provides perhaps the best glimpse into the animating principles of the saga writer per se. Sturluson is a

¹¹ The word “saga” has its origins in Old Norse and refers specifically to “any of the narrative compositions in prose that were written in Iceland or Norway during the Middle Ages ...” (*OED*). Although, it has since been repurposed in modern English to describe episodic, often chivalric narratives – Star Wars, for example.

remarkable figure. He authored a wide variety of sagas and is credited with having compiled or written the *Prose Edda* (1220 CE), a textbook which accounts for the traditions of Norse cosmogony, mythology, language, and poetry. As well as being a poet and historian, he was also a successful lawyer and politician, being elected to the Althing twice.¹² While working on a saga, an author like Sturluson is forced to balance the two semi-compatible and often-competing interests of historical fact and literary merit. The characters in saga literature are often real people, and the events recorded are often real events; the saga is at once a literary, historical, and even political document which must deliver a compelling *and* historically accurate narrative.

The need to balance fact and fiction is a unique challenge for the saga writer, and it often complicates things for the reader. In general, sagas hover somewhere between two extremes. Some sagas carry all the usual adornments of modern narrative fiction – complex and exciting plot sequences, distinct yet archetypal characters, universal themes, and so on – delivered in a prosaic/poetic style which, despite feeling a bit archaic, remains vivid and refreshing. On the other hand, some sagas sacrifice their more reader-friendly elements for the sake of long, complicated genealogies of the Icelanders, detailed accounts of political or legal squabbles, and other such elements which make them feel more like obscure historical documents than works worthy of literary analysis.

As a unitary body of work, saga literature tends to be a mixed bag, and their use of mixed form is similarly inconsistent. They are almost all prosimetric, but the frequency and use of their verse varies from saga to saga. Many examples of Norse-Icelandic saga hardly utilize poetry at all; among these are *The Saga of Eirik the Red* and its companion *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, which, despite being basically verseless, have given the genre its greatest claim to fame. *Eirik*

¹² The Althing is the Icelandic parliament, which, being founded in 930 CE, is one of the oldest parliaments still operating.

and *Greenlanders* document the Icelanders' discovery of Greenland and North America in the late 10th century – nearly half a millennia before Columbus stumbled into the West Indies. Although the Icelanders' presence in the North America was brief, fruitless, and completely accidental, the sagas remain the earliest European account of the Americas. They deliver this remarkable piece of history almost entirely in the kind of informative and dry prose style which is typical of the genre. The few pieces of poetry there are in *Eirik* and *Greenlanders* are not of much consequence, and despite the fact that each narrative is ostensibly interesting, neither reach the same level of dramatic achievement as sagas like *The Saga of Gunnlaug*, in which poetry plays a much greater part. Compared to *Eirik* and *Greenlanders*, the plot of *Gunnlaug* is terribly unremarkable. It is compelling and well-orchestrated, but it contains nothing which sets it apart from other such plots. A coming-of-age sequence, a love triangle, a series of duels, and other such romantic cliches work to hold it together, but its driving force – and its only really remarkable component – is its cast of characters, the most fascinating of whom are defined entirely by their relationship to poetry.

As in other sagas, *The Saga of Gunnlaug* lays out the lineages of the Icelanders, their feuds, squabbles, and business in incessant detail through passages of dry prose decorated intermittently – and with increasing frequency as the plot thickens – with pieces of poetry, which are generally spoken by the protagonist, Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue, or the antagonist, Hrafn. The tale tells of Gunnlaug's voyages, quarrels, and especially his fatal love for Helga the Fair, over whom he and Hrafn duel to the death. Gunnlaug's identity is inextricably tied to his propensity to speak verse. One of the earliest descriptions of Gunnlaug explains his nickname in relation to his poetic faculty: "He was a bold fellow and a great poet, though rather libelous---hence his name ..." (14). Within the narrative, his verses usually manifest themselves in courting, counsels,

quarrels, and other dramatic encounters. Whether they win him praise or scorn, Gunnlaug's audience is never unmoved.

