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# Manifest Prosody

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Like many nineteenth-century American writers, Sidney Lanier—poet, critic, professional flutist, Confederate soldier, and professor of English at Johns Hopkins—looked eastward toward Great Britain while commenting on and contributing to the American literary scene. Lanier’s identification with English tradition embraces the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, and specifically the popular nineteenth-century fantasy described by Reginald Horsman whereby white Americans imagined their supposed Anglo-Saxon origins as proof of being “a chosen people with an impeccable ancestry.”<sup>1</sup> Writing from Baltimore, Maryland, in 1879, Lanier thus explores “the remarkable ease with which *our* English idioms run into the mould of the sonnet.”<sup>2</sup> In an essay on Anglo-Saxon poetry published posthumously in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Lanier exhorts the “strong, bright, picture-making tongue *we* had in the beginning of the sixteenth century when the powerful old Anglo-Saxon had fairly conquered all the foreign elements into its own idiom” (CE, 4:293; italics mine). Identifying here with that Anglo-Saxon tongue, a tongue that in the creation of its own distinct sounds and cadences had pushed out the foreign—and, later in the same paragraph, the alien—Lanier positions both himself and his American readers as English linguistic subjects, the inheritors of an Anglo-Saxon cultural and literary heritage.

In what follows, I argue that Lanier’s move to elide the American with the early English, a move consistent throughout his prosodic and poetic writings, was an especially significant gesture in post-Civil War America. Much in the way that, as Foucault has shown, European nations throughout modern history have endeavored to trace their origins to the fall of Troy, thereby “guarantee[ing] a link of genealogical kinship with ancient Rome” and its “great unity . . . great strength . . . [and] great legitimacy,”<sup>3</sup> so Lanier constructs an American cultural genealogy firm in its English roots. Somewhat counterintuitively, Lanier suggests that the United States might best fortify itself against the foreign and alien through an exclusionary literary tradition whose origins ought be traced back to England. In both his prose criticism and his poetry, then, Lanier transports English metrical traditions to American soil, casting a backward glance toward the Old World as he sings his own imagined future for the West.

My arguments here build on and slightly redirect those of John D. Kerkering, whose recent study of *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* emphasizes the sonic elements of Lanier's prosody. Kerkering reads Lanier's 1876 "Centennial Meditation of Columbia," a poem on the hundredth anniversary of the United States' founding, as an effort to produce a singular "musical medium for one United States."<sup>4</sup> This American identity, as Kerkering shows, surreptitiously returns to a specifically Anglo-Saxon formalism, such that his poem becomes "less a centennial celebration of the nation than a millennial celebration of what [Lanier] calls 'our race'" (p. 123). Lanier thus participates in what Kerkering identifies, in the title to his chapter on Lanier, Whitman, Dvořák, and Du Bois, as "the music of racial identity"; the "Centennial Meditation" idealizes a postbellum America united through the sounds of white, Anglo-Saxon tradition (much as, across the Atlantic, conservative poet William Edmondstoune Aytoun believed the ballad form might unify a British public that, in the wake of Chartism, seemed otherwise at loggerheads).<sup>5</sup> Yopie Prins' recent contribution to a PMLA forum on "The New Lyrical Studies" pushes Kerkering further, suggesting that Lanier "is less interested in individual poetic thinking than in poetry as collective thought: prosody as recognition rather than prosody as cognition."<sup>6</sup> As Prins suggests, Lanier ought to be understood as writing at a historically specific moment, when the pressures for national unity may have privileged the collective (prosody as recognition, a medium for common feeling) over the individual (prosody as cognition, a space for personal reflection).

