A Roll of the Dice
Editorial & series introduction

...But they are, so you say, like the wine god’s holy priests
Who wandered from land to land in holy night.¹

Literary journals are proliferating. In the English language alone, counting only those that publish poetry, there are well over three thousand active, of which around two hundred have started up in the last six months.² They are also dying like mayflies. Since 2005, more than four thousand have ceased publication. It’s not for want of poems. The boom in writing programmes has been a lucrative business for university arts faculties, churning out far too many graduates for the ability or will of the world to sustain professional writers, let alone poets.³ Meanwhile, the readership for poetry continues to dwindle: it is a weary commonplace that more people like to write poetry than to read it.⁴

Why add to the glut? It’s certainly not good enough to reply, in the airy words of a journal that launched last year, why not? It’s incumbent on us to give some reason, or at least an excuse, for adding yet one more to the overpopulated, under-sub-

⁴  ‘Supply is decoupled from demand... no one is reading all this newly produced literature—not even the writers themselves.’ Ted Genoways, ‘The Death of Fiction?’, Mother Jones, 15 January 2010 <http://motherjones.com/media/2010/01/death-of-literary-fiction-magazines-journals>, accessed 17 January 2014. See also Rjurik Davidson, ‘Liberated zone or pure commodification?’, Overland 200 (2010), 103-109.
scribed world of poetry journals. Given the unpropitious ratio of journals to readers, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that a new publication with no other purpose than simply to publish poetry (however qualified with adjectives, usually more-or-less reducible to ‘good’\(^5\)) is redundant, a compounding of the problem: yet another tiny venture competing for—and thus diluting—the limited demand of a saturated market. This introduction is part apologia. But first, the larger problem: how can we characterise the state in which poetry finds itself today?

For the Lithuanian-Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, the tone of modern poetry is inflected by a flattening out of hope. He contrasts Walt Whitman’s quintessentially American optimism with a creeping pessimism that Miłosz finds in such distinct inheritors of Whitman’s legacy as T. S. Eliot\(^6\) and Allen Ginsberg.\(^7\) He is struck by the fact that the mood of poetry darkened during ‘a century of utopian hope’, the culmination of a process in which the ‘vertical orientation, when man raised his eyes toward Heaven, has gradually been replaced…with a horizontal longing’.\(^8\) Above was replaced by ahead; the promise of the kingdom of heaven was exchanged for the promise of the Enlightenment: a self-sufficient humanity, striding forward into a future of progress, peace and self-mastery. But the uto-

\(^5\) An anonymised sample of exhortations from the submissions pages of fledgling poetry journals: ‘contemporary poetry crafted with thoughtfulness and care’; ‘ambition, boldness, and attention to craft are paramount’; ‘make peoples eyes open wider and their minds race with excitement as they feast on your words’; ‘we care only about excellence’. Oddly enough, none of the journals we looked up were looking for bad, dull, inept or mediocre poems.


\(^7\) ‘Though quite differently - I would say inversely - motivated, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* crowns the history of Whitmanesque verse which once served to sing of the open road ahead. Instead we now have despair at the imprisonment of man in an evil civilisation, in a trap without release.’ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

pions of the twentieth century were betrayed: communism by the crushing oppression carried out by an overbearing and hypocritical State; liberal democracy by vast disparities of wealth, ecological devastation and the spiritual vacuum of consumer culture. Poetry became disillusioned with the ‘open road ahead’ not despite utopia, but because of its betrayal.

Isn’t this loss of hope, though, merely a response (one might even say, the only authentic response) to the unraveling of one grand narrative after another: the death of God, the obstinate failure of humanity to perfect itself, the hollowing-out of the ideal of progress? Perhaps; but in the process of that withdrawal, according to Miłosz, something fundamental was lost. Poetry ceased to speak to the people. It has become thoroughly colonised by academia, a hermetically sealed elite discourse in which ‘both the authors and the readers of poetry come from university campuses’ and from which the common reader is shut out.

