

# THE SPLENDOR OF FORM

by James Matthew Wilson, Villanova University

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In his recent short essay, “Lisping in Numbers,” David J. Rothman has made an attractive and well-founded argument not merely for the centrality of verse to poetry, but for its constituting the formal property that makes a given matter to be poetry rather than prose.<sup>1</sup> Rehearsing a familiar qualification, Rothman tells us that verse, while not the sole essence of poetry, is essential nonetheless. The practitioner of free verse, who inevitably has a bad conscience about his avocation, may immediately hear the integrity of his art called into question. But, exercising both charity and a knowledge of literary history, Rothman comes, at the end of his essay, to indicate that a great deal of what is called “free verse,” and is sometimes belittled as “prose,” in fact conforms to something like a principle of versification. For, he proposes, any aural element in a poem that can be understood in terms of number, anything that can be *counted*, may conceivably be used as the foundation for verse.

In a list that attempts to include the span of what might be counted, and so count as verse, he begins

with the “anaphoric versicles” of Whitman and ends with the “projective verse” of Williams and Olson. In this first choice, he is just and points out what is evident but not always obvious: verse, at minimum, entails formal repetition, including possibly the repetition of syntactical structures. The parallelism of the Psalms instances this most clearly:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his mercy endures forever;  
Give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his mercy endures forever.

We find here a movement that can be understood in terms of quantity, with words and sentence rhythms repeating in a readily discernible manner. English verse normally entails the repetition of metrical feet, but any kind of repetition governing expression may *conceivably* constitute verse. If this is the case, we should nonetheless note, as the poet Timothy Steele has on many occasions, that such a concession does not really help us to account

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for the indiscernible formal principles of much of what is called free verse in our day. For the language of such poems seem to be ordered to no quantitative scheme whatsoever. And thus, Rothman is less happy in his latter example, which seems an act of mercy at the expense of just reasoning. What repetitions are to be found in Williams—and there are many—disappear as soon as one's eyes turn from the page. To make a Williams poem seem like poetry entails making it *look* like poetry, in the sense of typographically arranging it on the page so that one can see it thus. We can see these lines of Williams as verses:

Two W.P.A. men  
stood in the new  
sluiceway

overlooking  
the river—  
One was pissing

But in pronouncing them aloud—especially in the breathless fashion Williams favored—they lose anything that would distinguish them from prose. Whatever measurement the lines conform to evaporates in the speaking. While contemporary avant-garde poets, such as Charles Bernstein, and their academic masters have sought to celebrate the typographic as a hardnosed realm of freedom and class struggle, in some parochial last gasp of Marxist historical materialism, most of us wish there to be some rationale behind, and beyond, the arrangement of words on paper. When the enigma of such arrangement dissolves, it leaves nothing behind. One may call it nice language, even impassioned speech, but the appearance would seem an idle pretense—what was called, in the Augustan age, “false wit.” The printed text does not help us to discern a measurement of words, but seems a visual substitute for one.

If this is the case, then there must be more to verse

than simply *any* kind of repetition. The repetitions and the zany line-breaks of Williams can be prescinded from the language of a Williams poem without changing the language itself. The syntactic repetitions of a psalm cannot; those repetitions are the language. We see that Williams' formal repetitions, at first glance anyway, allow much more freedom than the psalm, because the repetitions such as they are do not *do* anything to the language, but only to the characters on the page. We see also that the syntactic repetitions of the Psalm do almost everything: what can be said in the psalm is closely determined by the form in ways that can make it seem formulaic—so much so, that even those who have never actually read a psalm tend to find its aural patterns familiar. Is there a way in which language can be informed by repetition without its being circumscribed in what it can say or in its range of expression?

Once again, an evident but not always obvious answer presents itself. A psalm might say, “Give thanks” six times, and we would clearly have the sort of repetition that might be described as verse. But what properties of language are, as properties, present in every verbal phrase regardless of what kind of phrase it is? They are two in number: syllables and *relative* stress, both of which can be discerned in terms of metrical feet. Rothman therefore has rightly directed us to the great quality verse, even if he has not adequately defined it. It is numbered, counted, or *measured* speech wherein the measure remains regardless of what the language says. Here lies the virtue that recommends accentual-syllabic stress (metrical feet) for the writing of English verse. By means of it, we may give language precise and discernible (audible) measure, ordering it, giving it proportion or form, without in any way limiting what that language can say. Number and measurement allows the form of verse to exist in perfect harmony with any matter of language.