Both Kerkering and Prins identify Lanier's attentiveness to music—sound and rhythm—as the source of his prosodic contribution. It seems to me, however, that metrical form needs to be reintroduced to the conversation about Lanier and the political work we might imagine developing from prosodic structures. Not only was Lanier a metrically dexterous poet, but his compositions make clear the weight of thought—both prosody as recognition and prosody as cognition—borne by those metrical forms. In turning, for example, to Lanier's long 1876 *Psalm of the West*, a poem written, like the "Centennial Meditation," to celebrate the first one hundred years of the United States, one is struck by the proliferation of metrical forms across Lanier's many pages, from the free verse, odic opening stanzas to the ballad-like sestets and sonnets, along with much else, that follow. I wish to stress the extent to which Lanier's structures, though particular to the specific cultural tensions of postbellum America, participate in a transatlantic, indeed, global conversation about poetic form that might be traced across the nineteenth century. The larger project from which this essay is taken considers the role of British poetry and poetic forms in mediating the experience of emigration. British travelers to colonial spaces used poetry to help situate themselves in global contexts, from Canada to South Africa, India, and Australia. Sidney Lanier, who

understood his move from Georgia to Maryland as a sort of emigration, used his poems to establish a stronger political foothold in his new northern home.<sup>7</sup> I understand metrical form, therefore, to be something akin to the “cultural systems” Meredith McGill references in her introduction to *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*; meter “operate[s]” as a structure “beneath and beyond the nation-state,” both undergirding and surpassing national identifications.<sup>8</sup>

I am thinking, by way of suggesting the scope of this larger argument, of how meter becomes its own system of thought in poems composed and printed on Victorian emigrant ships sailing from England to colonies like Melbourne and Cape Town. Like Lanier, the shipboard emigrants use meter to signal both cultural belonging—we are all Anglo-Saxons; we are all British subjects—and an awkward gap between that original culture and the present: as Americans we are no longer European; as emigrants we are no longer strictly British.

According to the *Lady Jocelyn Weekly Mail*, a journal published on a ship returning from Australia to England in 1869, the “practice” of publishing a journal while *en route* between Britain and Australia was by the late 1860s “no novelty now; and, indeed . . . [it] seems to have become quite an institution.”<sup>9</sup> Among the many fascinations of the poems published in these journals, written ostensibly to pass the time on months’ long journeys, are the traditional metrical structures that mark both the passengers’ sense of national belonging and their distance (equally spatial, temporal, and psychological) from their homeland. Both Lanier and the British shipboard poets understand meter as a site for exploring the tensions between belonging and alienation.

For instance, in the same year Lanier composed his centennial poems, an anonymous traveler en route from England to Australia chose to rewrite Thomas Hood’s 1843 “Song of the Shirt,” among the most important political poems of the British mid-century. Published in the *Nemesis Times*, “The Song of the Ship” transplants Hood’s poem about working-class women’s labor—“Stitch! stitch! stitch! / In poverty, hunger, and dirt”<sup>10</sup>—into a poem about the monotony of emigration:

With features pallid and wan,  
 With colourless cheek and lip,  
 A lady sat on the quarter-deck,  
 Watching the heaving ship.

Pitch, pitch, pitch,  
 As her bow in the water dip,  
 In a tremulous voice, with a nervous twitch,  
 She sang the Song of the Ship.<sup>11</sup>

“The Song of the Ship” exists in a moment predicated on the past; its mimesis

of shipboard monotony can only be imagined by way of a Victorian seamstress' monotony. Life aboard the emigrant ship, that is to say, comes into focus by way of a backward-looking formal gesture. As far as the unhappy lady moves from her native England, she remains at a structural level in much the same place. In some ways her stagnation resembles that of the early British cartographers described by Paul Carter in *The Road to Botany Bay*, those newcomers to the Australian landscape who saw it less in terms of what was actually there than what they expected to find. "What was named" by white settlers in Australia, argues Carter, "was not something out there; rather it represented a mental orientation, an intention to travel. Naming words [for mountains, bays, and sundry geographical phenomena] were forms of spatial punctuation, transforming space into an object of knowledge, something that could be explored and read."<sup>12</sup> Like those early British explorers, the shipboard poets borrow from a shared metrical vocabulary, using formal structure to make sense of the new worlds in which they find themselves. The map of meter transforms the unfamiliar into recognizable, navigable spaces.

