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Critical Rhythm

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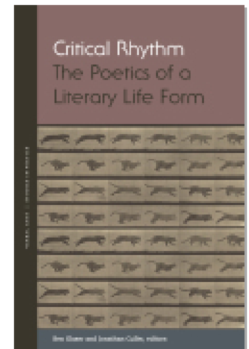

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Constructing Walt Whitman: Literary History and Histories of Rhythm

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Whitman studies in the twentieth century have shown us the truth of Whitman's declaration, "I am large, I contain multitudes." There is a Whitman for every artistic and social need: the aesthetic Whitman liberates poetry from the shackles of its past; the queer Whitman challenges heteronormative structures; the historic Whitman registers the rapid technological and media shifts of modernity; the political Whitman shows us the promise of liberal selfhood. There are British, Spanish, German, Brazilian, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, Swedish, and Russian Whitmans, as Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom show in *Whitman and the World*, each of which responds to distinct cultural trends and historical events. Whitman's varied legacies can make it seem as if "Whitman is mere *bathybius*; . . . literature in the condition of protoplasm—an intellectual organism so simple that it takes the instant impression of whatever mood approaches it," as the British critic Edmund Gosse half-seriously proposed in 1896.[1] Contemporary critics have been attentive to the constructed nature of these various Whitmans, particularly following the publication of the seminal essay collection *Breaking Bounds* in 1996, which was intended to direct critical focus to "the performative and staged dimensions of the figure 'Walt Whitman' and the constructedness of his reputation."[2] And yet, there is one Whitman who critics continue to accept as a natural fact: Whitman the father of free verse, who liberated American poetry from the confines of "traditional" poetry. This figure has been so fully naturalized that even the critics who are most attuned to Whitman's shifting place in history are still unable to recognize that the alignment of Whitman with free verse happened at a particular historical

moment. David Reynolds, for instance, whose carefully historicized work is otherwise sensitive to Whitman's protean reputation, states as fact that, as the "father of free verse," Whitman "changed the course of poetry" by "liberat[ing] poetry from rhyme and meter, opening it up to the flexible rhythms of feeling and voice."[3] Even Betsy Erkkila, the editor of *Breaking Bounds*, literalizes this figure by explaining that Whitman "broke away from the form and content of traditional verse" to found a new tradition of poetic rhythm.[4] To be sure, Whitman's own writings seem to authorize this vision of Whitman as the father of a new poetic form; as he put it in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the American poet's job was to "[see] the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms."[5] But to claim that Whitman's new form was free verse is to take for granted that we know what free verse was and is, and, in the process, to simplify a complex history of debates about poetic rhythm. Whitman's poetry was not called "free verse" with any regularity until the 1920s, and even then, arguments about the nature of free verse abounded. American scholars in the 1910s and 20s hotly contested the formal identity of Whitman's writing, turning to scientific studies of linguistic rhythm to solve the problem of free verse once and for all. In what follows, I argue that Whitman's position in literary history as the father of free verse began to be constructed in this critical moment, and that this construction was a much more complicated and contentious process than has been realized. Focusing primarily on the critical work of Fred Newton Scott, Amy Lowell, and Mary Austin, I show that these arguments about Whitman's rhythm were motivated by concerns about constructing an American identity. As the second great wave of immigration increased the diversity of the American population and stimulated anxiety about the country's ability to absorb multiple immigrant bodies into a coherent national body, debates about Whitman's rhythms became debates about an imagined American race. In the process, these debates produced key ideas about the nature of free verse and modern poetry that continue to circulate in the academy today in deracinated, decontextualized forms. This significant moment in the country's "absorption" of Whitman as a generative figure thus provides a particularly rich site for rethinking the relationship between poetic rhythms, national ideologies, and literary history.

Scott, Lowell, and Austin may seem like minor figures in the development of free verse in America, but their work represents a dominant strain of poetic thought in the early modernist era—a strain of thought that tells a much different story about the emergence and reception of free verse than the familiar narrative of metrical constraint and liberation.

