PHILOSOPHY AS VERSE-PERFORMANCE: FIVE POEMS AND A FORMALIST PROSPECTUS

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Introduction

The following poems—or verse-essays—are part of an on-going project with two principal and closely related aims. One is revive the fortunes of the broadly philosophical verse-essay, a genre that has been largely neglected over the past two centuries and more since its highpoint in the long literary eighteenth century. The other is to show how this can best be achieved through a formalist poetics involving the deployment of regular rhyme-schemes and likewise regular metrical structures played off against the shifting patterns of speech rhythm. This all runs very much counter to currently approved practice, at least among prominent (mostly academic) arbiters of taste, so I had better explain some of the issues raised by conjoining these two distinctly un-modish attempts.

The main thrust of *avant-garde* theory over the past few decades has been toward an idea of literary language that locates its resistance to passive or conformist habits of writing or reading primarily in 'the text'. This latter is then conceived—in post-structuralist fashion—as a site of conflicting significations that are defined in terms applying with equal pertinence to poetry or prose (for a fairly representative sampling of work in this vein, see Norris and Machin 1987). That is, it tends to neglect matters of a formal (by which I mean chiefly metrical, rhythmic, prosodic, syntactic, or verse-structural) character so as to engage more intently with the textual and intertextual aspects of poetic discourse. These aspects are more amenable to treatment by those—especially philosopher-critics or theorists bred up on a mixture of post-Kantian idealism with post-

structuralist ideas about language—who see it as their main role to mediate the relationship between poetry and theory. Although these critics do on occasion take note of certain formal features it is usually by way of a brief detour from that other, to them more absorbing and philosophically as well as poetically important business. It strikes me—no doubt as an interested party—that much of the contemporary poetry approved, promoted, anthologised, or encouraged by such criticism can itself fairly be said to suffer from a kindred defect. It often goes beyond the modernist revolt against 'traditional' rhyme and meter—a revolt quite compatible (as in T.S. Eliot) with a high degree of formal inventiveness in both respects—to something more like a cultivated disregard for such elements.

The result, in many cases, is a flattening-out of verse-rhythms through the lack of any metrical counterpoint. One feels that the poem might just as well have been written in prose since there is nothing—or nothing of a properly poetic, i.e., formally constrained but also formally inventive and liberating character—to warrant that generic description. This applies especially to the language poets (or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, as they like to be known) who emerged as a loosely associated movement in the 1970's and occupied ground that, in principle at least, overlapped to a striking extent with the territory I have been trying to stake out here (see especially Andrews and Bernstein 1984; also Bernstein 1992 and 1999; Hejinian 2000; McCaffery 1986 and 2001; Perelman 1996; Silliman 1987; Ward 1993). These poets, Charles Bernstein and Steve McCaffery among them, are highly self-conscious and theoretically aware about the kinds of effect they wish to achieve in creative practice and the kinds of relationship they seek to establish with various poetic and philosophical precursors. In brief: they reject (what they see as) the prevailing subjectivist or expressivist (i.e., neo-Romantic) ethos of much contemporary poetry; go in wholeheartedly for post-structuralist ideas of *écriture*, the 'revolution of the word', and the limitlessly plural or *scriptible* text; enthusiastically, and for just those reasons, endorse the Barthesian 'death of the author'; likewise approve the post-structuralist idea of literature's socio-political function as the undoing of bourgeois ideology by deconstructive, semioclastic, or other such textual means; and, again following Barthes, take the naturalisation of the signifier/signified dyad as the basic mechanism by which language colludes in our willing submission to the lures of 'common-sense' thinking. Along with these goes the further belief that the signifiers 'poetry' or 'poem' (not to mention 'poet') have for too long served to promote a notion of literary works as affording privileged access to realms of experience beyond reach of prosaic or rational grasp.