Of course there is more than meter in the backward gesture of "The Song of the Ship"; the poem would not succeed if not for the specific verbal cues, the sonic echoes that recollect "Stitch, stitch, stitch" in the ship poet's "Pitch, pitch, pitch." But the converse argument is also true: the verbal cues would not work if not for the metrical backbone to which they are bound. Arguments about class (the working-class seamstress who becomes an upper-class British émigrée) or gender (stultifying women's labor, a constrained spatial compass)—or any other cultural framework—will be incomplete without attention to the poem's formal tensions between metrical stasis (evoking structural historical fixedness) and the "pitching and tossing work" of the poem's content (drawing attention to the specific contingencies of its composition).<sup>13</sup> This is one version of what I am calling "manifest prosody," here a metrical scaffolding whose function, among other things, is to help make sense of the unfamiliar. One both knows and does not know "The Song of the Ship"; it is at once recognizable and foreign. Metrical structure in the shipboard compositions, as elsewhere, avails a framework for feeling at home in a poem, whether one recognizes the specific referent—here Hood's poem, which itself echoes Tennyson's 1842 "Break, Break, Break"—or not. My thoughts here on how meter works ought not to be confused with those of Bachelard, whose *Poetics of Space* suggests a more generalized phenomenology of poetic reading, for feeling at home in a poem, or those of Heidegger, which propose poetry as that which "really lets us dwell."<sup>14</sup> Both philosophers understand reading poetry as an inhabiting of an abstract domestic space: primal, interior, subjective. Pace Bachelard and Heidegger, I understand meter to be historically located and culturally ordered, particular to specific times and places. The shipboard poet finds space for herself within Hood's metrics because she understands

her experience of monotony to be similar to those of the seamstress. The point, then, is not that Hood's meter is necessarily monotonous, but that "The Song of the Shirt" had, through its circulation and absorption within popular Victorian culture, become representative of monotony; the shipboard poet then manipulated that sense of monotony for her own specific purposes.

In turning from the Australia-bound ship to Lanier's *Psalm of the West*, one encounters a manifest prosody that not only makes manifest an array of metrical frameworks, but also pushes readers to engage with those forms, to recognize poetic structure and to think in and about it. Lanier's meters function less as spaces in which to feel at home, and more as territory through which one passes, like the westward-moving explorer, en route to new land, who looks both ahead and behind, anticipating what's to come while remembering and depending upon what's come before. Whitman, too, proposed glancing backward while moving forward poetically, but Lanier's imagining of America through poetic form takes obvious aim at Whitman's free verse. Indeed, in a series of lectures given at Johns Hopkins in 1881, he explicitly mocks Whitman, attacking his essay "The Poetry of the Future," which had been published that February in the *North American Review*. In response to Whitman's familiar claim that "Walter Scott and Tennyson, like Shakespeare, exhale that principle of caste which we Americans have come on earth to destroy,"<sup>15</sup> Lanier invokes a scene from Froissart's *Chronicles*—the fourteenth-century history of the Hundred Years' War between England and France—in which English warriors successfully hold off the advances of Genoese crossbowmen: "thenglysshmen removed not one fote." Not one foot: like the steadfast Englishmen, Lanier refuses to abandon the steady metrical grounding for his (poetic) feet. "And so the Poetry of the Future has advanced upon us," Lanier concludes, "with a great leap and a fell cry, relying upon its loud, ill-pitched voice, but the democracy have stirred not for all that. Perhaps we may fairly say, gentlemen, it is five hundred years too late to attempt to capture Englishmen with a yell" (CE, 4:50).<sup>16</sup> Lanier thus positions Whitman as the uncouth invader whom English tradition, firmly rooted in American soil, will hold at bay.

A few paragraphs later, Lanier specifically challenges Whitman's privileging of free verse as the most appropriate vehicle for American democracy:

This poetry is free, it is claimed, because it is independent of form. But this claim is also too late. It should have been made at least before the French Revolution. We all know what that freedom means in politics which is independent of form, of law. It means myriad-fold slavery to the mob. As in politics, so in art. Once for all, in art, to be free is not to be independent of any form, it is to be master of many forms. (CE, 4:51)

For all the vitriol here, Lanier shares with Whitman fundamental assumptions about form and the politics of nation.<sup>17</sup> Both poets believe that poetry might in some ways be constitutive of the nation, politically and aesthetically. Even more, both suggest that the political may depend on the aesthetic, and vice versa. Whitman's well known claims in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* may thus occasionally be mistaken, or nearly mistaken, for those of Lanier, including his notion that "the great psalm of the republic," a poem to be hewn by "one among the wellbeloved stonecutters," will be composed by a poet who "sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms."<sup>18</sup> The distinction between Lanier and Whitman is primarily one of direction. Whitman looks forward to the forms of the future; Lanier's psalm relies structurally on established forms of the past. Whitman's politics anticipate a United States that will continue to evolve; Lanier's poetry of the future insistently keeps one foot moored in historical precedent.<sup>19</sup>