The study of poetry in the American academy during this time was largely concerned with a theory of generic evolution that grew out of nineteenth-century ballad scholarship. According to this theory, poetry had begun at the dawn of civilization as a heavily rhythmical, embodied, communal practice, and had evolved into an abstract, print-mediated, individualized experience. Nineteenth-century ballad discourse imagined pre-literate, pre-capitalist cultures to possess an authenticity and a unity that had been fragmented by the fall into mechanized print. In this schema, highly rhythmical oral poetry was the basis of genuine national literary traditions and a reflection of unified folk cultures; as Susan Stewart argues, ballad scholars believed that oral ballads provided "a legitimating point of origin for all consequent national literature" and culture.[6] This theory of the communal origins of poetry was reanimated and modified by early twentieth-century scholars, who saw free verse as an attempted return to the immediacy and organicism of the earliest poetry and as the true beginning of an American literary tradition. It is often acknowledged that the "balladic fantasy about a singular folk" was particularly powerful in the postbellum United States, as Michael Cohen has shown,[7] but it is less often noticed how integral this fantasy was to the construction of Walt Whitman as the fountainhead of American free verse. Indeed, Whitman's current place in literary history has been understood as a function of the institutionalization of the New Criticism rather than as an ongoing negotiation of the imagined relationship between rhythm, literary form, and national identity. Scott MacPhail, for instance, argues that the "lyric-nationalist readings of Whitman"[8] as the fountainhead of American poetry stem from the simultaneous emergence of the New Criticism and American studies in the mid-twentieth-century American academy.[9] MacPhail's analysis highlights how the New Critical ideal of the lyric as the genre that transcends history and ideology, when applied to Whitman's poetry, helped to "[serve] the ideological needs of [mid-century] state structures of power" by providing a seemingly rational, coherent articulation of American nationalism.[10] But an exclusive focus on this era's construction of Whitman misses the many other times that Whitman—and, more specifically, Whitman's rhythms—became a useful figure for the propagation of narratives of national progress.

By arguing that Whitman's poetry was not always understood as free verse, and that free verse is an unstable, changeable category rather than an empirical literary form, I hope to emphasize the imaginary, constructed nature of poetic rhythm itself. This is precisely the radical and unsettling understanding of meter that many scholars of Victorian poetry have been advancing in recent years; studies of American poetry from the same era,

however, have been slow to integrate the insights of this work.[11] Many scholars of Victorian poetry take for granted that there is no unified system of "conventional" English meter, and that prosody names, not "an aesthetic category . . . distinct from the political or cultural sphere," but rather any number of contradictory "way[s] of thinking" about "gender, class, and national structures."[12] Scholars such as Isobel Armstrong, Jason David Hall, Matthew Reynolds, Meredith Martin, and Yopie Prins have investigated how definitions of meter, rhythm, prosody, and versification shifted throughout the nineteenth century, and how these fields were imagined as forces that could construct and support ideal forms of English national identity. This work shows that, although accentual-syllabic systems of scansion, based on the foot as the most fundamental metrical unit, have come to seem like both the natural way to approach the formal study of English-language poetry and the natural foil to more organic free verse forms, such systems only achieved hegemony in the twentieth century. The complicated, multivalent history of prosodic debate this scholarship illuminates shows that there was no singular metrical tradition from which free versifiers could break away until they helped to invent it; as Gertrude Stein quipped, "there is nothing to cut loose from . . . know this when there is no more to tell about what prose and poetry has been."[13] Building on this scholarship, I track changes in Whitman's reputation as a rhythmical innovator not to find the answer to the question of how to understand his rhythm, but rather to understand why certain approaches to the study of his rhythm became appealing at a particular historical moment. If, as Martin argues in *The Rise and Fall of Meter*, meter is never "merely the measure of the line," but always also "operates as a powerful discourse that interacts with and influences discourses about national culture,"[14] recovering early critical arguments about Whitman's metrical forms can help to illuminate just how imbricated rhythmic and nationalistic discourses have been in American poetics, suggesting the importance of attending to the politics as well as the aesthetics of prosody.