The language-poets advance this case with a passion clearly born of 1960s political-cultural ferment and transposed, *via* post-structuralism, to the register of a dissident or radical poetics squarely at odds with the whole bad hegemony of received languages and verse-forms. They also— as scarcely needs adding—have a deep (and in some ways healthy) suspicion of the first-person subject whose agonies and ecstasies, along with more humdrum emotions, are the fulcrum of most poetry in the mainstream lyric tradition. I won't deny the appeal that such ideas have exerted, and continue to exert, on my own thinking about poetry and theory. Nobody who reads these pieces with an ear and eye to their formal (narrative as well as verse-poetic) aspects would be likely to take them as straightforwardly expressing my own beliefs or indeed the belief-set of any unified, autonomous, or integral first-person self. To that extent I am happy to acknowledge an affinity with

what the language-poets—or their most influential promoters (usually the same people)—place high on their creative-critical agenda. There is also a genealogical connection in respect of our shared sources in that line of jointly poetic-philosophical writing that goes back through Yale-School deconstruction to the Jena Romantics. However, in the case of the language poets, there is something too easily or unresistingly achieved about that two-way reciprocal passage between poetry and theory, or the fluency with which these writers modulate from a (nominal) poetry overtly engaged with issues in criticism and theory to a theoretically-angled criticism with claims—not always very strongly borne out—to constitute poetry in itself. The result is very often a hybrid discourse that fails to match either the creative flair of the best literary theory or the subtlety, range and conceptual resources of a poetry that makes best use of verse techniques for its own distinctive purposes.

This can most plausibly be put down to a deficit of just those formal attributes, such as rhyme and meter, that the language poets frequently denounce as at best mere relics of an antiquated verse tradition and at worst a means of inducing compliance with the norms of bourgeois subjectivity. On the contrary, I'd say: it is just those formal attributes that best, most effectively and durably exemplify poetry's power of resistance to ideological conditioning, whether by the sometimes restrictive effects of first-person (e.g., lyric) individualism or—more to the point here—by the subject's proclaimed dissolution into a multitude of intertextual discourses, codes and conventions. Hence the feeling of linguistic inertness in so much language-poetry and the impression it gives of endlessly announcing but never remotely achieving that revolution of the bourgeois signifying order first envisaged a full half-century ago by the left wing of French structuralist poetics (see for instance Belsey 1980; Kristeva 1984; Young 1981). My verse-essay about Mallarmé is relevant here since it reflects on the various sources of a double and co-implicated movement of thought, one that starts from Mallarmé's diagnosis of a 'crisis' ([1986] (2010) afflicting the high culture of nineteenth-century French classicism and presages the increasing permeability of any generic boundary between poetry and theory, along with the erosion of those formal features that once underwrote (albeit in historically and culturally variable ways) that same distinction. Hence the current anti-formalist bias and, closely allied to that, the prejudice against any poetry that argues a case as distinct from deploying symbolist-approved modes of oblique, evocative, highly metaphoric, non-discursive, analogical, non-consecutive, spatially conceived, and hence maximally non-prosaic language.

However what this attitude gives to poetry in terms of expanded creative-imaginative horizons it promptly takes away in terms of formal resources and capacity to earn its keep as a discourse of reasoned dialogical exchange. The precedents again go a long way back, to the English Romantics at least, although it wasn't until recent times that the idea of radically re-jigging the poetry/prose dichotomy was translated from the realm of generalised precept to poetic practice. Thus Wordsworth ([1800]) 1991) said that the relevant distinction was that between poetry and science, not poetry and prose, while Shelley ([1821] 2001)—with larger territorial aims in view—said that all major thinkers, discoverers, reformers, scientists and other visionary types should properly be accorded the title of poet. Yet neither of them, even Wordsworth in the prosier parts of *Lyrical Ballads*, went so far as to draw the inverse corollary of this and remove even those vestiges of

rhyme and meter that remained of the old (now despised) eighteenth-century 'poetic diction'. That was left to the avatars of twentieth-century modernism and its various, often to begin with academically sponsored but nowadays far more widespread and popular manifestations.