Insofar as it stands as Lanier's most metrically diverse poem, *Psalm of the West* offers the strongest example of this formal mooring.<sup>20</sup> Published in *Lippincott's* in July of 1876, the opening lines of varied meters, ode-like in their malleability, seemingly point to the "Freedom" (repeated seven times in the first twenty-three lines) promised by the North American continent before the arrival of the Europeans: "Tall Adam of lands, new-made of the dust of the West" (CE, 1:62). Only when the white man approaches does the poem shift to a more standard metrical pattern:

Stout Are Marson, southward whirled  
 From out the tempest's hand,  
 Doth skip the sloping of the world  
 To Huitramannaland,  
 Where Georgia's oaks with moss-beards curled  
 Wave by the shining strand. (CE, 1:66)

Lanier's ballad stanzas retell the legend of Are Marson, the Irish chieftain reputed to have sailed to North America—by accident, thrown off course in a storm—in the year 903 ("Florida," claims an 1838 article in *Cincinnati's Family Magazine*, "was . . . inhabited by white people . . . previous to the year 1000"<sup>21</sup>). Laying an early white claim to North America was no doubt important to Lanier, whose narrative of discovery conveniently omits reference to Native Americans (Lanier also refrains from mentioning Native Americans in his sections on Columbus and the Pilgrims; he leaves African Americans out of his account of the Civil War).<sup>22</sup> Leif Ericson follows soon thereafter—"Then Leif, bold son of Eric the Red, / To the South of the West doth flee" (CE, 1:68)—and finally Columbus, whose voyage to North America warrants eight Petrarchan sonnets.

The metrical forms of these distinct sections were important to Lanier.

Ballads, he writes, “quietly spread about through men’s minds [the] virtue of simple and vivid speech”:

poetry in the disguise of a ballad or common minstrel often steals through the hard battle of men’s lives bringing subtle news of reinforcement from unseen friends. This sense of nameless comfort, of kinship with the rest of humanity, comes with the ballad, even with a sad one. (CE, 4:382-383)

We might imagine ballads here as illustrating poetry as recognition, voicing common sentiments and experiences. Sonnets, on the other hand, work in a significantly different register, functioning as perhaps the most important manifestation of poetry as cognition:

To our astonishment, we may . . . discover that the sonnet, instead of being a verbal toy, is the very primitive art-form of the modern Englishman; . . . for the last three hundred years, whenever an English poet has had any peculiarly holy, private, and personal emotion to give forth in the poetic way, he has usually chosen the sonnet form for this purpose. (CE, 4:277)

That the sonnet form originated in Italy “is of no great moment” (CE, 4:277), so fully has it now taken root in English tradition. We might imagine the sonnet form operating, like the ballad form, “in disguise”—carrying in its structure not the “nameless comfort” of the ballad but an obfuscated process of national transition (originally the transition from Italy to England, but potentially from any one country to another). Lanier thereby positions the Englishman’s “holy, private, and personal emotion” in necessary relationship to transnational movement and the appropriation of cultural forms. We might then say that even the most cognitive of poetic forms never exists in a purely personal realm, but is always moored in larger, cultural traditions: sonnets privilege the cognitive, but their full effect develops in relation to multiple forms of recognition.

