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## Dialectical Poetics: Henry Weinfield's Blank-Verse Tradition

*The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity*, by Henry Weinfield. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Henry Weinfield's investigation of the blank-verse tradition formulates a methodology that could be called *dialectical poetics*—that is, a theory of making and unmaking that charges the poem with the difficulty of achieving a precarious synthesis informed by (if not on the verge of) a philosophical and linguistic crisis. Readers who are familiar with Weinfield's scholarship will recognize and enjoy, in this volume, a distinctive consistency in his work's theoretical grounding from *The Poet without a Name: Gray's Elegy and the Problem of History* (1991) to *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk* (2009). The earlier book studies Gray's *Elegy* as a philosophical poem that self-reflexively divines and defers insights into truth; and the latter work examines Oppen's and Bronk's careers in terms of their shared (yet sharply respective) struggles to balance poetic form against formlessness and to achieve existential rigor without risking lyrical intensity.

These monographs—each concerned with the legacy of Romanticism—share the imprint of Weinfield's remarkable blending of theoretical and critical discourses together with scrupulous research and incisive close readings. A dialectical poetics shapes his methodology in all three volumes, thereby underscoring an abiding engagement with literary criticism and theory since the 1990s that draws upon the phenomenological roots—"the shadowy realm of intentionality" (51)—and hermeneutical best-practices of Yale school deconstruction (among other influential theoretical movements at work here, including psychoanalysis) which established the canon of blank-verse Romanticism indirectly challenged by this book. Weinfield's thesis about freethinking turns primarily upon new readings of classic and, in a few instances, hitherto overlooked poems, and secondarily articulates

a series of critiques against critical discourse that develop somewhat unevenly among the volume's chapters. Some reviewers may see such inconsistency as a weakness in this book's orchestration while others (myself included) will be more engaged by Weinfield's commanding *explication du texte*, which, as he rightly notes, "is always more complicated than it might seem" (21).

Henry Weinfield is also an accomplished poet and translator. His most recent collections of poetry are *A Wandering Aramaean: Passover Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2012) and *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres Press, 2008); and his translations include *Collected Poems* of Stéphane Mallarmé (University of California Press, 1995). Weinfield's investigation of the blank-verse tradition from Milton to Stevens thus grasps the work from within—poet to poet and poem to poem—as well as on scholarly, theoretical, and critical levels.

This volume's title clearly announces the topic to be addressed: a trans-historical study of a *a priori* (blank-verse tradition) and a *a posteriori* (crisis of modernity) matters balanced upon a key concept (freethinking). Such an ambitious plan situates poetry squarely between antithetical forces, invoking heroic work from poet and critic alike. Such a capacious methodology also requires cogent limitations in scope guided by deft attunements to the inter-textual vitality—the fabric of *freethinking*—in the poems themselves that would compose this tradition, which, as Weinfield argues, embodies the forward-looking quest of imaginative work to achieve transcendence within (if not perhaps against or beyond) a literary culture of increasing religious and philosophical skepticism. Blank verse thus engenders and unleashes a singular spirit of energetic, lyrical questioning—"already latent in *Paradise Lost*" and thereafter emergent in Romanticism (8)—that Weinfield examines across "a series of complex inter-textual relations anchored by a form" (3). A paradox (which some readers may see as a contradiction) thereby animates the heart of this book. Among the key elements to be evaluated (i.e. poetic form, the poets, individual poems, inter-textual connections among selected poems, historical and critical contexts) which shall bear the deepest imprint of authentic freethinking—the "turnings intricate of verse" (21) and/or the "implacable chords" of sublime poetry (20, 236)—especially if such nascent, radical questioning, such noetic alterity, should turn into (or perhaps thrive upon) crisis? That's the wager, the crux, and the risk in the nexus of this volume's ten essays (of which six have previously appeared as journal articles between 2001 and 2009).

This erudite study ultimately concerns those "Romantic and mod-

ern poets" (i.e. Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and Stevens) who, "in their finest work," follow Milton's "willingness to risk error for the sake of a freedom that he regards as the truest index of our humanity" and who likewise grapple "with the religious crisis, or crisis of modernity, that overtakes Europe during the Renaissance and is deepened by the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment" (2-3). For these few poets, blank verse (after Milton) informs a distinctive and dynamic lyrical freethinking. Weinfield's introduction measures paradigmatic generalizations such as these against discerning claims that shape the book's thesis; for example: whereas Milton devised and defended freethinking in terms of both political and religious liberty (1), the poets who follow his example "struggle to find solid ground in the face of [philosophical] contradiction and uncertainty" (20); if Milton "is the progenitor of this tradition," then he "is both outside it and enfolded within it" (3); and although there is no "necessary correlation between blank verse and freedom," Milton's works generate this association, which the Romantics "sometimes extend . . . to include freethinking" (6). As these assertions and qualifications suggest, this investigation will begin by identifying the latent germ of freethinking in *Paradise Lost* that gains inter-textual purchase among particular poems from Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and Stevens.