Because the strict measurement of versification is entirely compatible with a complete freedom in



regards to language and content, I am doubtful of the wisdom of those contemporary poets who engage in what Marilyn Taylor has called “semi-formal” prosody. According to Taylor, such poetry loosely adheres to the measurement of syllable and stress, but only in order to suggest that measurement before, in the words of T.S. Eliot, withdrawing from it. The poet hopes to gain a freedom or flexibility thereby without completely surrendering the aural qualities of verse. Is it not the case, though, that one only would need “semi-formality” if accentual-syllabic verse actually stunted the sort of language a properly formal poem might contain? But as a numerical abstraction, metrical feet do nothing of the kind. Does not the semi-formal un-measure the measured, rendering what meter remains as a kind of allusion *to* rather than instantiation *of*? If that is the case, then meter ceases to be a formal property and becomes part of the matter of the poem; it no longer affords us a way of ordering speech, but is reduced to a particular sort of language. Far from being an ingenious solution for those who would write poetry in an age of prose, semi-formal verse at once hints at and despoils the central mystery of poetry.

Allow me to restate my last claim. In the measuring of language and rhythm according to an abstract principle of number, we are in the presence of a *mystery*, and it is one that does not dissolve as soon as we learn to count a line of iambs: indeed, a mystery that has beguiled Western man since the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers. I do not mean specifically the meter of poetry, but the idea of number and measure as such, which may help us “see into the life of things.” I would like to explain why this mystery is so central to our history, and why Rothman’s essay reminds us that it is one particularly central to poetry. And yet, in conclusion, I would also like to suggest why his essay seems destined to convince few in an age such as ours.

We begin with the Philosopher. When Aristotle delivered the lectures whose notes we call the *Metaphysics*, his chief ambition was to correct the errors of three competing theories about the nature of reality. He began with the materialists, because he believed they were, in most respects, right. The materialists claimed that only that was real which was matter, and, indeed, it was matter that constituted the reality of a given thing. Aristotle replied, while all or most substances (real,

separately existing things) are material, they are not merely material, but composites of form and matter. A rock is a rock and a tree is a tree because of some differentia. “Sure,” says the materialist, “the differentia is the shape of the matter.” “Exactly,” replies Aristotle. A tree contains matter in a given form, and a rock in another; this form is therefore *other than* the matter and is what defines a given quantum of matter as being in its nature arboreal or mineral. All material beings that have the arboreal form are trees; those that do not, have some other form, are something else. But, again, the materialists were mostly right: matter “matters.”

Bearing this in mind, he turned to another school, that of the Platonists, who said that essential form constituted what is real, and the particular beings of this tree or that rock were individual expressions of that essential reality. As everyone knows, Plato intended that the idea “arboreal” or “mineral” was itself an eternal substance that shared the reality proper to itself alone with this or that individual specimen by way of *participation*. This was an implausible theory, explained Aristotle. He recognized that forms were real and that without them there would be no things, material or otherwise, but he did not see why a form need be separately substantial. The form of a tree constitutes the essence of all given trees; it may be abstracted by the intellect from any given tree and therefore come into virtual being as an accident in the mind of another existing substance (the human being). But it explained nothing, he thought, to say that the form subsisted separately, and it even created a new problem: a given tree has myriad attributes, and so which attributes, exactly, would exist as separate, subsistent forms? In answering this question, we multiply to infinity the number of forms without getting any closer to what causes a real thing to be at all, or to be one thing rather than another.<sup>2</sup>

But here arises a curious turn in Aristotle’s dispute. Materialists recognize differences between one thing

and another, even though they deny the theory of forms. Platonists, conversely, recognized some relationship between forms. “Tree” and “rock” do not just float in the heavens, but are intelligible in relation to each other as *forms*, independently of their individuals’ all sharing in matter. What principle exists beyond this material thing and another that allows us to distinguish them? “Why,” says the materialist, “number.” A tree’s matter may be quantified as “atomic ratio X” and a rock as “atomic ratio Y.”

One may similarly ask the Platonist, what principle exists beyond the forms themselves that allows us to relate them? The answer to this varies in different parts of the Platonic tradition and within Plato’s own dialogues, but one possibility introduced in his *Timaeus* is—number. The diverse ideal forms might ultimately be understood as diverse mathematical structures, which would seem plausible, since an actual pyramid is evidently a material expression of the ideal geometrical form of a pyramid. Perhaps the forms were rooted in a complex geometry. After all, numbers seem everywhere in material nature, and yet everyone knows that mathematics is itself highly abstract, finding its perfection only once removed from the contingencies of nature.

Materialists and Platonists alike were beguiled by what Aristotle understood as the Pythagorean temptation: number seems to be so ubiquitous that it may account for everything. Number gives us the recipe for forms or for material things, but it is itself always present; thus the Pythagoreans give us a third theory of the nature of reality: number, rather than matter or idea, is the first principle of what is.