The sonnets of *Psalm of the West* are spoken by Columbus himself, and are meant to capture both the “private” and “personal” elements of the form and the sense of the sonnet as a structure marking transit between nations. Lanier perhaps imagined the sonnet an appropriate vehicle for Columbus’ thoughts insofar as the explorer was Italian by birth, and may well have grown up reading Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. Despite the sonnet’s origins being “of no great moment,” Columbus speaks in the most Italian of sonnet forms, the Petrarchan. Here is the octave of a sonnet on Columbus’ anxiety that the earth after all may be flat and his journey westward amount to nothing:

My Dawn? my Dawn? How if it never break?  
How if this West by other Wests is pieced,

And these by vacant Wests on Wests increased—  
 One Pain of Space, with hollow ache on ache  
 Throbbing and ceasing not for Christ's own sake?—  
 Big perilous theorem, hard for king and priest:  
*Pursue the West but long enough, 'tis East!*  
 Oh, if this watery world no turning take! (CE, 1:70)

Columbus looks westward across the vast Atlantic and worries that *his* idea of the West may be only a fantasy. His interrogatives generate an increasing number of alternate Wests—"these by vacant Wests on Wests increased"—all of which fail to fill the "hollow" space before him, the open sea. His concern that "this West"—the West of his imagination—"by other Wests is pieced" suggests both that these other possible Wests may come together (to be pieced together) and that they fall apart (to fall into pieces). Lanier likely has in mind Columbus' mistaken belief that his ships would eventually make landfall in southeast Asia; the "vacant West" then becomes the North American continent, "vacant" both because Lanier refuses to recognize the continent's original Native American inhabitants and because North America at this time lacks formal structures—like sonnets—through which one might make sense of its vast space. Lanier's chief concern remains spatial, a cross between geography and architecture: how to alleviate the "Pain of Space," how to fill the imagined hollowness before him. Historically speaking, these abstract concerns would eventually become material as North American colonizers worked to assert order over what they perceived as untamed landscape.

Such concern for creating order out of chaos seems at the heart of Columbus' next sonnet:

Or, haply, how if this contrarious West,  
 That me by turns hath starved, by turns hath fed,  
 Embraced, disgraced, beat back, solicited,  
 Have no fixed heart of Law within his breast,  
 Or with some different rhythm doth e'er contest  
 Nature in the East? (CE, 1:70)

The attention to the "Law" suggests both the rule of state (a continent perceived to be without governmental structures) and formal aesthetic mechanisms (what Patmore called—in the title of his 1857 treatise—"metrical law").<sup>23</sup> From Lanier's perspective, Columbus' fears of a lawless West are equally political and aesthetic. To meditate thus in the space of eight sonnets may be, for Lanier's fantasy of Columbus, a strategy for projecting order (fourteen lines, a strict Petrarchan rhyme scheme) onto that otherwise hollow landscape. The sonnet form thereby functions as a structure in which Columbus, or Lanier's reader, makes sense of the unknown, a formal instantiation of McGill's

“cultural systems.” McGill addresses directly the ways poetic form acts as “a medium for transatlantic exchange,” suggesting that “poetic order serves as a proxy for questions of social order and as an instrument for the regulation of distance—between speaker and addressee, poet and precursor, poetry’s pasts and its possible futures” (pp. 8-9). To McGill’s catalogue I would add that poetic form regulates distance between the place you leave and the place you are going. If we recall Lanier’s enthusiasm for the Anglo-Saxon “tongue” that “conquered all the foreign elements into its own idiom,” we should here imagine a European structuralism with the capacity to absorb the foreign elements of the North American continent—the blank, empty spaces—and make them its own.

An originary aesthetic order might then be imagined as evolving into political order; for Lanier, the connection between poetry and the progress of nations is neither arbitrary nor casual. In the preface to his 1880 treatise, *The Science of English Verse*, he writes that “it is the poet’s business to keep the line of men touching shoulders with each other”; the poet is “the preacher of the future,” he (for Lanier it is always a he) who “is in charge of all learning” (CE, 2:5-6). The concluding gestures of *Psalm of the West* thus indulge in a sort of divination, looking ahead in the spirit of Manifest Destiny to the future of the west. Following his accounts of both the Revolutionary and Civil wars (each with its own metrical structure), Lanier imagines a “Latter Man” whose “wondrous free” future will allow him to persevere through “Time’s worst and best” over “thy realm of Good-and-Ill” (CE, 1:82). The continued promise of freedom, an aspiration for postbellum America, comes not from a centralized federal government—which Lanier, as a southerner, would always find suspect—but from those cultural forms, manifest in poetic structure, that have been carried down through generations of English men and women. Poetry might thereby be imagined as a counterpoint to the “unprecedented expansion of federal power” that, according to Eric Foner, came as a result of the Civil War.<sup>24</sup> As the United States retreated from federalism to a more centralized national government, Lanier turned to England and its cultural heritage as the true source of American spirit. Kerkering notes that Lanier’s intent here has much to do with “perpetuating Anglo-Saxon racial identity”; “Lanier, it would seem, is less an American than an Anglo-Saxon poet” (p. 121, 123). To be clear: Lanier’s meters (his sonnets, for example) often have nothing to do with Anglo-Saxon poetics in the strict sense. But as Horsman shows, nineteenth-century British and American writers understood “Anglo-Saxon” in loose terms to mean the Teutonic race: “Germans, Norsemen, and Anglo-Saxons, including the English, who had colonized throughout the world” (p. 63). From this perspective, “Anglo-Saxon” means, roughly, white Europeans and their descendents the world over. That Lanier understands this Anglo-Saxon identity as formal, and specifically as metrical, must be