Anti-formalism has had yet further harmful effects. One has been the regrettable division of labour between literary theorists working in self-conceived vanguard movements like post-structuralism or deconstruction and scholar-critics of a more traditional, often philological bent with a primary interest in prosody, metrics, stylistics, structuralist poetics, and genre-theory. (To be sure there are those, like Derek Attridge [1995; 2013], who refuse that division and pursue both projects with notable success.) Meanwhile a good deal of recent poetry—including, non-coincidentally, some of the work most favoured by university-based critics—continues to make a point, even a chief virtue, of its indifference to such presumptively obsolete concerns. Moreover one gets the impression that a main requirement for any poem appearing in some metropolitan literary journals is that it bear no formal marks of being a poem except those of having an unaligned right-hand margin and, very often, a looser grammatical (not to mention thematic and argumentative) structure than one expects of decent prose. It seems to me that this has often gone along with a sizeable and uncompensated loss of those manifold expressive, technical, and (not least) philosophical-reflective resources that are there to be had from rhyme and meter. Anti-formalism and pan-textualism can perhaps be seen as flipsides of the same post-Romantic coin, a coupling that I think has a lot to answer for in terms of current poetic and literary-critical practice.

Mallarmé ('A cast of dice . . . . ")

This is a poem about Mallarmé's symbolist poetics with an eye both to its formal innovations in verse-technique—his response to the 'crisis' he perceived as afflicting the classical tradition of French poetry—and to the themes of chance and necessity evoked most suggestively in *Un coup de dés*. Seeing no future in anything like the traditional rhyme-schemes and metrical forms which had entered that presumptive state of crisis Mallarmé set out to create a poetry of visual, spatial, and (perhaps) ultimately mystic-numerical import that would break with all such precedent. This would bring about the conditions for an epochal advance in the currently stalled unfolding of poetry's formal possibilities and expressive scope. Moreover it would show by such means how certain kinds of highly disciplined poetic creation—or certain modes of highly wrought analogical thought—might demonstrate (as promised in the poem's opening line) that 'a cast of dice will never abolish chance'.

My verse-essay makes its point *contre* Mallarmé by sticking resolutely to iambic pentameter (the national-cultural equivalent of the French alexandrine so despaired of by Mallarmé) and adopting a rhyme-scheme about as tight, 'classical' and (seemingly) restrictive as could well be conceived. However this is just my point: that if we want a perfect analogy for the paradox that Mallarmé obliquely propounds, that is, the idea of chance (and hence, he implies, of freedom or creative choice) as somehow re-emerging on the far side of necessity then we could hardly do better than

invoke the instances of poetic rhyme and metre. It is just such formal exigencies that may prompt the poet, even (or especially) when hard pressed, to all sorts of otherwise improbable discovery or invention. In which case, ironically enough, Mallarmé's theme in *Un coup de dés* might be said to find its most striking enactment or exemplification in just those features of the classical tradition whose obsolescence he so fervently proclaimed. At any rate such has been my experience during five years' work in the interstices of poetry-writing and poetics: that it is chiefly through those distinctive verse-attributes—their capacity to dislodge or side-track thought from its habitual linguistic-conceptual grooves—that poetry differs from prose. Or rather, since sweeping claims in that regard are always open to objection by counter-example: it is one chief line of defence for verse-essays like mine that their various turns of argument are carried, invigorated, sharpened, and sometimes sprung upon the rhyme-questing mind by the pressures and challenges of formal constraint.

My dear Degas, poems are not made out of ideas. They're made out of words.

The flesh is sorrowful, alas, and I have read all the books.

The work of pure poetry implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields the initiative to words.

Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book.

I, who am sterile and crepuscular ....

<div align="right">Stéphane Mallarmé</div>

It's still a toss-up (or so Mallarmé
   Would have us reckon) even though the dice,
Once cast, must surely come to rest this way

Or that and so relieve us in a trice
   Of any thought that randomness might play
Some role beyond that moment of precise

And punctual outcome. Yet the *coup de dés*,
   For him, entailed no such dehiscent slice
Through time's continuum since it *jamais*

N'abolira le hasard. If the price
   Of this was constellating the array
Of signifiers page-wide (a device

That neutered rhyme and rhythm) then he'd pay
   It happily since then we'd profit twice:
By liberating hazard from the sway

Of pitiless Ananke with her vice-
   Like grip, and breaking free of that *passé*
Verse-idiom whose methods to entice

A better class of reader now betray
   Their less than noble lineage. Suffice
It here for old-guard classicists to say

His revolution found no room for nice
   Prosodic points ('absente de tous bouquets',
These blooms) or fine-tuned strategies to splice

The even measure of a well-made line
   With such slight upsets to the steady beat
As might allow the odd alexandrine