Fred Newton Scott's Whitman: Rhythm as National Symbol

Whitman simply proclaimed that he had created a new form of national poetry, but many scholars in the early twentieth-century American academy believed that their investigations into the origins of poetic rhythm had finally proved that this was so. Fred Newton Scott became one of the first academics to argue that Whitman had successfully created an entirely new, and entirely American, verse form when he published "A Note on Walt Whitman's Prosody" in *The Journal of English and*

Germanic Philology in 1908. Scott was a hugely influential figure in English studies in the early 1900s. He served as president of the Modern Language Association in 1907, founded the department of rhetoric at the University of Michigan, co-founded the National Council of Teachers of English and the Linguistic Society of America, and authored an impressive number of textbooks, critical studies, and scholarly articles, including the widely used *Introduction to the Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism*. Scott was particularly interested in the problem of differentiating the rhythms of poetry from the rhythms of prose, and his work in this area led him to believe that he had discovered the solution to the problem of Whitman's irregular form (though, importantly, he did not call that form free verse).

Scott's reconceptualization of Whitman grew out of his engagement with an unlikely pair of theorists: Francis Barton Gummere (whose career Virginia Jackson outlines elsewhere in this volume) and John Stuart Mill. As Jackson's essay shows, Scott's pairing of Gummere and Mill was truly strange, since Gummere fought a losing intellectual battle against Mill throughout his long career. Gummere strenuously objected to Mill's definition of poetry as "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude" because such a definition failed to account for the vital social functions of poetic rhythm. Mill's assertion that to "[confound] poetry with metrical composition" was "vulgar"[15] seemed to Gummere to be a catastrophic error; if cultural identity was an effect of poetic rhythm, as Gummere believed it to be, then uncoupling rhythm from poetry would fragment a once-coherent nation. Scott had no trouble combining aspects of these oppositional theories, however, because he believed that poetry was a unified, coherent genre, and that academic investigators could discover the "primal causes" and universal principles that governed its evolution.[16] He believed that Gummere was correct in arguing that poetry had begun as a social practice grounded in rhythm, but that it had evolved into an individualistic art form with little connection to early communal rhythms, meaning that Mill's definition was an accurate description of modern poetry. In eliding the distance between Gummere and Mill, Scott ignored the fissures and pressure points in prosodic discourse, thereby contributing to the growing sense that there was one "right" way to read poetry rather than multiple ways to approach different genres and metrical forms.

Scott's version of "right" reading is, curiously, both an artifact of turn-of-the-century evolutionary science as well as a source of many influential ideas about the organic rhythms of modern poetry. Scott accepted Gummere's theory of poetic evolution along with Mill's famous distinc-

tion between eloquence and poetry, and he posited that this distinction held the key to finding the fundamental difference between the rhythms of prose and the rhythms of poetry. Scott explained that speakers who wanted to communicate information were more attuned to the social function of poetry, since they had to factor in the response of their audience. He argued that the back-and-forth of communication led to "a swaying, fluctuating movement of a seemingly irregular kind."[17] Speakers who wanted to express emotion, on the other hand, had only to account for their own feelings, and so tended to produce "a fairly regular series [of sounds] subject to changes in tempo and pitch corresponding to the successive moods of the speaker."[18] If written prose and poetry had developed as modes of communication and expression, respectively, as Scott believed both Mill's and Gummere's theories proved, then it stood to reason that the rhythms of prose would be made up of long non-repeating units, based on the back-and-forth movement of communicative speech, while those of poetry would be made up of short recurring units based on the more regular movement of individualistic expressive speech. In premodern poetry, Scott explained, the short units of poetic rhythm corresponded to the stamping feet and clapping hands of the throng described by Gummere. In modern poetry, the units of rhythm were derived from the "physiolog[y] and psycholog[y]" of individual bodies.[19] To Scott, this theory seemed to prove that the most fundamental units of English-language poetry were not syllabic units (iambs, dactyls, anapests, etc.), as many prosodists believed, but rather temporal units derived from the rhythms of the human body. Syllabic units could be rightly understood as abstractions imposed upon those basic bodily rhythms—abstractions that could easily distract poets and their audiences from what he saw as the real rhythms of poetry, which were the rhythms of the body in motion.