emphasized and understood in the larger context of nineteenth-century poetic history. Meter becomes a tool for propagating Lanier's particular version of American culture and history. Or, better, through meter Lanier supplants a newly consolidated American political and cultural apparatus with what he believes to be more traditional, European structures of thought.

This insistence on the primacy of metrical form contradicts not only Whitman, but Emerson. "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem," Emerson had written in 1844: "a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form."<sup>25</sup> According to Emerson, the ideal poem originates as an idea, which then takes shape according to its own contours and hews. Meter thus grows organically from out of the idea; metrical structure might be understood as an exoskeleton that forms to encapsulate an already living organism. When Whitman writes, in the concluding sentence of the "Future of Poetry," that "democracy waits the coming of its bards in silence and in twilight—but 'tis the twilight of the dawn" (p. 210), he follows Emerson in understanding the idea of democracy to be fundamentally in place, requiring only the outward form of poetry to make manifest and then disperse those ideals. Lanier's opposition to Whitman, in the way of chicken-and-egg matters, insists that meter comes first, before the idea; he reverses Emerson's meter-making argument into a meter that makes an argument. In this way, Lanier's ideal of meter carries with it the historical resonances through which an individual might make sense of his own culture, and through which a nation might make sense of its past, present, and future.

Lanier was not alone in articulating cultural and political roles for specific poetic meters. Writing on nineteenth-century ballad culture in America, for example, Michael Cohen argues that "identifying a poem as a ballad not only classified it by way of its formal features; rather, it also named specific ways to understand the cultural function of the poem, namely as a primary source for the history of social and cultural relations among peoples and places."<sup>26</sup> Yopie Prins has written of Matthew Arnold's belief that "the nation was a form that might be transformed by acts of metrical translation"; whereas Lanier turned to Anglo-Saxon tradition for his vision of American culture, Arnold looked to classical models, and hexameters in particular, as a source for his ideal English culture.<sup>27</sup> Meredith Martin develops these ideas further, showing how George Saintsbury's later efforts to stabilize a "healthy, collective, patriotic view of English meter" had everything to do with "English poetry's role as a stabilizing, patriotic force in national culture."<sup>28</sup> Within this larger framework for thinking historically about poetics, I read Lanier's own metrical theory as an engagement with the myth of American exceptionalism

that, according to Horsman, was very much in place by the mid-century:

By the 1850s two ideas were firmly engrained in American thinking: that the peoples of large parts of the world were incapable of creating efficient, democratic, and prosperous governments; and that American and world economic growth, the triumph of Western Christian civilization, and a stable world order could be achieved by American commercial penetration of supposedly backward areas. (p. 298)

The penetration Lanier imagines through *Psalm of the West* remains dependent on America's European origins. In the following quote, taken from the conclusion to the poem, the American west—the landscape itself—exhorts the east to move westward, to continue the work of Manifest Destiny. Note the centrality of poetry—all different forms of poetry—to this process:

Neighbor East, come over West;  
 Pledge me in good wine and words  
 While I count my hundred herds,  
 Sum the substance of my Past  
 From the first unto the last,  
 Chanting o'er the generous brim  
 Cloudy memories yet more dim,  
 Ghostly rhymes of Norsemen pale  
 Staring by old Björne's sail,  
 Strains more noble of that night  
 Worn Columbus saw his Light,  
 Psalms of still more heavenly tone,  
 How the Mayflower tossed alone,  
 Olden tale and later song  
 Of the Patriot's love and wrong,  
 Grandsire's ballad, nurse's hymn—  
 Chanting o'er the sparkling brim  
 Till I shall from first to last  
 Sum the substance of my Past. (CE, 1:80)