But Aristotle demurs. Number is itself an abstraction *from* something and so cannot be a first principle. What, then, is first? Being. Far from number’s explaining and causing being, being evidently occasions the existence of number. This becomes plain when we consider the

following: were I to say, suddenly, “two,” to a fellow on the train, it will lead him, if he is not frightened off, to ask, “Two *what?*”

Being is the most abstract term we can think in reality. Number helps to make that reality intelligible by allowing us to conceive the relations between things: the *ratio* of number becomes the principle of all relation and distinction, whether between forms-as-ideas or forms-in-matter. Number at its simplest—i.e., the distinction between zero and one—makes it possible to describe the presence of difference within nature. But, being always comes first and *stands beneath* everything, stands even beneath the idea of *difference*, as that which makes anything a *thing* at all.

For Aristotle and for the Western tradition writ large, this debate was not a zero-sum game. In the descendants of Plato and Aristotle, being and number jostled and combined in a fruitful intellectual synthesis. For St. Augustine, the highest reality was *That Which Is*, Being Itself—the God who named Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14. And yet, St. Augustine also believed that a knowledge of number was the means by which we created beings born into a world of difference rise intellectually to the inviolable simplicity of being. In *de Musica*, he outlines a hierarchy of seven kinds of number that, in the words of St. Bonaventure, “ascend step by step from sensible things to the Maker of all so that God may be seen in all things.” We begin with the dazzling but sensible infinity of created things, abstract from them the numbers of mathematics, and proceed on up an admittedly arcane ladder until we arrive at that Unity of Unities, which, because absolutely indivisible and immutable, is beyond all number.

As Umberto Eco detailed many years ago, this synthesis of number and supernumerary unity led, in the Middle Ages, to two *ostensibly* competing theories of beauty. The Aesthetics of Proportion contended that something was beautiful to the extent that it comprised

perfect quantitative *ratios*. Weight, measure, and order were the conditions of beauty, and beauty was merely a “certain fitting relation.” In contrast, the Aesthetics of Light proposed that that was beautiful which showed forth the perfect unity of what Plotinus had called the “Idea-Form” and what Pseudo-Dionysius called “the Good,” a pure radiance “uncontained” by form. Just as pure light seems to illuminate all without limiting itself to a particular shape, so did beauty show forth in a pretty face, a well-turned phrase, a heroic virtue—or, in the mind, as Beauty Itself.

Is an artwork beautiful because all the pieces are in place, or because the pieces themselves manifest something infinitely beyond themselves? In fact, this is a false alternative. The Western tradition has generally concluded, not “either/or,” but “both/and” to this proposition. Being’s light gives form and number to all things; number makes light “visible.” Number helps make the perception of being possible; the abstraction of number makes even that which is beyond all division intelligible and pleasing to us. And yet, number neither defines nor exhausts the refulgence of reality; it rather serves as a guide as we enter into being’s mystery and fullness. St. Thomas Aquinas provides the most pithy definition of beauty we may know: *splendor formae*, the splendor (intelligible radiance) of form (proportion).

Aristotle synthesized form and matter, number and being. Before him, Plato’s dialogues articulated both light and number as first principles. Indeed, variations on these propositions speckle the whole history of Western thought, sometimes in surprising or less obvious terms, down to the present moment. How unsurprising, then, that, for a poem to be a poem, it must be measured, proportioned by number; and yet, it must also show forth a radiance beyond mere meter. And, how fitting that Rothman’s defense of verse should restore Pythagoras to his proper place, near the center of any discussion of art and beauty. The splendor of a poem must be given form—it must be counted.

But we are moderns, and modernity does not permit us to end on such a harmonious note. Our world is absolutely saturated in number and talk of number—as much as was the world of Plato and Aristotle. But ours lacks their synthesizing genius. In the public realm, only matter and motion are counted as real, and these, only because they are resolvable into numbers we can manipulate. Behavior is processed as statistics; thought as quantifiable chemical processes; society as the mere sum of economic transactions; morality as incarceration rates; education as graduation rates; wedded bliss as divorce rates; and the course of history as so many measurable biological modifications. In a world so beholden to the spirit of the Pythagoreans, it is curious the arts should be so patently typified by their explicit *rejection* of all number.

In Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, existential searcher Binx Bolling speculates that "romanticism" and "1930's science" killed his father. He asks himself, "Does a scientifically minded person become a romantic because he is leftover from his own science?" Quantification is the key to the modern physical sciences. We are subordinate to it in the scientific method and in everyday life far more than we are to "empirical observation"—that phrase with which the supposed rationalist among us flatters himself. We do not believe in what we see or experience; we believe in what others can count and calculate, so much so that we readily dismiss our own experiences, if they seem to conflict with some publicly established measurement. And so, though nearly all of us have turned the reins of health and history over to the powers of the numeric, we nearly all feel something "leftover" that cannot be entirely dismissed, but which cannot be counted either, and therefore seems not to *count* as real. The leftover is us.