Scott's attempt to substitute temporal units for syllabic units had many precedents in the nineteenth century—most famously, in E. S. Dallas' 1852 assertion that meter was simply "time heard" and in Coventry Patmore's 1857 elaboration that meter was made up of "'isochronous intervals,' or units of time."[20] These temporal units were so often tied to the rhythms of the body that, as Jason Rudy argues, "the history of Victorian poetry is in no small part a history of the human body."[21] If Scott was aware of this rich prosodic history, however, he did not let on. He presented his theory as an entirely new discovery that was only possible thanks to advances in modern science. He appealed to his own amateur experiments and to popular evolutionary theories to justify his approach to rhythm, which helped to give his prosodic theory the appearance of a disinterested, scientific discovery. He presented "data" drawn from his encounters with

animals to prove that his rhythmical laws held for all vocalizing animals, explaining that, when he managed to overhear the songs of birds and the cries of cats without their noticing (meaning they had no audience and were only attempting to express themselves to themselves, to paraphrase Mill), their vocalizations came "in a rhythmical (one might almost say a metrical) series," but that, once his subjects noticed his presence and realized they had an audience, their cries became "harsh, strident," and "less regular," echoing the irregular rhythms of prose communication. He noted that his anecdotes about mewling cats and chirping birds opened him to "smiles and gibes," but he remained confident that "the researches of Darwin, Groos, and others concerning the genesis of expressive signs" proved the validity of such evidence.[22] To Scott, it was clear that his observations, combined with other studies in evolutionary science, plainly showed that the same set of rhythmical laws governed all languages, from the non-human to the primitive to the modern, and that his generation of theorists was the first to have discovered this fact. In Scott's account, poetic rhythm was an empirical, verifiable phenomenon, and classical prosodic terminology obscured this fact.

Scott argued that the discovery of these universal rhythmical rules meant that the answer to the question of how to interpret Whitman's idiosyncratic cadences was finally at hand. He posited that Whitman's unusual long lines were the result of a blending of the wave-like rhythms of prose (which he called "motation") and the steadier rhythms of poetry (which he called "nutation"). According to Scott, Whitman's natural "delight in large *free* movements and rushes of sound made him impatient of the *short* units, the quickly recurring beats, of the nutative rhythm. He wished to embody in his verse the largo of nature," and so he "sought to make [these natural sounds and movements] the very foundation of his prosody, the regulative principle of his rhythm."[23] Whitman had asserted that his poems were the best expression of democratic freedom, but Scott found scientific proof that Whitman's poetry was indeed more "large" and "free" than the "short," cramped, and stifling movements of "regular" meter. Scott thus helped to naturalize the opposition between "traditional" foot-based systems of prosody and more organic forms of meter.

At the same time, Scott's theory was able to locate the genesis of this new metrical freedom in the language of the American people. He explained that Whitman's hypersensitivity to the unique beauty of American speech helped him to see that he had to create an entirely new idiom in order to adequately express its "peculiar genius," and that it was his ear for "the pitch-glides and speech-tunes" of prose that allowed him to develop his new, hybrid poetic form.[24] In revaluing American speech as

a tool of literary innovation, Scott's theory responded to a strain of British criticism that viewed Whitman's prosodic originality as an unfortunate effect of his insufficient metrical education. According to this view, Whitman was simply not educated enough to know that there were already metrical forms suitable for the expression of his ideas. Percy Smythe, 8th Viscount Strangford, put forth this argument most bitingly in 1866. In a satire couched as a defense, Smythe explained that Whitman had "somehow managed to acquire or imbue himself with not only the spirit but with the veriest mannerism, the most absolute trick and accent, of Persian poetry." Smythe argued that Whitman's uneducated state led him to translate this spirit into an undisciplined "yawp," but if he had had the good luck to attend an English preparatory school, and if "Persian verse-making had been part of the Haileybury course, after the manner of Latin alcaics and hexameters in an English public school," then Whitman might have been another Edward FitzGerald, translating mystical Eastern poetry into proper English forms.[25] Smythe's offhand references to specific Latin (and, elsewhere in the piece, Persian) meters are meant to give a sense of exactly how little metrical knowledge Whitman possessed. Not only did poets in the nineteenth century have access to countless English meters; the metrical traditions of all of the languages of the world were increasingly being translated and adapted for use by English-language poets. In ignoring these possibilities, Whitman proved his status as an uncultured American who could only "yawp" irregularly. It was clear to nineteenth-century critics like Smythe that Whitman was foregoing a world of metrical possibilities, and that his refusal of the metrical past required either condemnation or an explanation.