How did this happen? A populist answer is simply that poetry became opaque, as impenetrable to the uninitiated as a painting by Georges Mathieu or one of Harry Partch’s bizarre atonal compositions. Innovations by successive movements brought about a metamorphosis of poetry’s formal structure so radical as to render it unrecognisable to the ordinary reader. To appreciate the novelty of, say, the ‘Language poetry’ of Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein, one must be familiar with modernist and ‘objectivist’ movements that preceded them: earlier innovators whose work had become a norm against which the Language poets defined themselves. A couple of decades later, a so-called ‘post-Language’ poem needed to distinguish itself again, and so the process goes, rupture layered upon rupture until the reading of poetry becomes an arcane and specialised skill. The world war of a hundred years ago produced not only the horror of trench warfare, but a blossoming of poems that memorialised the experience for the generation who lived

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through it, and the succeeding ones too. Not so the next war. Barbaric or not, people have continued to need what poetry has traditionally offered; but they have met that need not through poetry, but the increasing sophistication of popular song lyrics. The people’s poet of the nineteen-sixties was not Ted Hughes, but Bob Dylan. The popular song is what impinges on the traditional territory of the poem, forcing it to deform itself to justify its existence, much as the photograph did to painting, film to theatre, or science to philosophy. As the interloper takes over the older art form’s traditional function, the latter must redefine its raison d’être, for territorial as much as for aesthetic reasons; and in doing so, it aligns itself with an audience of a sophisticated taste that appreciates qualities unique to the art form proper. In other words, it abandons the public at the moment when it realises it is being abandoned.

This populist argument is not without merit. But it only describes what happened; it does not touch on why it happened, which is the essential question to be answered if a way is to be found out of the impasse. According to Miłosz, the stylistic obscurantism of the contemporary poem, the kernel of despair it carries within itself, and its marginalisation to the outer periphery of the public sphere are but three aspects—form, content, context—of a single phenomenon: a retreat from the domain of the commons to the domain of the individual. As the poem’s subject contracts from a common to an individuated Lebenswelt, the poet writes in a mode that speaks to herself rather than to the world; as the poem’s frame of reference shrinks from shared experience to interiority, solitude

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11 ‘[Poetry] withdrew from the domain common to all people into the closed circle of subjectivism.’ Miłosz, p. 26.
and its concomitants—helplessness, alienation, loss—become its dismal motifs; and as the poem abjures the concerns of the outside world, this gesture is increasingly reciprocated by an indifferent public. If the poet wishes to cloak himself in the romantic mantle of the outsider, the world shrugs its shoulders: let his wish be granted. The aesthetics of individualism is both cause and effect of this vicious cycle.

The decline of poetry as a medium that resonates beyond its rarified milieu is roughly coterminous with the rise of the novel, from a lowly and disreputable genre of about the same cachet as today’s soap operas, to a form of uncontested scope and prestige, from the pinnacle of high culture to the mass market. The poem cast aside its traditional trappings—a vast range of metres, structures and rhyme schemes—in favour of freedom, ignoring Goethe’s dictum that mastery can only be attained by working within limits. Whereas, alongside many experiments with form, the novel never discarded its essential mode: a more-or-less sequential prose narrative of fictional characters in a story. Yet the narrative mode of the novel is itself saturated with individualism. The individual’s relation-