To risk its dignity with some discreet
   Yet innovative shift to reassign
Stress-patterns over the adjacent feet

And tease the ear. No wonder they decline,
   Those prosodists, to contemplate retreat
From principles that let them thus combine

Verse-discipline with strategies that meet
   The challenge of Ananke through a fine
And subtly-judged refusal to deplete

Too much of their good stock and so enshrine
   Pound's 'make it new!' as just the cry to greet
Each *succès de scandale*. They intertwine,

These issues, with his master-plan to cheat
   Necessity as if on some cloud nine
Where words no sooner land than, *tout de suite*,

They self-configure into sibylline
    Star-patterns whose receding waves delete
All signals save from those white dwarves that shine

As witness to a universe whose heat-
    Death's imaged in their intricate design.
By such means only might his words secrete

The chemistry of that *explosante-fixe*,
    That finite though unbounded cosmos traced
By cancelling the metric troughs and peaks

Of old-style scansion so that their displaced
    Vocalic energies, through verse-techniques
More exigent in kind, not go to waste

But reconfigure in a form that seeks
    An end to all mere poetising based
On *voix humaine*. Here language never speaks

In modulated tones and accents graced
    By rhyme and metre, or more subtly sneaks
Its *entre-nous* back in to meet the taste

Of readers unimpressed by such critiques
    Since refuge-seekers in that even-paced
And sonorous verse-music that now reeks,

To modernists, of all that once disgraced
    The poetry of those—from ancient Greeks
To Hugo and beyond—who interlaced

Art-speech and common parlance. By such tweaks
    To that eurhythmic partnership they braced
The vocal nerve to furbish up antiques

Of prosody instead of such mad haste
    To free the page of any sound that freaks
The Mallarméans or offends the chaste

Since ear-decoupled gaze of those intent
   On coupling eye and intellect. The main
Idea behind this epochal event

(For such he deemed it) in the verse-domain
   Was to display how words might represent
The throw of dice by which Ananke's bane

Might yet be lifted or perchance relent
   So far that all the outcomes still remain
In play as if time's arrow underwent

A freeze-frame on its flight to ascertain
   Some further outcome, or as if the bent
Of natural necessity might strain

Against itself. Then think to what extent
   Effects of rhyme or metre both constrain
And liberate, or how they supplement

The work of thought in ways we can't explain
   Except by retrodicting what we meant
To say from what we said. Even so, this train

Of reasoning's sure to throw us off the scent
   Since no sign-constellation can ordain
It in the poet's gift to circumvent

The fact that their best efforts to sustain
   That saving power might better yet be spent
Musing how chance events in rhyme's domain

Are thought's best guide to freedom's continent.

Giverny

You'll understand, I'm sure, that I'm chasing the merest sliver of colour. It's my own fault. I want to grasp the intangible. It's terrible how the light runs out. Colour, any colour, lasts a second, sometimes 3 or 4 minutes at most.

Claude Monet

Monet is only an eye, but, good Lord, what an eye!

Paul Cézanne

The critic Florent Fels encountered … a proud, small old man, who dodged the obstacles in his path uncertainly. Behind the thick lenses of his spectacles, his eyes appeared enormous, like those of an insect searching for the last light.

Ross King, *Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies* (2016)

Four minutes at the most, and then they die.
  Years since I dreamed I'd get the colours right.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Nice of Cezanne to praise me up, but why
  Make something wondrous of an old man's plight?
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Ten minutes - more or less - and I'd get by
  On memory plus technique as best I might.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Photography is one new trick I try
  To conjure up their hues again despite
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Time was when those four minutes used to fly
  Yet hues would iridesce throughout their flight.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

My dear friend Clemenceau says I'll raise high
   The nation's cultural stock, but I take fright:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

I'd rather he just spare a passing sigh
   For all the hues now lost to vision's blight.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Giverny's my dream-world, yet a far cry
   From what that vision once strove to requite:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

The critics praise my lilies but apply
   Mere words that spell them out in black and white.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

The mind's its own place and disclaims what I
   Read in each change of hue, however slight:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Then there's the pigments shifting as they dry
   Through some strange interzone of day and night.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

That eye of mine sees colours go awry
   Through cataracts that further cloud my sight.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