The first piece of verse in the saga appears during an altercation between Gunnlaug and a farmer. Gunnlaug stays the night at the farmer's house, and in the morning one of the farmer's shepherds takes Gunnlaug's horse out and runs it into a great sweat. Naturally, Gunnlaug "knock[s] the shepherd senseless" and offers the farmer a mark in compensation for the shepherd's injury. The farmer refuses Gunnlaug's offer, demanding more, and Gunnlaug speaks thus:

Come now, farmer, take this fee
 For thy servant stricken low,
 Or thou shalt find thy scorn of me
 Side by side with sorrow go. (17)

Hearing this, the farmer promptly accepts Gunnlaug's offer and they part ways. Despite the fact that Gunnlaug's poem only reiterates the terms which he already laid out in prose, the farmer, having rejected the pitch in prose, accepts the pitch in verse. It is clear that there is something in Gunnlaug's poetry which moves the farmer in a way that his prose does not, but it is unclear, at this point, whether verse is the primary cause of the farmer's acquiescence. One could certainly make the argument that the threat alone placates the farmer, and the fact that the threat is versified is only incidental. At this point in the narrative, a bit of ambiguity about the nature of Gunnlaug's verse is justified; the reader has only just been introduced to his character. As the narrative goes on, however, Gunnlaug repeatedly uses verse to transcend the limits of his common speech and bind the world to his own resolve – he does so by appealing to the Dionysiac influence and revealing himself as a fragment of the Dionysiac figure. By asserting his

status as such, Gunnlaug places himself alongside Oedipus, Prometheus, Frodo, Bilbo, and other such figures, who Nietzsche would interpret as Dionysus himself in varied masks and who, by force of will, plow headlong through the slings and arrows cast at them by circumstance of their narratives.

The fact that Gunnlaug has to reveal himself as one such Dionysiac figure is a consequence of the fact that his status as such is not always evident to those around him. This is a constant nuisance to Gunnlaug, who, in his impatience to be understood, uses verse to cut down any obstruction which conceals his Dionysiac status. He constantly wrestles with Nietzsche's *principium individuationis* – that is, the individuation which Dionysus undergoes in order to appear as corporeal figure on the stage – and he cannot always escape it. Although Gunnlaug aspires to be the Dionysiac hero, driving through the world and its obstacles like a runaway train, his identity as Gunnlaug Serpent's-Tongue, a hot-tempered young traveler from Iceland, makes it difficult for him to claim the Dionysiac ideal as his own. Social status, appearance, and often even the ideas which populate his words are the Apolline elements which continually conceal his status as a Dionysiac figure. Many of the early examples of poetry in the saga deal directly with Gunnlaug's struggle to be recognized as Dionysus and to be afforded the respect and reverence rightly due to him.

In a case such as that of the farmer and the shepherd, Gunnlaug's verse slices through the Apolline veil as easily as a sword through a curtain, but in other cases he hacks and cleaves to no avail. Whereas Gunnlaug's use of verse placates the farmer with little trouble, it appears somewhat less effective in his first meeting with Earl Eric of Norway. The encounter with Earl Eric is the only moment in the narrative where Gunnlaug really seems to fail as a poet. He has just departed from Iceland, leaving behind his father – whose reputation has been his main claim

to social status thus far – and his sweetheart, Helga, who’s been promised to him *only* on the condition that he build a decent reputation abroad and return within three years’ time. The terms of this ultimatum are a serious challenge for Gunnlaug, who is known mostly for his temper and sharp tongue. Earl Eric is the first of a number of kings which Gunnlaug must charm over the course of the narrative. But, along with the natural insecurity which is sure to tarnish the first attempt of any such task, Gunnlaug is cursed with a load of aesthetic baggage at their first meeting:

They say that Gunnlaug and Audun Cable-hound went with ten others to Hladir and that Gunnlaug was dressed in a grey tunic and white breeches. He had a boil under his foot on the instep, and when he walked, it frothed up with blood and oozed out pus. And in such condition he and Auden and party went before the Earl....

“What is the matter with your foot, Icelander?” asked the Earl.

“There is a boil on it, Sire,” Gunnlaug replied.

“Yet you didn’t limp,” said the Earl.