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12 ‘It’s the one literary genre in which certain convergences only possible after globalisation—between ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ culture, between theoretical or intellectual validation and free-market or material investment—take place.’ Amit Chaudhuri, ‘The Novel After Globalisation’, Meanjin, 66 (2007), 97–113 (p. 98).
13 ‘None proves a master but by limitation / And only law can give us liberty.’ (‘In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister / Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.’) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, ‘Sonnet’, trans. by Michael Hamburger, in German Poetry from 1750 to 1900: Goethe, Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Others, ed. by Robert Browning (London: Continuum, 1984), p. 59.
14 On the protagonist as misfit: ‘What else allows Elizabeth Bennet, Pip, Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver, Michael Henchard, Dorian Gray, and Stephen Dedalus to represent the claims of unacknowledged individuality in general, if not the fact that they are first and foremost something more than the consequently obsolete place assigned them?’ Nancy Armstrong, ‘The Fiction of Bourgeois Morality and the Paradox of Individualism’, in The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes, ed. by Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton
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ship to society has been the novel’s theme *par excellence* since Cervantes. To crystallise the difference in the way individualism exhibits itself through the novel and through the poem: the novel *stages* individualism, the poem *performs* it. The novelist creates and shows us Don Quixote; the poet’s own art form has become intrinsically quixotic.

**The poem and the Crowd**

*New Trad’s* wager is that this is not all poetry can be: that a poem can be more than the voice of a lone figure in a world that is both uncomprehending and incomprehensible. The journal is, of course, a mere pawn on the board, an obtuse and preposterous experiment with a high chance of total failure. For a small and entirely unknown ‘little magazine’ to attempt to grapple with these large issues, there is an obvious risk of absurd grandiosity, perhaps to invite accusations of messianic delusion. The risk is worth taking; and as for messianism, we plead extenuation to a John the Baptist complex: the best we can hope is that it might, with a combination of luck and bloody-mindedness, open a space for other kinds of poem to flourish, and that it might in some small way prepare the path for a poetry that is able to speak to the people.

How can this be accomplished? How can the poem re-discover its communal voice and function in our fragmented and atomised world? Or have we travelled a one-way journey to a modernity in which individualism is unavoidable and ubiquitous?¹⁵ Let’s pose some responses to this question: three

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¹⁵ ‘Are we going to become—or go back to being—premodern? Do we have to resign ourselves to being antimodern? For lack of any better option, are we going to have to continue to be modern, but without conviction,'
pessimistic, and finally a tentatively optimistic one.

A first pessimistic response is that it simply cannot be done. The organic authenticity of the ancient poets—Homer, Bragi Boddason, Valmiki—is no longer available to us, and any attempt to recapture it is destined to fail. The shift from recited song to written poem represents a fundamental rupture; these poets represent not the foundation of a literary tradition, but the last gasp of a much greater oral one; and (on this view) the story of literature is a long degeneration in which modernity is merely the most recent, as well as the most debased and confused, episode. If today’s poems are trapped in solipsistic individualism, that’s just because those are the only ones that can be written successfully in the kind of world in which we live. With our loss of innocence (Galileo—Darwin—Freud—Einstein) a light has gone out of the world. The malaise of poetry offers only a despairing answer to Hölderlin’s question: ‘What are poets for in a destitute time?’

The second pessimistic response is that even if it were possible, it would not be desirable. The aesthetics of social holism, on this view, are utterly incompatible with our globalised, multicultural world. Any attempt at invoking a lost spiritual organ-

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For instance, Georg Lukács argues that the authenticity of literature derives from its ‘historico-philosophical substratum’, i.e. that the succession of literary forms is conditioned by the dialectic of history, and not vice versa: ‘Art can never be the agent of such a transformation: the great epic is a form bound to the historical moment, and any attempt to depict the utopian as existent can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality.’ *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 152.

The default of God forebodes something even grimmer, however. Not only have gods and the god fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world’s history. The time of the world’s night is the destitute time…it can no longer discern the default of God as a default.’ Martin Heidegger, ‘What Are Poets For?’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstander (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 87-140 (p. 89).
icism will at best lead to nostalgia, a yearning for the supposed simple verities of a past that, if it ever contained that sense of rootedness, cannot be regained.\textsuperscript{18} At worst, it lends aesthetic cover to an ugly politics: a desire for cultural homogeneity, racist attitudes to the Other, an ideology of purity that indelibly stained the twentieth century with the horrors of fascism.\textsuperscript{19} Liberal individualism may have its faults, but the alternatives (on this account) are immeasurably worse, and to attempt to step outside it is to flirt with the very worst aspects of human nature.