I scarcely know where water ends and sky
   Begins, so it's sheer chaos I invite:
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

How splendid our precursors who defy
   The chaos by their colours clear and bright.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Some days there are when all that fake bonsai
   And other Japanese stuff seems just trite.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Georges says he'll fix it so the state will buy
   And house my lilies if I just sit tight.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

For what's the point of some cut-price Versailles
    If likeness isn't your ambition's height?
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

A torment to me, that I won't deny,
    Yet still I prize those flickerings of the light.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die;
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

The Reality of the Past: two views

Realism about the past entails that there are numerous true propositions forever in principle unknowable. The effects of a past event may simply dissipate …. To the realist, this is just part of the human condition; the anti-realist feels unknowability in principle to be simply intolerable and prefers to view our evidence for and memory of the past as constitutive of it.

Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (1991)

Her only thought: 'This ends it, leaves no shred
    Of it behind, our life before
His going. "Nothing's changed by this", he said,
    "No part of it, of my and your
Past lives, but think instead
    There's all the more,
Even as we look ahead,
    To look back on and so restore
To life's bright pattern the unbroken thread
    Of how things were." His letter tore
That pattern into pieces as I read.'

His only thought: 'I hear it, hear the pain
   And grief in those last words, though she
Can't cancel out the good things that remain
   From back then, all the years that we,
I know, can't live again
   Yet still must be
Real-time since they contain
   Shared reference-points that she'll agree
Stand firm. But suchlike memory-talk's in vain:
   "You've wiped all trace of you-and-me",
She says, "and left no good link in the chain".'

Our only thought: how then to judge this pair
   Of shell-shocked young survivors whose
Time-warped perceptions of the past they share
   Suggest the other they accuse
Is not the one whom they're
   So loth to lose
And who thus has to bear
   Whatever sharp reproach they choose
To level, but themselves for taking care
   That time befriend them and refuse
All quarter to their partner in despair.

For it's our case that's dress-rehearsed when they
   Pursue this vain attempt to show
Either (for her) that nothing could defray
   The cost in lives annulled since no
Truth-reckoning lets us say
   How much might go
The evanescent way
   Of all those years, or else (for so
He thinks of it) that everything should stay
   Just as it was in each *tableau*
Vivant that he'll remember come what may.

And yet, you know, their differend doesn't quite
   Fit our case, us survivors less
Concerned to get the time-conundrum right,
   His way or hers, or second-guess
How far that answer might
   Ease her distress
Since now there'd come to light
   No further memories to oppress
Her past-unburdened soul, or else invite
   His glad assent since bound to bless
Remembrance with a direct line of sight.

Let's say the issue's not, for us, the sort
   To stir such passions as appear
In his attempt to hold the time-line taut
   As truth requires and hers to shear
A link that's lately brought
   No souvenir
Unless to stir new thought
   Of love as Plato's sundered sphere
With corresponding halves that truly ought
   To mate yet never will. Though we're
Stray hemispheres the thing's not quite so fraught.

I mean, we've come out somewhere on the far
   Side of those wandering orbits, yet
Perhaps (please help me here) still are,
   Years on, not quite prepared to let
The question go or bar
   All cause to fret
When crossed ellipses jar
   On us who thought we'd paid our debt
To time and truth. Now perturbations mar
   The steady state we hoped we'd get
To know as truth timed out each au revoir.

Structuralism and Its Discontents

The mind cannot remain at rest in a mere repertorization of its own recurrent aberrations; it is bound to systematize its own negative self-insight into categories that have at least the appearance of passion, novelty, and difference.

Paul de Man, 'Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism' (1990)

Neat theory, but I doubt it fits our case.
Granted, all signifiers slip and slide,
Yet bygone signifieds still leave their trace.

The gap between might be just empty space
With nothing meant since meaning's open wide.
Neat theory, but I doubt it fits our case.

If breaking up seems easier to face
When past intent affords no future guide,
Those bygone signifieds still leave their trace.

Splendid idea for structuralists to base
Their doctrine on, though here it's misapplied:
Neat theory, but I doubt it fits our case.

Too much gets lost in synchrony's embrace
As it canutes all thought of time and tide
While bygone signifieds still leave their trace.