Like those ancients prey to the Pythagorean temptation, most of us only accept the numeric as real; and, while our world of quantity may overwhelm, it does

not satisfy either intellect or will. The typical fallout of this unhappy circumstance is for one to turn "romantic," that is, to elect for a conception of the beautiful or the "poetic," as light without form, love without reason, being without quantity. If the quotidian world must be a quantified world, then we want our art to be a refuge of inarticulate unity, of light and color without matter. Our view of the arts is romantic, even when it lacks the divinization of imagination and emotion typical of the romantics of the nineteenth century.

To be a romantic, in brief, means to be one who accepts the Aesthetics of Light *in opposition to* the Aesthetic of Proportion. Rather than availing themselves of the venerable and fruitful synthesis of being and number, romantics cling to some species of the former in vehement opposition to the latter. Even materialists of the avant-garde, such as Bernstein, think of their typographical high jinks as a resistance to absorption within the orders of modern rationality and the accounting of modern "capital." And so, while I understand the dismay many writers and artists in our day feel about counting, I think their works tend to display a pathetic resistance to, rather than a successful transcendence of, the maniacal quantification of modern life. If resistance is all we may have, then so be it; but I think the hoary examples of Aristotle, St. Augustine, and indeed the broader Western tradition provide us resources for correcting-by-transcending the worst excesses of our age.

Unfortunately, when an artist or a poet sees through the partiality of this romantic love of radiance without form, he sometimes resorts to a mere aesthetics of proportion, as the neo-classicism of seventeenth-century or the academicism of nineteenth-century France is often thought to have done—and as contemporary metrical poets from Steele to Dana Gioia are sometimes accused of doing. This can result in an austere formalism that may be preferable to the meaningless and anti-intellectual "lights" of many modern romantics, but

it may also confirm those romantics yearning after a greater artistic fullness in their resistance to the rational beauty of measure. They may come to believe, contrary to Augustine and Bonaventure, that number takes us nowhere—and certainly it cannot help us ascend to *That Which Is*.

I am sensitive to the warning against “classicizing” reductions of true art to the conscientious obedience of formal conventions found no less in the *Art and Scholasticism* of Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain than it is in the criticism of a contemporary poet such as Deborah Warren. Such writers would de-emphasize the centrality of numbers to poetry in specific response to those historical moments in which poetry has been almost reduced to a mere courtly calculation. If one judges a work of art only by what can be counted in it, then one has left aesthetics behind and entered into mathematics. And yet, the records of poets themselves through literary history suggest that there is great virtue and joy in the mastering of difficult “numbers,” and that this virtue makes possible a still greater discovery and achievement. We should not merely identify number *with* form but, following Plato, recognize it as a readily intelligible principle within a larger formal pattern. On this point, it is worth noting that St. Augustine thought the understanding of meter more proper to the scholar of liberal arts seeking true knowledge than to the musician seeking only to practice an art: the counting of verses is always an act of abstraction that helps us to understand what ought to be a rich totality.

I suspect that, at present, most of those who take an interest in poetry are too anxious to see poetry as a therapeutic refuge from the mechanical and rationalistic regime of everyday life—one which really has gone off its hinges!—to avail themselves of the fuller tradition to which they are heirs. Nevertheless, for those of us who continue to see poetry as a means to truth, and truth as a property of being and reason, it is heartening to hear a defense such as Rothman’s. We are reminded that the

equipoise of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas is still ours to accept. Poetry is an expression of number, that is, of those orders and proportions that make the world and the works of man intelligible. *And* poetry is more than that. But the counting of metrical feet is one rung on the great ladder by which we ascend to *That Which Is*. The innermost need of human nature is just such an ascent. To recognize the role of meter—of number and measure—in art is to put the beautiful back in conscious contact with our human need and the highest reality alike; it renews art and beauty even as art and beauty come once more to play a role in our fulfillment and in the revelation to us of a reality they can only intimate.

## NOTES:

1. Rothman’s essay appeared as part of the Symposium on Form published as a complete issue of *Think Journal* 3.4 (Spring 2011). A version of the present essay was originally published as a part of that symposium.

2. St. Thomas Aquinas rightly explains that Plato’s theory of forms does indeed explain something, though it does not solve the problems that most concern Aristotle. Namely, the theory is one solution to how knowledge is possible when there is an absolute difference between matter and intellect. If, as Plato believed, the intellect could only properly know ideas and, therefore, could not know the material in itself, then some theory of forms is inevitable. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the mind can convert the matter into intelligible ideas through the intellect’s acting upon what is received from the senses. This does not reduce the absolute difference between matter and intellect, but indeed is part of a larger explanation of how spirit and intellect are not only superior to matter, but have an easy commerce with it, as does a potter with his clay. Intellectual forms precede material things, giving them form and purpose. In turn, the form and purpose in material things remains always potentially intelligible to the perceiving intellect.