The third response is more subtle, but posits an equally intractable situation. The philosopher Alain Badiou takes issue with Miłosz’s contention that poetry since Stéphane Mallarmé has turned its back on the world in favour of abstraction and hermeticism. For Badiou, the poem itself is the opposite of elitist: its addressee is everyone, the ‘egalitarian crowd’.\textsuperscript{20} The hermeticism Miłosz detects in western poetry is nothing intrinsic to the poem itself, but in the context of its reception: if western poetry seems to the Polish poet to suffer from a ‘subjective excess’, this is not (Badiou claims) due to a deficiency in the poems themselves, but in the individualised nature of western society, as compared to the communitarian society of Miłosz’s

\textsuperscript{18} ‘…In [Heidegger’s] over-emphatic identification with a familiar and immediate community—its woods, its hearth, its dialect—there was an implicit claim to a monopoly of authenticity, almost to an exclusive, patented trademark, as if his sincere attachment to his own soil allowed no room for the loyalties of other men towards other soils and other lands—to their log cabins, or their blocked-rent tenements, or their skyscrapers.’ Claudio Magris, \textit{Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea}, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Harvill Press, 2011), p. 45.

\textsuperscript{19} ‘After post-structuralism, “nostalgia” became a dirty word; it pointed to a longing for hieratic, repressive totalities, a malaise that could affect, at once, the fascist, the humanist, and the member of the old Left.’ Chaudhuri, p. 104.

Polish-Lithuanian background. He quotes Mallarmé:

Mallarmé rigorously indicates that his epoch is without a present for reasons that come down to the absence of an egalitarian crowd: ‘There is no Present, no, a present does not exist. Unless the Crowd declares itself.’

By Badiou’s account, then, the poem is already speaking to the world, or ‘the Crowd’ (la Foule); the problem is that the crowd isn’t listening, precisely because it fails to constitute itself as the Crowd. In our contemporary individualistic socio-political environment, each reader encounters the poem alone, without a sense of solidarity that would enable her to experience the universality of great poetry. The poem is not at fault; it is we who do not have ears to hear it.

According to these answers, then, the project of transcending the individualist voice of the contemporary poem is, respectively: impossible, dangerous, redundant. These are different and contradictory propositions, but all deny any agency to poetry itself in transforming itself to beneficial effect. If we are to make a credible case for this journal’s intent in the context of Miłosz’s problematic, it is necessary to find some rejoinder to all of these answers.

First, Badiou’s invocation of Mallarmé’s absent Crowd. Mallarmé’s role in setting the trajectory of modern poetry is, without doubt, highly significant. But he was far from simply a proponent of free verse at the expense of existing traditions.


22 ‘Mallarmé’s singularity lies in being a poet who simultaneously participates in the most audacious modernity and maintains in a strict fashion the essential character of regular meter.’ Quentin Meillassoux, ‘Badiou and Mallarmé: The Event and the Perhaps’, trans. by Alley Edlebi, Parrhesia, 16
Mallarmé proposes a middle way between either side of the quarrel between *le vers libre* and *le vers officiel*, the extremes of which denied the legitimacy of the other. Instead, he suggests a division of labour between the two:

For me, classical verse—or, better, *formal verse*—is the great nave of the cathedral of French poetry; whereas free verse populates the aisles with attractions, mysteries, rare extravagances. Formal verse must remain, because it was born of the soul of the people, it springs from the ground of the past, and it flourishes with the most exquisite blooms. Free verse is also a fine achievement, rising up in revolt against the banality of convention; but, for the sake of its own existence, it must not set itself up as a dissident church, separate and in rivalry!