Weinfield's evaluation of the blank-verse tradition thus represents a selective account of the field. Intermittent moments of attention given to other aspects of pre-Miltonic unrhymed verse may be found among the volume's essays—e.g. *versi sciolti* (1), Shakespeare (12, 80), Virgil (181), Homer (206)—which may move some readers to lament the absence of poets and dramatists who also made substantial contributions to the development of blank verse in England, such as Henry Howard (Earl of Surrey), Thomas Norton, and Christopher Marlowe. These omissions, while perhaps inconsequential to the scope and focus for Weinfield's subject and argument, may be less distracting for most readers than the more problematic neglect of post-Miltonic women poets who wrote in blank verse (e.g. Ann Yearsley, Anna Barbauld, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, and Joanna Baillie) especially Charlotte Smith, whose much-read and widely praised "Beachy Head" (published posthumously in 1807) participates in the Romantic revival of the prospect poem, a subgenre integral to Weinfield's claims about freethinking in Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (73-77) and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (71-97). Notwithstanding these observations, which address matters beyond the book's design, Weinfield reflects that his "aim has not been to be

comprehensive or systematic but rather to focus on poems on which [he] felt [he] had something compelling to say"—that is, unquestionably great poems "worthy of continued study" (20–21).

Weinfield's incisive interpretations compose the volume's major strength. However, as noted above, the dialectical methodology at work in these chapters places extraordinary pressure on poetry to resolve oppositional forces (e.g. philosophical/lyrical, generic/modal, certainty/skepticism) predicated upon an immanent/imminent unraveling within the very warp and weft of blank-verse freethinking. The poems featured in each essay accordingly embody a necessarily chiasmal contest "between prose and song" to achieve "a kind of transcendence" that "never entirely escape[s]" from ideology (21). Each of the book's chapters therefore underscores this inter- and intra-textual matrix by contrasting one or more poems that exemplify "freethinking tendencies" (3) against "poetry that insists on certainty and situates itself in opposition to freethinking" (9). For example, the volume's introduction juxtaposes Wordsworth's "Prospectus" against Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, which illustrates "the furthest possible remove" (9) from Romantic freethinking. The book's subsequent essays focus intensely upon key poems (Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Books 2, 7, and 10; Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*, Book 5; Shelley's *Alastor*; Keats's *Hyperion* poems; Tennyson's "Tithonus"; and Stevens's "Anatomy of Monotony") set within a robust context of related works from the poets and their contemporaries, critical and theoretical debates, and literary, philosophical, and religious texts from Ecclesiastes to Emerson and Marvell to Mallarmé.

Chapters one through three examine *Paradise Lost* in order to identify and follow the mercurial signs of latent Romantic freethinking that will spark the inter-textual literary historicity connecting the poets who follow Milton's example. In the passages from *PL* 2 concerning the conclave in hell—especially the speeches given by Moloch, Belial, and Mammon—Weinfield discerns a "poetic power . . . derived from the process of freethinking they are allowed to undergo" (39). Despite the ideological constraints of his time and due, at least in part, to his Arian-monist-thnetopsychism, Milton unleashes this transgressive power, seeming "to have understood, from what looks like a modern psychoanalytic or pragmatist perspective, that the mazes in which the devils get lost have a certain value over and above their truth content" (42). In Raphael's narrative in *PL* 7 on the Creation, Weinfield perceives Milton's "complex recognition . . . that in order for the principle of freedom to be maintained, Nature cannot merely obey an orderly script; it must be free to follow its own course,

even if by doing so it falls into error" (52). From the atomic structure of matter to the intuitive powers of the angels, from the building of Pandaemonium to the dreams of Adam and Eve, Milton's poetics therefore celebrates error as a Lucretian generative force (*clinamen*), or swerve of divine wandering (53). And in Adam's lament in *PL* 10, following the sentences of punishment from God, Weinfield hears the "clearest expression we have in the poem" (60) of Milton's *thnetopsychism*—that is, his mortalistic skepticism about the soul's immortality and the promise of individual redemption—with which Wordsworth unconsciously wrestles in his "Immortality Ode" (57). Equally if not more significant than the devils' rebellious questioning or the generative disruptiveness of error, Adam's lament gives voice to the "one crucial aspect of the existential experience" that *Paradise Lost* most profoundly challenged: "the traditional belief in the immortality of the soul and the Christian afterlife" (56). These three radical themes in Milton's epic, especially the poem's meditation on the significance of death, are "already in some respects Romantic—and in particular Wordsworthian—*avant la lettre*" (56).