“I shall not go lame whilst both my legs are of the same length,” replied

Gunnlaug. (21)

Needless to say, Apollo is not on Gunnlaug’s side here. Setting aside the image of a man in a grey tunic and white bridges, which, however silly it may seem now, may well have been the fashion of the time, it is certainly unbecoming to approach the throne of a King with one foot spewing puss. Furthermore, one would be hard pressed to conjure up a subject less fitted to courtside conversation than the source of said puss, however bravely Gunnlaug bears it (that is, the frothing boil on the instep). Approaching the King, Gunnlaug looks like a fool; in

conversation with the King, he comes off as proud and somewhat awkward; and before he's had the chance to speak any verse establishing his own identity, an identity is attributed to him by a hostile servant of the King:

Then said one of the Earls's retainers, Throrir by name, "This fellow is behaving arrogantly, this Iclander. It would be a good thing if we were to test him somewhat." Gunnlaug looked at him and said:

Mistrust yon retainer
 So swarthy and vile;
 None is more crafty,
 Deep-fanged with guile.

Then Throrir would have gripped his axe, but the Earl said, "Let it be. Men should pay no attention to such nonsense. How old are you Iclander?" (22)

It goes without saying that Gunnlaug's poem, within the context of the narrative, is a failure, but the same cannot be said of his verse. The poem, which has both sonic and semantic objectives and therefore deals in both the Dionysiac and Apolline realms, is compromised from the start. Gunnlaug's entrance is unsightly, and his speech is unlovely. The semantic objective of the poem is to win the King's praise with fair words, and in order to achieve such a goal Gunnlaug must appeal to the Apolline spirit, finding it in himself to summon up some image or idea that might fire the King's imagination, please his fancy, or, at least, distract from the swollen foot. Instead, spurred to anger by the retainer's barb, Gunnlaug effectively doubles down on the first impression. By responding to the insult of the servant rather than paying reverence to the King, Gunnlaug affirms the retainer's accusation of arrogance, and by lashing out in anger, he concedes that the aesthetic ground established by the image of the bleeding boil is in fact his

primary aesthetic ground. Although the foul words of the poem – “mistrust,” “swarthy,” “vile,” “deep-fanged,” “guile” – are aimed at the retainer, they and the images they conjure up do seem to fester and ooze in a way which only further accentuates Gunnlaug’s own aesthetic issues.

Though the Apolline deficiencies bar the poem from achieving its semantic objective, the verse retains much of its Dionysiac intensity. Gunnlaug’s poem works very well as an animating force; Thrórir, the retainer, is moved almost to violence before being stayed by the King. The king, who feigns disinterest and dismisses the poem as “nonsense,” nevertheless acts as if the poem has shaken him. Rather than make peace in the court by sending Gunnlaug away or settling the issue, he instead belittles Gunnlaug, mocking his age and predicting that he will die young. So, although Gunnlaug does reveal himself as a Dionysiac figure, it only exacerbates the problems already established, so that he appears to them not only as a flurry of horrible images, but one which also conceals some indomitable will. The terrible aspect and the hidden vitality taken together are understandably perceived as a threat, and despite the strength of his verse, Gunnlaug is cast out of the kingdom.

Gunnlaug goes on to correct the mistake he makes with Earl Eric. He goes to England and recites for King Ethelred, who rewards him with a very fine scarlet coat and a place as a retainer; he also goes to Ireland and recites for King Sigtrygg, who rewards him with yet another scarlet cloak, a tunic, and a golden ring; and at a Yule banquet hosted by Earl Sigurd of the Orkneys, he even wins back the favor of Earl Eric.¹³ There is an argument at the banquet between the Geats and the Norwegians about which of their respective kings, Sigurd or Eric, is

¹³ It is mentioned in the narrative that Gunnlaug speaks a poem for Sigurd as well, but that poem is not present in the saga. As I’ve mentioned before, these sagas are often based on real events, and their construction largely depends on what information the authors have. Sometimes poems are recorded and sometimes they are not; as a result, some sagas are built around poetry and others can only give secondhand reports.

the greater. Gunnlaug is called on as a mediator despite his history with Eric, and he delivers a verse which satisfies both parties:

Warriors, you have told me
 Of this aged Earl
 That he has seen the mighty waves
 Before his vessel swirl.
 True is that; yet, Eric, too,
 Has crossed the heaving main
 And from the prow of speeding ship
 Has heard the east sea strain. (26)

Unlike the poem recited in the court of King Eric, Gunnlaug's poem here meets all of the Apolline criteria necessary to achieve the semantic objective; he needs to make a peacemaking poem which casts both Sigurd and Eric in a positive light, and the images and ideas which appear in the poem befit and praise both men. The quality of the poem's ideas as well as the nobility with which Gunnlaug casts aside the old grudge have the potential to make peace between the two parties while clearing Gunnlaug of his past wrongdoing. However, the great leveling which the poem achieves – that is, bringing the rival bands of warriors eye to eye – is owed only in part to the shining images which make up the Apolline part of the poem. The force which impels the warriors to accept the terms which the Apolline spirit so fittingly frames is Dionysiac in nature. It is, in essence, the same force which caused Throrir the retainer to grip his axe rather than laugh off Gunnlaug's insult.