Whitman's defenders in the 1880s and 90s did little to justify his metrical project; they tended to assert that Whitman was an important innovator and defender of democracy without providing proof of their own, simply quoting Whitman's poetry in the belief that it spoke for itself.[26] It was not until Scott and other scholars of American literature set out to prove that their objects of study formed a coherent national literary tradition that critics began to attempt to explain and categorize Whitman's metrical innovations in a systematic way. Scott's account of Whitman's speech-based rhythms seemed to provide particularly compelling evidence that American poetry had finally become an organic expression of a unified national culture rather than an imitation of British poetry. As such, the poetic tradition that Whitman inaugurated could help to maintain the unity of the nation, creating a feedback loop between national identity and its literary expression. In Scott's opinion, as in Gummere's,

social and artistic institutions were intimately linked. He argued that poetry and government were ruled by the same principles, explaining that,

> the relation between art and nature is like that between a people and its government . . . The people can become free and remain free, only by submission to restraint. They can preserve their coherence, their communal individuality, their organic life and opportunity for unlimited expansion of that life, only as these things incessantly find expression in traditional, law-observing, law-embodying institutions.[27]

Prior to Whitman, no American poet had been able to devise a poetic law that could give expression to the American people's unique "organic life," and so American literature had failed to successfully cohere as a national tradition. The realization that Whitman had been creating within the bounds of rhythmic law rather than simply "yawping" without a sense of poetic rules meant that he could take his rightful place as the fountainhead of a modern American literary tradition, and that scholars of American poetry could finally prove that their discipline was a vital area of research.

Though Scott followed Gummere in arguing that a nation's literature and its identity were inseparable, his sense of the relationship between poetic rhythm and identity was slightly different. Gummere believed that national identity was an effect of rhythm, but Scott understood rhythm to be a figure for the functioning of a nation. If Scott's conflation of prosody and social relations was less absolute, it was no less powerful, for Whitman's prosody as a figure for the body politic provided a model for reconciling the potential chaos and heterogeneity of a truly democratic society with the supposed lack of freedom in any other social system. Scott put forth this model in parable form, explaining, "when I read Whitman's poetry in light of [the] conception" of Whitman's prosody as an interweaving of the long, irregularly recurring rhythms of prose and the short, repeating rhythms of poetry,

> a fantastic myth passes through my mind. I seem to see in Whitman some giant-limbed old heathen god who has descended to the earth fain to take part in the dance of mortals. He begins by practicing the waltz, but soon tires of the mincing steps and quick gyrations. He wants a larger, freer movement. He then tries marching and running and leaping, only to find that what his soul hungers for is the undulating movement of the waltz. So, devising a kind of colossal minuet, with woven paces and with waving arms, he moves through it with a grandiose, galumphing majesty peculiar to himself, fling-

> ing his great limbs all abroad and shedding ambrosia from his flying locks, yet with all his abandon keeping time to the music, and in all the seeming waywardness of his saltations preserving the law and pattern of the dance.[28]

Scott advanced this parable of Whitman the dancer god as the foundational myth that America had been searching for since its colonial days. The motative movement of prose, with its potentially lawless irregularity, stands in for the heterogeneous individuals that make up the American people. These fractious individuals are brought under control by the regular, lawful nutative steps that allow bodies to move together in "the rhythm of consent" that Gummere had theorized, thereby becoming a unified people. For Scott, the "discovery" of Whitman's prosody was also the discovery of the first American throng. By finding their rhythm, he believed, the American people had found a way to overcome the social divisions and pressures that always threatened a democratic society. The "waywardness" and "abandon" of willful individual subjects would be harmonized in the pattern of the "colossal minuet" that was *Leaves of Grass*. For Scott, Whitman was useful not so much as the familiar figure of metrical revolution—the Whitman who liberated the line and "broke new wood" for Ezra Pound—as the figure of metrical reconciliation—the benevolent dancing giant who would bring his national community together.