In this conception of poetry, a compromise is sought between the old and the new, between the stately beauty of the alexandrine and the wild charms of *le vers libre*, in which each has its place. It is clear, however, that the relationship between poetry and the people is through formal verse (‘*il est né de l’âme populaire*’). In the century that followed, Mallarmé’s Catholic

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23 ‘The Parnassians, such as Lectont de Lisle and Heredia, denied that free verse was verse at all,...just a prose poem whose lines are arbitrarily interrupted. Inversely, the most radical advocates of free verse, such as Gustave Kahn...refused all legitimacy to traditional metre, seeing in it only a constraint, an essentially political one—the inherited legacy of royal centralism and absolutism...’ Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s Coup de Dés*, trans. by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), p. 22.

model for coexistence in a single ‘church’\textsuperscript{25} was not realised. Not only did free verse establish itself as a rival institution—a protestant church, if you will—but it supplanted formal poetry almost totally. According to Quentin Meillassoux:

The complete or quasi-complete victory of free verse in the 20th century would have meant for him, if he had bore witness to it, a ruinous amputation of poetry.\textsuperscript{26}

So if the poem in Mallarmé’s time spoke to the Crowd—present or otherwise—then the ‘ruinous amputation’ of that aspect of poetry, formal verse, that was ‘born of the soul of the people’, has ensured that this is no longer the case. In Mallarmé’s own frame of reference, then, we can wrest back the terms of the problem as Miłosz envisages it from Badiou’s argument.

To return, then, to the first pessimistic response: because of its fragmented social context, the poem cannot transcend the confines of individualism. It is, perhaps, a little easier to test the veracity of this claim, as it admits to empirical verification. Even a single counter-example of an aesthetically successful contemporary poem that meets our criteria would falsify it.

First, then, we need to determine what such a poem would look like—and then try to find one.

\textit{Voice of the people}

To begin with, the question of voice. The poignant intensity of the contemporary poem derives its power in large part from the singularity and interiority of the voice, and startling,

\textsuperscript{25} This is more than a casual metaphor. The great task Mallarmé envisaged for poetry, and formal poetry in particular, was to replace the communion of faltering Christianity with a secular sacrament. ‘...[T]he vocation of Metric verse, according to Mallarmé, is precisely the re-foundation of the community after the collapse of Christianity. If this verse does not survive free verse, poetry will become exclusively an art of individuality...’ Meillassoux, ‘Badiou and Mallarmé’, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 41.
unexpected syntax that by its very freshness forces the reader
to see its subject matter in a new light. We have already noted
the tendency of novelty in form to escalate into an arms race
between poets and literary movements that leaves the reader
behind: today’s new fashion becomes tomorrow’s old hat.\footnote{27} It
is the strongly personal voice of the contemporary poem, the
unmistakeable character of a specific poet, that ties it to what
Miłosz calls ‘the progressing subjectivication that becomes
manifest when we are imprisoned in the melancholy of our
individual transience.’\footnote{28} Jan Miesłowski, writing on Hölderlin’s
‘Voice of the People’, considers the self-abnegation required on
the part of the poet to make the poem something more than
the vehicle of a singular voice:

What must the poetic voice sacrifice in order to be able to talk about
(or ‘give voice to’) these other voices? Does giving voice to the voice of
the people or the voice of God involve speaking on their behalf? […] If
the lyric is to become a truly social text, it needs to escape its own voice
so that something more than the expression of a singular individual is
articulated.\footnote{29}

A social text. With that little phrase, the concerns of form,
content and context can again be seen to be interdependent.
The confessional mode of contemporary poetry, with its raw
expressive power maximised at the expense of formal structure,
and the consequent disorientation of the reader, who must
peddle hard to keep up; all this must be sacrificed.