The Dionysiac will, bent on a pure ablution of social friction, works to dissolve the Apolline constructs of character in both cases. Throrir is moved to action because Gunnlaug's

verse challenges his Apolline self-image as a loyal and trusty retainer; he lashes out in order to defend that self-image. The warriors are moved to resolve their conflict for a very similar reason. Each group has a somewhat inflated regard for its leader, and neither group can tolerate the idea that its leader could have an equal. This misperception is based in an Apolline shortsightedness; the self, as I've mentioned, is a construct of the Apolline erected to stand in opposition to Dionysiac oneness. The warriors here insist on the primacy of the self. Merely to be a Geat or to be a Norweigan is already to participate in an Apolline construct which shuns the larger Dionysiac oneness. In this conflict, each group seems unable to see beyond their particular social bubble; for example, because he has no peer among the Norwegians, Eric must be peerless absolutely. In a sense, we see two Apolline vessels speeding toward one another, each convinced that the other is a mirage and each too proud to turn. Gunnlaug's verse, however, shifts the warriors' attention away from the particular feats, age, and pedigree of each king, turning instead to their common existence. Each must wade "the mighty waves" and cross "the heaving main"; they are enveloped in the same Dionysiac tumult of being, and that fact demands that they set aside petty disputes over which king has a better claim to this or that merit. Or, more precisely, Gunnlaug demands it, as he is the speaker who invokes the Dionysiac will.

It is also at this point in the narrative that Gunnlaug sheds the first-impression he made with King Eric in Norway, his only major failure abroad. The change comes about not through a change in Gunnlaug's verse but rather through a change in the aesthetic trappings of that verse. The verse has the same Dionysiac effect as it ever did. Earl Eric is able to accept Gunnlaug as a Dionysiac figure here because there are no longer any glaring aesthetic errors which cause him to react negatively to Gunnlaug's imposition. In much the same way that the Frodo and Bilbo would repeat the same song with alternate words and meanings, Gunnlaug fits a number of

Apolline trappings to the same base Dionysiac undercurrent. His verse operates the same way almost everywhere – that is, as a direct representation of the Dionysiac will – and it is only the images, ideas, and concepts surrounding it which fluctuate.

I have made the claim thus far that Gunnlaug serves as the Dionysiac hero of the saga and that, sometimes, his status as such transcends his status as an individual. This is not to say that Gunnlaug ever stops being Gunnlaug; rather, through his use of verse he is able to play the part of Dionysus, and at the moment that he begins to do so, his identity as Gunnlaug Serpent's-Tongue ceases to be relevant. When he speaks verse, Gunnlaug effectively sheds the Apolline self and embodies Dionysus. This works to his advantage most of the time because to embody Dionysus is to borrow his best attributes – an indomitable will, a commanding presence, a bottomless reservoir of manic energy, and a great ear for poetry, to name a few. It is by the virtue of these attributes that Gunnlaug is able to achieve the fame and notoriety that he does in the saga, but it also bears mentioning that he is not the only such figure. Hrafn, son of Qnund, also fancies himself a poet, and it does not take long for he and Gunnlaug to become rivals for the role of Dionysus.

In the chapter aptly titled “Gunnlaug and Hrafn Meet in Friendship But They Part in Wrath,” the two poets meet at the court of King Olaf the Swede. They talk for a while with one another about their travels, and they seem to become fast friends, but the friendship quickly deteriorates when Gunnlaug approaches the King and asks to recite a poem. Just as he does so, Hrafn follows behind and requests to recite also. There is a slight disagreement about who is to recite first, but the King eventually grants Gunnlaug the first reading, saying rightly that “he will lose his temper if he doesn't get his own way” (28). Gunnlaug recites and the King asks Hrafn for a criticism, to which Hrafn says, “it is a high-sounding poem, but it is ugly and somewhat