Alternatives to Whitman: Rhythm as "Racial Fact"

Scott believed that the question of Whitman's rhythm and his consequent place in literary history was a settled affair. But for the majority of critics in the 1910s, the issue was far from resolved. According to prominent critics including Amy Lowell and William Morrison Patterson, a professor of English at Columbia University who researched how speech rhythms influenced poetic forms, the same scientific investigations into rhythm that proved to Scott that Whitman had invented a new and uniquely American verse form instead showed that he had failed to go far enough in his formal experimentation. Like Scott, Lowell and Patterson, who worked together to investigate poetic rhythm, believed that speech rhythms were the physical basis for the rhythmic patterns of both poetry and prose. But unlike Scott, they argued that Whitman had simply brought together the distinctive rhythmic curves of the communicative and expressive speech of the American people without adequately synthesizing them into a coherent poetic form. In her 1914 article "*Vers Libre*

and Metrical Prose," published in *Poetry* magazine, Lowell explained that a misunderstanding of the nature of English meter was causing critics to overvalue Whitman's work and to overlook the truly groundbreaking prosodical experiments being carried out by contemporary poets. This was clearly a self-interested claim on Lowell's part, but her understanding of English prosody was shared by many of her contemporaries, as we will see. Lowell explained that Whitman had not invented a new poetic rhythm, but had rather stumbled into what she called "metrical prose."[29] She argued that *vers libre* had, confusingly, become a catch-all term for innovative poetry, which obscured the significant differences between French and English versification, as well as the notable divergences between different types of modern experimental poetry. In French poetry, Lowell argued, with its "firm and inelastic rules," it was "difficult . . . to escape monotony," and so French *vers librists* had rightly rebelled against the constraints of traditional meter.[30] English prosody, on the other hand, was "so much freer, and permits of so much more change," that translating the rhythms of *vers libre* into English was almost impossible.[31] According to Lowell, most poets who attempted this feat—including Whitman—ended up producing "metrical prose" rather than free verse. Sounding much like Scott, Lowell argued that the rhythms of speech, which were the basis of all poetic rhythms, formed a spectrum, from the long "wave lengths" of prose to the short, repeating "curves" of poetry, and that Whitman's rhythmical "wave lengths" showed that his most experimental passages were prose rather than poetry. The curves of Whitman's lines were "very long," but with a clear "return," which stood in marked contrast to the curves of *vers libre*, which were "much shorter" with an "excessively marked" return.[32] Lowell believed that the difference between the wave lengths of prose and the curves of poetry was absolute, and that mapping these rhythmical patterns could show beyond a shadow of a doubt whether a piece of writing was prose or poetry. Whitman's writing contained too many prose "wave lengths" to be classified as poetic, according to Lowell. If much of his poetry was not even poetry, but rather metrical prose, then he was clearly an unsuitable father figure for an American tradition, in spite of Scott's protestations to the contrary.[33]

Lowell believed that her hypothesis was verified in 1916, when she collaborated on a series of experiments with Patterson in his lab at Columbia University. Lowell read poems aloud into a state-of-the-art "sound-photographing machine" that "measure[d] the time-intervals" between her vocalizations.[34] Patterson and Lowell interpreted the results of these experiments somewhat differently (Patterson believed that the rhythms of *vers libre* could be translated into English; Lowell did not), but they

agreed that they proved that Whitman was not the metrical innovator Scott believed him to be. Patterson explained that Whitman's poems were "mosaics," which he defined as a genre in which "the several kinds of verse and prose . . . alternate successively," creating an unsynthesized blend of multiple types of rhythmic curves. Not only did Whitman's writing rely too heavily on unmodified prose rhythms to be considered poetic; the poetic rhythms he did incorporate "drop[ped] into rather futile regularity" too often to truly break free from the constraints of "traditional" meter.[35] By placing the rhythms of prose and poetry side by side without fusing them, Whitman had pointed to the limits of, but had not transcended or transmuted, poetic form.[36] And if Whitman had been unable to synthesize the diverse American speech rhythms that Lowell and Patterson, like Scott, believed he had taken as his starting point, then his poetry would certainly not be able to accurately represent and reflect a coherent national character.