A social text; is the poem, then, to try to encroach on the
territory of the novel? No, for two reasons. One is that the posi-
tion is already filled; the novel does a much better job of being
itself than the poem can. The other is that the modern novel is

\footnote{27} ‘If syntax means anything, it is that the offbeat or the atypical soon
becomes the norm.’ Jan Mieszkowski, \textit{Labour of Imagination: Aesthetics and
Political Economy from Kant to Althusser} (New York: Fordham University
\footnote{28} Miłosz, p. 115.
\footnote{29} Mieszkowski, p. 88.
itself another vehicle of individualism.\textsuperscript{30} A social text not only speaks to the people but speaks in the voice of the people—not merely that of individuals within it.

A quasi-political objection arises immediately: would this not be a regressive step, to attempt to give the Crowd a singular voice? Would such a poetry not replicate the imperialistic tendencies of the epic, as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin—to discard polyphony and heteroglossia, and revert to an authoritarian, oppressive single voice that brooks no oppositionality?\textsuperscript{31} Does this attempt not invite those very fascistic tendencies warned against by the second pessimistic answer to our question ‘how can it be done’?

Some empirical observations are in order. First, polyphony is not \textit{a priori} a guarantee of an emancipatory political dimension in literature. The opposite tendency can be found in the \textit{Cantos} of Ezra Pound, in which a multiplicity of voices, presented using the modernist techniques of fragmentation, decontextualisation and aesthetic irony, serve not to give voice to the people but to reinforce an authoritarian worldview informed by the poet’s own fascist sympathies.\textsuperscript{32}

Pound’s preference for presentation, for showing over tell-

\textsuperscript{30} ‘[Defoe’s] total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes’s cogito ergo sum was in philosophy.’ Ian Watt, \textit{The Rise of the Novel} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 14.

\textsuperscript{31} ‘The epic world is an utterly finished thing…it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value.’ Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel’ in \textit{The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays}, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3-40 (p. 17).

\textsuperscript{32} ‘…in the case of Pound, however, anti-democratic discourse is not formulated in the explicit monologic diegesis of the authoritative rhapsode but in the infinite voices of interrupted conversations and under the guise of parody, irony and prejudice.’ Line Henriksen, \textit{Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound’s Cantos and Derek Walcott’s Omeros as Twentieth-Century Epics} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 158.
ing, mimesis over diegesis, follows an aesthetic choice shared by the contemporary novel (in contrast with, for instance, the editorialising narrator of George Eliot’s fiction). Though this is not a new phenomenon—it dates back to Aristotle—it is one of the hallmarks of modern fiction. But the erasure of the individual voice of the poet (speaking as the poet) required to create a social text, does not automatically imply an erasure of poetic voice altogether. On the contrary, the task of the social text is to give voice to the multitude.

We can find an exemplary instance of the social text in Derek Walcott’s great poem *Omeros*. In common with the other late epics of the twentieth century, it alludes deliberately to the foundational epics of western poetry, in particular the *Iliad*. However, it bucks the modern trend for pure presentation, in favour of a representational mode of narrativity that does not shrink from evaluating and commenting on the events described, a practise that found little favour among New York critics, for whom ambiguity and semantic multiplicity are an important element enriching literary texts (and also, perhaps—less charitably—make their own efforts in hermeneutics a necessary service!). It is this mode of telling, rather than showing—highly unfashionable in the individualist aesthetic climate of our times—that makes *Omeros* a truly social text.

In *Omeros*, Walcott gives voice to many individual characters. But the poem as a whole chiefly speaks in the narrator’s voice. To whom does this voice belong, properly? Not to the poet as individual. Walcott himself insists that his proper task

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33 Cf. Aristotle *Poetics* 1460a5-11.
34 ‘In contrast to Pound’s bid for an epic of presentation, *Omeros* makes the genre revert to representational verse and a narrative combination of mimesis and diegesis.’ Henriksen, p. 252.
35 ‘This explicitness represents a return to the narrative stance of ‘telling’ discarded by Imagist and modernist poetics. Within the epic genre, Walcott’s move also becomes a return to the all-embracing diegesis of the oral rhapsode.’ *Ibid.*, p. 297.
36 ‘Dialogue is the exception in *Omeros*; the larger parts of the long poem are made up of the narrator’s diegesis.’ *Ibid.*, p. 246.
37 In Walcott’s own words: ‘I would never lay claim to hearing my own
as a poet is to speak for his people, the people of St Lucia:

I have felt from my boyhood that I had one function and that was somehow to articulate, not my own experience, but what I saw around me...That’s what I felt my job was. It’s something that other writers have said in their own way, even if it sounds arrogant. Yeats has said it; Joyce has said it. It’s amazing Joyce could say that he wants to write for his race, meaning the Irish. You'd think that Joyce would have a larger, more continental kind of mind, but Joyce continued insisting on his provinciality at the same time he had the most universal mind since Shakespeare. What we can do as poets in terms of our honesty is simply to write within the immediate perimeter of not more than twenty miles really.38

With the example of Omeros, we can counter the claim that the contemporary poem is incapable of transcending the individual voice to become a social text. It is also, obviously, not an avatar of imperial authoritarianism. Is this because of its specific provenance as a postcolonial text, or, as one study dubs it, an ‘epic of the dispossessed’? To some extent, perhaps; but to emphasise its postcolonial origin to the exclusion of its specificity as a work of literature would be to reduce it to a political cipher, an expression of postcoloniality and nothing more. The key, rather, to its success as a social text in terms of its context lies in Walcott’s geographical expression: ‘to write within the immediate perimeter of not more than twenty miles’.

Twenty miles....A little hyperbolic, perhaps; but Walcott identifies a vital fact about the social text: the identification between the milieu that the poet knows by direct experience and the people on whose behalf he speaks. If Walcott’s identity as a St Lucian gives him an advantage in making his poem a

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social text, it is in the relative smallness of the island, not in any
dietaritarian valorisation of the periphery in the global world-
system. The poet can speak for a smaller group with much
greater authority—because he knows it—than for a larger one,
which can only be captured in general terms that tend toward
the simplistic even if they manage to escape the stereotypical.
This is what makes the task of national laureate such an oner-
ous and artificial one, and renders most of the poems written
in that capacity poor examples of the poet’s talent: the nation-
state, in most cases, is far too vast to be known, personally, by a
single poet. (We might, perhaps, denote Joyce’s ‘provincialism’
more narrowly than Walcott does, as a writer of Dublin, rather
than of Ireland as a whole.)

Thus, the difficulties facing the contemporary poet—as
contrasted with her ancient counterpart—attempting to speak
for and to the multitude, can be seen as different not in kind
but simply in scale: the ancient polis, or the tribe or clan to
which a bard belonged, was of sufficiently small size for the
poet to know it intimately. A vital step, then, in recovering the
potential of poetry to become a social text is to reject the false
choice between representing the vast abstraction of society as
a whole (for which the attempt to speak tends towards an aes-
thetic reinforcement of political sovereignty) and the expression
of purely individual feeling, and rather to aim for somewhere
in between: a community on a human scale, be that a town, a
village, a borough, a diaspora or immigrant community within
a metropolis, or any other crowd small enough to warrant that
term literally, rather than the forbidding abstraction of Mal-
larmé’s Crowd.

It is this focus on the poet’s locality that sets the agenda for
New Trad’s themed second issue: to give voice to communities,
without slipping into the pathos of individualism or the inhu-
man scale of nationalism (interested poets and scholars should
consult the call for submissions on page 142).
A home for hypotheticals

But what of the poetic form of Omeros? It is surely no accident that this exemplary social text alludes so strongly to the epic tradition: not only in its narrative structure and the naming of characters, but in its near-consistent use of the Homeric hexametre, and tercets with a rhyme scheme that (while looser than Dante’s) is modelled upon the terza rima of the Divine Comedy. Something is at work of greater significance than the magpie-like hybridisation and pastiche of postmodernism.