stiff in composition, just as Gunnlaug himself is in his temper.” Then Hrafn recites and the King asks Gunnlaug for a criticism, to which Gunnlaug says, “it’s a very fine verse, just as Hrafn himself is fine to see, but it is a mean one.” It should be noted that the King does not attempt to egg the two poets on; he seems perfectly comfortable having two poems read for him. The friction very naturally appears between the two poets because they vie for the same position, and each attempt to expose the other as unqualified for the Dionysiac role. In their criticism of each other’s poetry, both Gunnlaug and Hrafn liken the other’s verse to its poet’s individual characteristics. This may seem only a way to land a personal jab in the guise of literary criticism, but there is a deeper criticism working here. To liken a poet’s verse to the poet himself is to deny that he is capable of transcending his individual status and assuming the role of Dionysus; it is to accuse him of having been smothered completely by the Apolline veil. The poet, then, is trapped in the illusion of the self, and the scope of his verse is bound to it. In other words, he is a lousy poet, niche at best, and incapable of achieving anything of universal appeal.

Gunnlaug and Hrafn’s rivalry continues until it takes both their lives. While Gunnlaug is serving as a retainer to King Ethelred, the appointed time by which he was to return to Iceland to marry Helga passes; he requests leave of the King but is not permitted because there is rumored to be a great host of Danes coming to England in arms. But the Danes do not come, and eventually Gunnlaug is allowed to go back to Iceland. In the meantime, Hrafn goes back to Iceland and marries Helga. He does so in part because she’s reckoned the most beautiful woman in Iceland, but the opportunity to slight Gunnlaug seems to be the main incentive. Needless to say, Gunnlaug does not take this news very well, and when he hears of it from his friend Hallfred, he speaks thus:

Let the howling east-wind

Lash the waves to foam,
 Break this landsman's weather,
 Drive our vessel home.
 Let it bear my threat to Hrafn,
 And shout where'er he be,
 He shall not be an equal
 Till death tries grips with me. (31)

The heart of Gunnlaug's message here is that *he will not suffer an equal*. In his eyes, he is the sole deliver of the Dionysiac will. He is the poet – he turns the minds of others – and all laurels befitting a poet are fit for him alone. He seems to try to summon the weight of the ocean here to follow behind him before he comes crashing down on Hrafn, who, for his part, is no less eager to prove which of them is greater. As soon as Gunnlaug returns to Iceland, a duel is arranged. The first duel is inconclusive; they are both held back by their kinsman. But they later agree to leave Iceland so as to fight again with no holds barred in Norway. Gunnlaug overcomes Hrafn and spares him, saying he will not fight a wounded man, to which Hrafn says that he will continue to fight if Gunnlaug brings him some water. Gunnlaug agrees to this on the condition that Hrafn promises not to trick him. Hrafn assents and promises, but when Gunnlaug brings the water, Hrafn breaks his word, striking Gunnlaug on the head with his sword. Gunnlaug kills Hrafn but succumbs to the wound thereafter. The two poets continue to trade barbs in verse up until the moment of the fight, and even after they've both perished, they each appear in their fathers' dreams and each speak a verse telling of the final battle.

The fact that the narrative cannot tolerate two separate Dionysiac figures is indicative of larger insight about the nature of the Dionysiac and, by extension, poetic spirit. Whereas there

can be many varieties of Apolline figures – for example, the Geats, Norwegians, and so on – there is only one kind of Dionysiac figure. If Gunnlaug and Hrafn were not poets, they would not have any quarrel with one another because they would be satisfied to fill one of any number of distinct social roles. But because they are poets, they must draw their poetic identity from the same Dionysiac wellspring of verse – verse, which, as established, is a constant through time and through many generations of Apolline constructions.