America's west here imagines itself as an amalgamation of European songs: Norse rhymes, Pilgrim psalms, and ballads of "love and wrong." These together sum the substance of its history, suggesting through the double meaning of "substance" that poetic forms both tell the story of the west (substance as meaning) and physically manifest its structure (poetry becomes the material substance of the landscape).

This twofold understanding of substance offers a fitting synthesis of Lanier's metrical theory, what I have been calling his manifest prosody. According to Lanier, meter makes an argument—rather than arising from a set

of ideas that, in Emersonian fashion, precedes the poetic structure—both because it carries the weight of historical precedent (the ideas of its past uses) and because meter is itself substantive, a physical presence. Like the shipboard poet who borrows Hood's "Song of the Shirt" to write her own experience of emigration, Lanier understands poetry as both idea and matter, an intellectual and physical tool for shaping culture and national experience. To read Lanier from this perspective requires one to "peruse imaginatively," as Martha Nell Smith encourages with respect to nineteenth-century poetry more broadly, "with an eye to the poems as they were, not as we wish them to be."<sup>29</sup> The point is not to determine whether Lanier was in any sense right, or to critique his blatant racial and nationalistic privileging, but rather to understand his ideas within the larger picture of nineteenth-century prosodic thinking. From this perspective, Lanier's poetics reflect the honest concerns of a man displaced by war and illness, and passionate about the role poetry might play in shaping the future United States. That Lanier was, in many ways, on the wrong side of the Whiggish history that recognizes Whitman's and Emerson's poetic visions as quintessentially American, makes it all the more important to understand the foundational prosodic quarrels that, cast to the dustbins, were no less significant for having been nearly forgotten.

## Notes

I am grateful for the continued inspiration of my fellow metrical compatriots: Max Cavitch, Michael Cohen, Virginia Jackson, Meredith Martin, Meredith McGill, Yopie Prins, Eliza Richards, Martha Nell Smith, and Carolyn Williams. The graduate students in my "Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Poetry and Poetics" course at the University of Maryland (Fall 2008) inspired some productive thinking about Lanier; Robert Wakeman challenged me to take more seriously Lanier's interest in medievalism. Most especial thanks go to Michael Snediker, interlocutor extraordinaire.

- 1 Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 5.
- 2 Sidney Lanier, *Centennial Edition of the Works of Sidney Lanier*, ed. Charles R. Anderson, 10 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), 4:277, italics mine; hereafter cited as CE.
- 3 Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 75.
- 4 John D. Kerker, *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), p. 119.
- 5 On Aytoun, Chartism, and the ballad form, see my own "On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad" (VP 41 [Winter 2003]: 590-596).
- 6 Yopie Prins, "Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *The Science of English Verse*," *PMLA* 123 (January 2008): 233. Prins responds here in part to Simon Jarvis' "Prosody as Cognition" (*Critical Quarterly* 40 [2003]: 3-15), in which Jarvis berates the literary critic-as-"scientific prosodist" who aims to determine through objective analysis the effects various poetic techniques might have on readers (p. 10). Like Prins, I believe a

historical framing of prosodic effects might circumvent Jarvis' critique; as my current essay suggests, the focus of analysis for the historical prosodist moves away from what poetry does in an objective capacity and towards what poets and readers at specific historical moments imagined poetry might do.