'If signs make sense,' they say, 'then it's by grace
Of signifiers, not things signified.'
Neat theory, but I doubt it fits our case.

And if they say such doubts are out of place
Since theorists have the whole thing cut-and-dried,
Then bygone signifieds still leave their trace.

Behold those structures crumbling apace.
Time-lapse affirms what synchrony denied.
Neat theory, but I doubt it fits our case.

Lacanians think the signifier-chase
Goes on and on, but that idea's belied
When bygone signifieds still leave their trace.

For we're the sorts who need to interlace
Times past and present lest they subdivide
And that neat theory retrofits our case
So bygone signifieds can leave no trace.

Doors and Pictures: Wittgenstein

This poem about the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has its generative source, as regards both topic and rhyme-scheme, in the two words 'say' and 'show'. Wittgenstein's early philosophy—as likewise, in a different way, his later thought—turned crucially on that contrast whether pushed in a linguistic, metaphysical, ethical, or quasi-mystical direction. My poem reflects on the multiple ironies of his life and work, among them the fact that, so far from 'giving philosophy peace' by getting philosophers to drop all those futile since merely abstract disputes, his writings managed to spawn an academic cult and a full-scale industry of Wittgenstein scholarship and exegesis. It is constructed around that resonant pair of rhyme-sounds (say/show), which of course runs the risk of becoming a protracted and rather tedious technical *tour de force*. However the poem is redeemed, I hope, by conveying a sense of how Wittgenstein deployed his own intellectual and temperamental traits—austere, rigorous, obsessive-compulsive, self-disciplined to the point of self-torment—in some highly creative and idiosyncratic (if philosophically bewilderment-inducing) ways.

It is, I should say, a very far from reverential piece which aims to puncture a few of the pomposities that currently surround his work and have allowed some very dodgy or questionable arguments to gain widespread currency. On the other hand it does try to honour what is impressive—even in an odd way exemplary—about Wittgenstein's facing up to his private demons and managing to keep them from doing more in the way of harm to others. Still one can't help wishing that he'd given them a bit less grief and that the Wittgenstein commentariat hadn't so often emulated the worst aspects of his character in their dealing with others and amongst themselves.

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

<div align="right">Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations</div>

A man will be imprisoned in a room with a door that's unlocked and opens inwards; as long as it does not occur to him to pull rather than push it.

<div align="right">Wittgenstein, Culture and Value</div>

I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition.

<div align="right">Culture and Value</div>

He had this thing about what you could say
   And what you couldn't say but only show.
To make that point, he thought, the only way
   Was to push 'say' as far as it would go.
With that in mind he'd put up an array
   Of reasonings *more geometrico*,
Along with a meticulous display
   Of numbered parts that made it seem as though
The thing was too well-built to go astray.
   This would ensure that those chaps in the know,
Bertie and his lot, had their role to play
   As dupes in Ludwig's stratagem to blow
A T-shaped hole in everything that they,
   Like his Tractarian double, took as so
Self-evident as strictly to convey
   No more than syllogistic might bestow
By way of sense or content. Yet dismay
   Set in when those same chaps proved far too slow
To take his point, or eager to essay
   Some risk-containment exercise that no
Depth-rumblings might disturb. This helped allay
   Their nagging sense that he'd contrived to stow
Something in his oblique communiqué
   That threatened to upset the status quo
Of language, truth, and logic. Anyway
   They picked it up, the cryptic undertow
In this strange work of Russell's protégé,
   But made sure it was kept so far below