In the same way, the particular poets who we know and identify by their idiosyncrasies in aesthetic form do in fact differ in an Apolline sense, but they all lean upon the same musical, Dionysiac spirit. The thing which has often been called the “poetic spirit,” the quality of “poeticity,” and so on has its roots in that same unitary, Dionysiac force which all poets – if they are to be poets in anything other than name – must invoke. The works of Virgil, Dickinson, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and so on are distinguishable from one another only by the variously painted Apolline shells of imagery and concept which enclose and often conceal their underlying anima – that Dionysiac well-spring or whirlpool of music. They are greatly varied nonetheless, and they are therefore not always at odds; in the same way that siblings do not (always) quarrel over who can claim the greatest share of the virtues of their common parentage, poets too can suffer kindred spirits, mutual followers of Dionysus, so long as they can still distinguish themselves from one another in some other way. Variability in the Apolline dimension allows poets to exist simultaneously without too much friction. There is also, over time, a natural aesthetic progression which allows poets of one generation to admire their predecessors without too much jealousy; Bilbo and Frodo, for example, do not clash in the same way Gunnlaug and Hrafn do because there is a clear line of inheritance between them. But nonetheless, rivalries do

emerge, and all poets, at one point or another, strive to be the singular talent of their generation – their era’s Dionysus.¹⁴

¹⁴ There is a single moment of friction between Bilbo and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo inherits the Ring of Power from Bilbo, which is effectively a passing of the torch, marking the end of Bilbo’s time as Dionysus and the beginning of Frodo’s, and at one point, when Bilbo sees the Ring on Frodo, he goes mad for a moment and attacks him. All this is to say, there is always some amount of friction if ever two Dionysiac figures cross paths.

Recapitulation and Resolution / Eliot, Verse, and Poetry

I have thus far made two essential points: 1.) the effect of a text can be accounted for by the analysis of its sonic and semantic qualities and 2.) the sonic and semantic qualities of a text have a mutually generative relationship with one another, as approximated by the interaction of Nietzsche's Dionysiac and Apolline spirits. I derived the first point from a critique of Fishelov's framework for the analysis of the effect he labels "poeticity," wherein he proposes that the effect of "poeticity" is produced by the clever combination of "linguistic parallelisms" and "semantic relations." The key difference between our two frameworks is that I reject the term "linguistic" in favor of "sonic." Many things fall into the category of "linguistics"; linguists concern themselves with the function of language, its grammar, syntax, articulation, and the ways in which it produces semantic meaning. Given that semantics is often thought of as a subfield of linguistics, one cannot define the two terms against one another. However, there are aspects of linguistics which bear no intrinsic relation to semantic meaning. The more mechanical aspects of language-making – the bare production of wind through the throat, tongue, teeth, and lips – and the noise which they produce are only furnished with semantic meaning after their initial production. Verse, the sonic framework on which poetry is built, is a thing which exists prior to and independent of linguistic construction. Though sound must contribute to language in order for it to work, the art of music is evidence that sound does not need language or any other semantic framework in order to communicate. So, if we are to produce a binary framework for the analysis of "poeticity," a feeling produced by language, it makes more sense to use the terms "sonic" and "semantic," which, unlike "linguistic" and "semantic," are two completely separate dimensions which both contribute to the effect of language.

As I've mentioned, that word "poeticity" is, of course, a derivation of the word "poetic," which denotes a thing's resemblance, in form or feeling, to poetry. Fishelov uses this word to describe the closing paragraph of Joyce's "The Dead," a piece of prose. That particular piece of prose happens to feature a number of sonic qualities which justify its comparison to the form of poetry, but the fact that Fishelov is comfortable labeling both its sonic *and* semantic qualities as producers of "poeticity" is, as I've argued, indicative of a larger critical problem. Critics, teachers, and casual readers alike tend to be perfectly comfortable labeling texts which have no trace of sonic complexity or style "poetic." They may even describe an action, scene, or image in a text "poetic" irrespective of the words that produce it. This apparent mislabeling begs the question which has guided much of this paper: what do critics talk about when they talk about "the poetic," and why do they insist upon that word and its cognates?

In order to account for the critical instinct to label moments of extreme sonic and semantic elegance "poetic" regardless of whether or not they are actually delivered in a poetic form, I called upon Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which lays out the artistic framework of the Dionysiac and Apolline. Within Nietzsche's framework, the sonic and semantic dimensions are the mediums through which the Dionysiac and Apolline artistic impulses find expression. I demonstrated how, though the Dionysiac and Apolline have distinct points of origin in the artist, it can be difficult to tell them apart once they are built into a piece of art. Art made up of language utilizes the sonic and semantic frameworks simultaneously so that, by the time the words enter the ears of the listener, the separate streams of the Dionysiac and Apolline have already merged into one unitary river of image-laden sound. It is that river which stirs the effect of "poeticity" in the mind, and the listener is so caught up in the rush that they lose the presence of mind to define the separate sources of the single stream. However, genres like Attic tragedy