- 7 Lanier moved to Baltimore both because the climate was more agreeable to his consumption and because it put him closer to the northern literary establishment. Having fought for the Confederacy, he continued to think of Maryland in sectional terms, writing to his northern friend Milton Northrup shortly after the war, "I begin to have serious thoughts . . . of emigrating to your country" (Lincoln Lorenz, *The Life of Sidney Lanier* [New York: Coward-McCann, 1935], p. 61).
- 8 Meredith McGill, "Introduction: The Traffic in Poems," *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. McGill (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2008), p. 3. Matthew Reynolds writes provocatively on the relationship between English poetry and the work of "nation-building," though his attention remains focused on canonical poets whose travels remained mostly within Europe (*The Realms of Verse: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001]).
- 9 *The Lady Jocelyn Weekly Mail* (October 25, 1869; repr. London, 1869), p. 1.
- 10 Thomas Hood, *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hood*, ed. Walter Jerrold (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920), p. 625.
- 11 Anonymous, "The Song of the Ship," *The Nemesis Times* 3 (December 26, 1876; repr. Melbourne, 1877), p. 3.
- 12 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 67.
- 13 "The Song of the Ship," p. 3.
- 14 Martin Heidegger, "... Poetically Man Dwells . . .," *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 111.
- 15 Walt Whitman, "The Poetry of the Future," *North American Review* 132 (February 1881): 197.
- 16 In 1879 Lanier published a children's version of Froissart's *Chronicles*, the *Boys' Froissart*. In the introduction to that volume he writes that "Froissart sets the boy's mind upon manhood and the man's mind upon boyhood. In reading him the young soul sifts out for itself the splendor, the hardihood, the daring, the valor, the generosity, the boundless conflict and unhindered action, which make up the boy's early ideal of the man; while a more mature reader goes at once to his simplicity, his gayety, his passion for deeds of arms, his freedom from consciousness and from all internal debate—in short, his boyishness" (CE, 4:346).
- 17 My thanks to Michael Snediker for suggesting this point.
- 18 Walt Whitman, "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 8.
- 19 Michael Moon suggests that Whitman's "model text" for his own poems is the U.S. Constitution, "a text that asserts its own profound provisionality and initiates the literally interminable process of its own amendment or revision." Like the Constitution, then, Whitman believes *Leaves of Grass*—his song of America, his poetry of the future—will continue to evolve (*Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991], p. 16).
- 20 On the poem's metrical diversity, see Gay Wilson Allen, *American Prosody* (New York: Octagon, 1966), p. 291.

- 21 "Are Marson's Sojourn in Great Ireland," *Family Magazine* 1 (1838): 314.
- 22 The absence of Native Americans in Lanier's American West would have been especially significant to readers in July of 1876, just one month after the June 25-26 Battle of Little Big Horn. Though Lanier's poem was likely written before the battle, tensions between the Sioux and the U.S. War Department had been building since late 1875, as Native Americans, grown savvy to the drive of U.S. westward expansion, resisted compromise and insisted on maintaining their rights to the Montana Territory's Black Hills region (on U.S./Sioux relations and the lead-up to the Battle of Little Big Horn, see Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* [NY: Picador, 2007], pp. 274-313). Black Americans likewise have no place in Lanier's vision for a future America; James Reitter suggests that Lanier's absence from the canon results largely from his "never [having] resolved the conflict of slavery in [his] writing"; "the heroism of the South is trumpeted, but the immoral foundation of the culture is never discussed" ("The Legacy of Three Southern Civil War Poets: Henry Timrod, Paul Hamilton Hayne, and Sydney [sic.] Lanier," *South Carolina Review* 41 [Fall 2008]: 69-79; 69).
- 23 Coventry Patmore, *Essay on English Metrical Law* (Washington, DC.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1961). On Patmore's "law," see Yopie Prins, "Patmore's Law, Meynell's Rhythm," *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 261-284; and my discussion of Patmore in *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 111-127.
- 24 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1989), p. 23. Foner argues that "the exigencies of the war" necessitated a more centralized federal government "with a greatly expanded income, bureaucracy, and set of responsibilities"; "these measures reflected what might be called the birth of the modern American state" (p. 23).
- 25 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 450.
- 26 Michael Cohen, "Whittier, Ballad Reading, and the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *Arizona Quarterly* 64 (Autumn 2008): 5.
- 27 Yopie Prins, "Metrical Translation: Nineteenth-Century Homers and the Hexameter Mania," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), p. 230.
- 28 Meredith Martin, "Prosody Wars," in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason Hall (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, forthcoming). I am grateful for having been permitted to read this essay in manuscript form.
- 29 Martha Nell Smith, "The Literary World Has Always Been Read/Write," *ESQ* 54 (2008): 279.