The predicament of contemporary poetry, as described at the outset, is its rampaging self-cannibalisation, its impatience with metrical form and structure, its destruction of the ground on which poetry has traditionally stood. How can today’s poets renew poetry, when the last century has been a blur of novelty-seeking?

The conviction of New Trad—and it is, I will freely admit, more of an intuition than a fully conceived hypothesis—is that the future will only be won by reference to the past. This is, after all, more the rule than the exception. The Renaissance is the obvious example: the great aesthetic advances of that time were engendered not by a desire for novelty, but from a desire to reconnect with a lost tradition. T. S. Eliot is an unlikely model, given that it is the wreckage of modernism that has buried poetry in its own obscurity; but it is notable that Eliot justified modernism by a reference to the ‘metaphysical’ poets of the seventeenth century, wondering what might have happened if poetry had never turned, under the influence of Milton and Dryden, from the path trodden by Donne and Marvell.39 He thus grounds the project of modernism in English poetry not

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39 ‘In the seventeenth century, a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.... We may ask, what would have been the fate of the “metaphysical” had the current of poetry descended in a direct line from them, as it descended in a direct line to them?’ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, in Selected Essays (London: Faber & Faber, 1924), 281-291 (p. 288).
as a straightforward break from tradition, but as a continuation of an older tradition, in a kind of hypothetical: *what if we had never stopped writing in this way?* How would poetry in this mode have developed in the meantime?

The purpose of *New Trad* is to be a home for many such hypotheticals. Our emphasis is not on the recent pre-modernist past. There are several venues already in existence for the rhyming, metrical poetry that immediately preceded the onslaught of free verse and has been maintained by the likes of Robert Frost;\(^{40}\) we have no desire to replicate them. Rather, we seek to revitalise ancient forms and traditions so long fallen out of use as to be become mere objects of scholarly study. What if we still wrote like the ancient Norse skalds? What if we had never stopped writing spells and invocations in the manner of the Akkadians? What if the Sapphic lyric or Horatian ode were still with us...what would they have become, for us—what can we make of it in our own era?

A scattershot approach, we have to admit, and one that may take us up many dead ends; still, who’s counting, if even one of those paths turns out to lead onward? It may also seem a perverse response to the problem as posed by Miłosz—for whom the retreat of poetry from the public sphere is reinforced by its excessive proximity to academia—to specialise in poetic forms mostly familiar only to literary scholars. Indeed, a majority of the contributors to this issue are connected to a university in one way or another. Against this contradiction we can only plead a more modest mission than the broadening of poetry’s contemporary readership (a grand task entirely out of our reach): to incubate and foster new possibilities—albeit via archaic traditions—for poetry. Another objection is that the journal only publishes work in modern English; how can it possibly hope to engage meaningfully with the vast and various

40 Examples: *Measure* (‘a review of formal poetry’), *Mezzo Cammin* (‘an online journal of formalist poetry by women’), *The Lyric* (‘the oldest magazine in North America in continuous publication devoted to traditional poetry’), *Able Muse* (‘predominantly publishes metrical poetry’).
array of archaic poetic traditions in the world?

Time will tell. *New Trad* is an experiment—a roll of the dice, in other words. But the chill wind of individualism and its formal concomitant, free verse, has blasted poetry for too long. We are encouraged by the enthusiasm surrounding recent experimental forums for archaic poetic form such as the ‘*Modern Poets on Viking Poetry*’ project, which last year brought together skaldic scholars and contemporary poets, under the auspices of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge University, in a series of workshops that culminated in the publication of some fascinating work\(^{41}\), as well as the remarkable work of individual poets making use of ancient forms, such as Bev Braune’s epic poem ‘Skulváði Úlfri’ (an extract of which appears in this volume) and Glaswegian poet Ian Crockatt’s excellent and varied collection *Skald*.\(^{42}\) This might—just perhaps—be an idea whose time has come.

17 February 2014

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