and the prosimetrum approximate the Dionysiac and Apolline split in their form, and they are therefore essential to understanding how the two spirits interact with one another. I have attempted to show how various prosimetric works dramatize the interaction of the Dionysiac and Apolline spirits by way of their Dionysiac, poetic figures. The poetic figure enveloped within the action of a narrative stands within an unwieldy whirlwind of images, concepts, and characters. He earns the label “Dionysiac” when he tames the whirlwind. He doesn’t exactly settle it, because to do that would be to end the narrative, but he directs it, shaping it to his will and forcing it to manifest new images of his own design. The whirlwind of images, on the other hand, only earns the label of “Apolline” once it has been molded into a coherent aesthetic unity by the Dionysiac will. Without the Apolline, the Dionysiac will would exert itself uselessly into a void, and without the Dionysiac, the Apolline would remain an incoherent flurry of concepts.

Although single form genres – i.e. pure prose or pure poetry – do not lay out the mechanisms of the two spirits so clearly as the prosimetrum, the Dionysiac and Apolline work much the same way in single form genres as in mixed form genres. The sonnet, for example, has a number of sonic rules which it must follow in order to qualify as a sonnet. The poet begins with the will to speak, reaches out into the world of the Apolline for images, concepts, and so on, and then binds them to the sonic framework. The images and concepts the poet chooses, which are determined by the poem’s semantic objective, are naturally refined and intensified by their compression into the bounds of the sonic frame; the words (sounds) the poet chooses, which are determined by the poem’s sonic objective, are clarified and complicated by their adherence to the semantic frame. If we are to compare the general effects of poetry and prose, we must acknowledge that the presence of verse in poetry produces a corresponding enhanced semantic quality. So, when a critic comes across a moment of semantic elegance in a piece of prose, it

feels right to call that moment “poetic” because, unlike prose, poetry has verse, which tends to inspire an increased semantic potency.

Nonetheless, the use of the word “poetic” and its cognates to describe semantic elegance alone is imprecise. It is the result of a misunderstanding of the Dionysiac roots of poetry, and the perpetuation of that misunderstanding has, for the last hundred years or so, widened the rift between poetry and verse, which in part has caused poetry’s loss of relevance in the public consciousness. I mentioned at the beginning of the paper that Whitman, introducing free-verse to the mainstream, shattered critical understanding of what poetry is as compared to prose. *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was and is an incredible poetic achievement, and its status as such is not diminished by its non-traditional approach to verse, but its success has allowed a slew of weak-willed imitations to enter the mainstream. Though Whitman does not utilize traditional verse, he is nonetheless the definition of a Dionysiac, poetic figure. “Song of Myself” could be thought of as a masterclass on the *principium individuationis*; Whitman insists that he, an individual, is one with every other individual. He acknowledges Apolline identities and worldly images but only as they relate to the Dionysiac oneness of being and experience, which only he, the Dionysiac poet, can reveal. Though the Apolline world of images certainly decorates that poem, Whitman generally expresses an indifference toward it, emphasizing instead the human agent and the human will – hence: “I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth, / I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself, / (They do not know how immortal, but I know.)” (127-129). He is somewhat of a tragic figure in this sense. By sheer willpower and poetic invention, he miraculously achieved the status of a Dionysiac figure without leaning on traditional verse, but the extent of that achievement seems to have been lost on many of his free-verse successors. Seeing that Whitman didn’t need to invoke traditional verse to make great

poetry, they rushed to the conclusion that the next generation need not invoke verse at all. And, whereas Whitman points to himself – that is, his Apolline identity – in order to show how the boundaries between individuals are illusory, effectively *de-emphasizing* his own particularity, succeeding poets point to themselves for no other reason than to revel in their own subjectivity.

An example of one such narcissistic reveler is T.S. Eliot, who, in my opinion, has greatly contributed to poetry's aimlessness since Whitman. In *The Wasteland* (1922), his seminal poetic work, there are bits and pieces of verse, but they are too inconsistent to bind the assorted fragments of image and concept together in any meaningful way. In the poem's second part, for example, the verse deteriorates almost completely:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—
 I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
 He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said,
 Others can pick and choose if you can't.
 But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.
 You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique ... (2300)

The capitalization and line breaks here are the only indication that we should call this poetry.