Deck in the first translation as to stay
   Disarmed of any spanners it might throw
Into the works. For there they'd ricochet
   And cause no end of philosophic woe
To Russell and those heralds of the day
   When mystics would repay the debt they owe
To logic. Then they'd see fit to obey
   Such rational demands as bid them toe
No line where superstition's apt to prey
   On trust or faith says reason should forego
Its privilege. Keep saintliness at bay,
   His colleagues thought, lest worldly wit lie low
In deference to it and extend the sway
   Over weak minds of any holy joe
With some new crack-brained gospel to purvey,
   Or any US-style politico
With God on board. That stuff was now *passé*,
   So Russell thought, that Sunday-School tableau
Got up with all the faux-naiveté
   By which the firm of Jesus Christ & Co
Had managed so adroitly to portray
   Their potentate as power's most powerful foe.
 Yet this ignored Saint Ludwig's *dieu caché*,
   His hidden god (think Pascal, think Godot),
Whose failure to arrive as promised may,
   To souls elect, reveal the vapid flow
Of saying's intellectual cabaret
   Struck dumb. Thus having nothing *à propos*
To say—and falling silent—might defray
   The cost of all those endless to-and-fro
Discussions spawned, he thought, by the decay
   Of what once found expression (think Rousseau)
In sentiments that showing might relay
   Once all the saying's done. On this plateau
The tribe of *bons sauvages* join Mallarmé
   In savouring only fragances that blow
From flowers that have their place in no bouquet,
   Or hues that vanish in the gaslight glow
Of rainbows shadowed by the grey-on-grey
   That passes muster in the Savile Row
Of logic-suited thought. The first rule: pay
   No heed to anything we cannot sew,

Us stitchers-up, to standards checked OK
   For sticking to the proper ratio
Of words to thoughts and things lest words outweigh
   Truth's currency and thinking undergo
Such figural bewitchments as betray
   Its old malaise. His message: we should grow
Alert when language 'went on holiday'
   Since here it often held in embryo
All the misshapen progeny that lay
   Athwart the path to thinking's *vrai niveau*
Of common speech. Such were those *recherché*
   Linguistic idioms that he thought *de trop*
Since parasitic on the DNA
   Of communal accord, or the escrow
That underwrote our forms of everyday
   Folk-usage. This he showed us, *modulo*
The need for umpteen exegetes to say
   Just what it was his words were meant to show,
As witness the shelf-bending dossier
   Of monographs and endless *de nouveau*
Renditions of old themes whose overstay
   He'd hoped his *Tractatus* would long ago
Have laid to rest. Last irony: that they,
   His acolytes, should be the ones whom no
Strict rule, like his, against such making hay
   With words and concepts could persuade to throw
The habit off despite its threat to fray
   The bonds of communal accord and so
Permit such verbal licence (aka
   Delinquency) to twist the quid pro quo
That constitutes a true *communauté*
   De langue et vie. His tragedy: to know,
If dimly, that he'd pointed them the way
   And sounded the linguistic tallyho
That led his followers to a disarray
   Of language-games as likely to kayo
That prospect as the mutants on display
   In some linguistic isle where Doc Moreau
Spliced metaphors like genes. And so, *malgré*
   His dearest wish, this anti-Prospero
Saw monstrous life-forms bred out of Roget
   By language-games from his own portmanteau.

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Sources for epigraphs: "Mallarmé ('A cast of dice . . . . ')": 'My dear Degas...' from Valéry 1960; 'The flesh is sorrowful, alas!...' from 'Brise Marine' (1887), in Lloyd 1999, 70; 'The work of pure poetry...' from 'Crise de Vers' (1895), in Lloyd 1999, 55; 'Everything in the world exists...' from Mallarmé 1945, 37; 'I who am sterile...' from letter to Henri Kazalis (1865), in Lloyd 1999, 48. "Giverny": all epigraphs from King 2016. "The Reality of the Past: two views": 'Realism about the past...' from Dummet 1991, 7. "Structuralism and Its Discontents": 'The mind cannot remain at rest...' from de Man 1990, 185. "Doors and Pictures: Wittgenstein": 'A picture held us captive...' from Wittgenstein 1954, §115; 'A man can be imprisoned in a room...' from Wittgenstein 1980, 42e; 'I think I summed up my attitude...' from Wittgenstein, 1980, 24e.

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Biography

Christopher Norris is Distinguished Research Professor in Philosophy at the University of Cardiff, Wales. He has written more than thirty books on aspects of philosophy and literary theory, among them (most recently) *Re-Thinking the Cogito: naturalism, reason and the venture of thought*; *Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative*; and *Philosophy Outside-In: a critique of academic reason*. His volume of verse-essays *The Cardinal's Dog and Other Poems* appeared in 2013 and two further collections, *For the Tempus-Fugitives* (Sussex Academic Press) and *The Winnowing Fan* (Bloomsbury), will be published later this year.