Chapters four through ten pursue the inescapable "shadow of Milton [that] looms over the blank-verse poetry of the entire subsequent tradition" (9), highlighting the dialectical tensions, in each essay's reading of key poems, among moments of philosophical skepticism and lyrical intensity through which "the mind at work" struggles to provide "a concrete basis for hope" (93) in the face of existential, imaginative, and poetic annihilation. "Tintern Abbey" thus articulates a chiasmal vision of Nature that "is both that which is perceived through the language of the senses and that which, interfusing and therefore transcending all things, is unintelligible to that language" (95). And in Book 5 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab and Boy of Winander sequences achieve "melding[s] of philosophical meditation[s] and lyrical narrative[s]" (99) that respectively accommodate "the poet's apocalyptic vision" to the antithetical yet integral proposition "that the individual and the creative productions of the human mind manifest, reflect, or in some way participate in 'immortal being'" (103).

Compared with Wordsworth's more implicit opposition (126) between the prosaic and poetic worlds, Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*, "Ode to the West Wind," and especially *Alastor* vigorously confront an existential "chasm that . . . threatens to turn the outside world into a wasteland and life into an increasingly desperate and even suicidal attempt to grasp hold of fleeting moments of [lyrical] beauty" (133). Whereas the contingent inter-textualities of "Tintern Abbey" and *The*

*Prelude* substantiate Wordsworth's desire "to preserve . . . precursor texts and narratives without being destroyed by them" (110), Shelley's archetypal figure of *Alastor* seeks an annihilating, fictive internalization of Nature and Death (157)—a quest for the Absolute through "the realm of Intellectual Beauty"—that ignites the Poet's intra-textual *apotheosis* within "the poem he inhabits" (161). Shelley's tragic (if exuberant) drama of Jungian *enantiodromia*—that is, the individual's search within the sensible for the suprasensible that consequently eclipses grounded, ordinary reality (134)—serves as a profound object lesson in Keats's *Fall of Hyperion*. Moneta's blindness thereby signifies "the refusal of vision" because, reacting against Shelley's intensification of Milton's shadow over Romantic freethinking, Keats "turns his vision against itself . . . [fearing] that he has gone too far . . . [potentially] condemning himself to a life of barren solitude and solipsistic wandering" (190).

Tennyson's "Tithonus" transposes this inter-textual (and increasingly intra-subjective) emergence of Romantic freethinking, existential and linguistic crisis to a more extroverted scale, mediating his personal anxieties "about the inwardness and aestheticizing tendencies of his poetry" (195) through direct engagements with Adam's lament from *PL* 10 and Keats's portrait of Moneta's ambivalence. Whereas Adam fears that his soul might survive the death of his physical body only to suffer doubtful redemption, Moneta and Tithonus share the inability to die (196). Yet only Tennyson's poem "performs the psychic work of converting the human desire for immortality into an acceptance of mortality" (209). Weinfield's concluding essay carries this theme of dialectical existentialism figured through poetic making and unmaking into a close reading of Stevens's "Anatomy of Monotony" vis-à-vis Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (219), Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" (225), and Mallarmé's "L'Azur" (23–36). These latter two poems comparatively articulate a "false transcendence: Wordsworth's poem on the old Christian-Platonism and Mallarmé's on a kind of aestheticism that makes poetry itself redemptive" (236). Stevens's "Anatomy of Monotony" and "Idea of Order at Key West" critique both exemplars with the proposition "that the poet can strike the implacable chords only by remaining implacably within his subject" (236).

This chiasmal formulation (the book's final sentence) amplifies a deep attunement to Ecclesiastes that reverberates throughout the volume—that is, only by "being released and restored to the [existential] ground can [lyrical freethinking] be restored" (215)—while also artfully returning to the introduction's proposal to examine freethinking "within the confines of the blank-verse spaces [the poets and their

poems] inhabit, spaces in which the lyric impulse encounters the opposing impulse toward narrative or philosophical discourse" (20). Weinfield's dialectical poetics thereby finally transform crisis into synthesis by way of Stevens's unyielding, autonomous figuration that completes the full arc of blank-verse Romanticism. Weinfield's keen attention to emergent inter-textual literary historicity—the fabric of freethinking—unifies the essays in this book.