The verse, insofar as there is verse, is clearly designed to imitate prose. It has a certain spontaneity which is reminiscent of common speech, and the presence of multiple voices in dialogue balks the traditional, direct speaker-reader relationship typical of the poetic form.

Rather than doing as a poet should and doubling down on verse, Eliot seems to have been swept off his feet by the rise of the novel; after he read over the early versions James Joyce's manuscript for *Ulysses* (1922), Eliot wrote back to Joyce, offered a few minor suggestions, and said, "I have nothing but admiration, in fact, I wish, for my own sake, that I had not read it" (Worthen). The Joyce influence is unambiguous in *The Wasteland*. There are some particular ideas which Eliot borrows, but more than that there is the overarching sense of fragmentation.

The Wasteland is, like *Ulysses*, notoriously difficult to read. It earns that reputation not because of the complexity of its verse or ideas but rather because Eliot *refuses to speak to the reader*. If one can ever make out the voice of the poet, it is standoffish and distant. Reading *The Wasteland* feels like putting an ear to the door of a locked room, catching scraps of dialogue, nervous mumblings, foreign languages, and (if one pays any heed to Eliot's notes) the impositions of some stuffy scholar insisting on the mythic significance of it all. Much has been said about Eliot's notes – most of it has been said by Eliot himself – but I'd argue that they're present in the poem not because the reader is incapable of reading, but because the speaker is incapable of speaking. Eliot fails to establish any authority as a poet in *The Wasteland* because he abandons the unitary, poetic voice of Dionysus in order to pay reverence to the wave of new-fangled, dialogic prose voices which emerge in the 19th and early 20th century. Rather than taking the helm as a Dionysiac figure, Eliot surrenders to the whirlwind of Apolline images and ideas: voices spring out of unexpected places, ideas are posited with no follow through, and an

assortment of images, characters, and allusions are scattered about a barren plain. The readers – along with the Eliot of the notes – are left to pick up the poem’s wreckage.

I don’t mean to mock Eliot. *The Wasteland*, despite its many problems, is actually one of the more thoughtful examples of free-verse to come out of the twentieth century. Eliot fundamentally misunderstands the function of verse in poetry, but even so, he does not lightly cast it aside. Eliot, Pound, and the best-read of the modernist poets crept carefully, cautiously toward a vision of poetry where verse was just one of many interchangeable tools the poet could use to craft a poem to his purpose. They recognized verse’s historical significance, but they believed – or perhaps needed to believe – that the poetic tradition could move beyond it.

That belief, if it was ever held in earnest, was ill-founded, and the efforts of the modernists, however cautious, were misguided. In fact, verse runs much deeper than the poetic tradition. Verse is the nearest possible approximation of the direct expression of the artist’s urge to speak. Cut off from the semantic framework, it cannot conjure images, formulate ideas, or initiate meaningful dialogue, but it can nevertheless communicate. It is almost indistinguishable from the urge – the Dionysiac will – itself; it is the sonic representation of the very root of artistic intention. The loss of respect for the poetic enterprise which has occurred over the past century is a consequence of the fact that poetry has been uprooted. Thus, the droves of critics who have called poems like *The Wasteland* “groundbreaking” are correct in their word choice but wrong in their tone: the loss of verse has torn the ground out from under poetry and left the genre drifting through a void; the sight of poetry’s embellishments – image, identity, and concept – left so terribly free should be cause for anguish not celebration. Without verse, there is no longer any force to propel poetry through space and time – except, of course, the brute force of academics, who will continue to hand-pick new poets from their own social circles only to

declare them (and themselves, for having picked them) monumental and timeless as they dwindle into irrelevancy. Since it seems that poetry and verse must remain estranged, the genre will remain fodder for anthologies and reprints, and the Dionysiac weight which has fortified the word “poetic” for so long, making it interchangeable with words like “profound,” “sublime,” and so on, will continue to deteriorate. We need not attempt to reverse the pattern of decay. If the poets have allowed the genre to die, it is not, then, the job of the critics to resuscitate it. But, since we must preserve poetry as a relic for the study of future generations, it is absolutely vital that we acknowledge its deterioration and diagnose the cause. Otherwise, the word “poetic” will continue to be sullied by miseducated “poets” who know not what they do.

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