In his influential 1915 polemic *America's Coming-of-Age*, Van Wyck Brooks supported the idea that Whitman's rhythmic experiments had failed, though he posited a more complicated reason for Whitman's failure. It was not that his prosody was too free and unsystematic to constitute a national rhythm; rather, Whitman could not have represented the American character in the form of his poetry because that character did not yet exist. Brooks explained that America in the 1850s and 60s—like America in the 1910s—was a collection of "chaotic raw materials," and until the unassimilated immigrant groups that made up the population had been turned into a distinct American "race," no poet could create the representative form capable of founding a native tradition. Whitman had done all he could by diagnosing the problem with American poetry, which was that it was the product of a derivative, "genteel" culture that promoted the outmoded ideals of European romanticism.[37] Until "the American character" had been "determined . . . as a racial fact," no poet could do anything more.[38] For Brooks, the very condition of an American literary tradition was its perpetual deferral; if the American people needed a representative poet to show them their character, and if such a poet needed to have a coherent racial type to represent in his poetry, then American poetry was defined by its continual striving for an ideal that could only ever be imagined. Brooks' account turned American poetry into a utopian horizon rather than a discrete body of literature, helping to institutionalize the longstanding idea that American poetry could only cohere once an American identity had been located.[39]

For their part, Lowell and Patterson, like Scott and Gummere, saw the relationship between poetic form and national identity as a reciprocal

one, in which poetic rhythms could help American readers to discover something like the American racial identity that Brooks saw as a moving target. Patterson argued that the free verse experiments of Imagist poets were a return to the "ancestral cadence" of the earliest English throngs who had chanted and danced their poetry, and as such they offered a powerful vision of rhythmic community that was illustrative for America as a nation of diverse immigrants.[40] Lowell concurred, arguing that it was the abstraction of meter as marks on a silent, printed page that had deafened modern readers to the "exceedingly subtle rhythmic effects" that early humans naturally felt in their bodies; consequently, rag-time, as an "instinct in the Negro race, a memory of the Congo," was more rhythmically complex than most popular newspaper poetry, and Franz Boaz had proven, in his study of the Kwakiutl tribe, that "the American Indian exhibits extreme facility in the execution of syncopating rhythms" that white Americans no longer possessed.[41] By tapping into the physical basis of poetic rhythm, Lowell and Patterson believed, modern poets would also necessarily touch the community-building functions of the earliest poetry.[42] Lowell was a particular champion of Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and other so-called New Poets, who she believed had most successfully transmuted primitive rhythmic impulses into modern forms. Whitman may not have been able to harness the power of such rhythms, but these later poets, armed with studies like Lowell's and Patterson's, could return to the pre-literate physical origins of rhythm and the vital, primitive sociality of the Gummerian throng.[43]

In the 1910s, then, the question of what types of rhythms Whitman had included or created in his writings was inextricable from the question of American identity and its literary expression. Like Lowell and Patterson, the prolific critic and political activist Mary Austin responded to these questions with a crusade to show that a new tradition of American poetry had been created in the modern era, but that this tradition had not—indeed, could not have—begun with Whitman. Austin is best remembered as a regional, local color author and as a radical feminist and environmentalist. Her role in advancing an evolutionary view of poetic rhythms is less often noted, even though her theory of rhythm was a touchstone for F. O. Matthiessen in *The American Renaissance*. In *The American Rhythm*, first published in 1923, Austin argued that the endless search for a representative American poet by scholars from Emerson to Brooks to Lowell had missed the significant fact that, "[a]ll this time there was an American race singing in tune with the beloved environment, to the measures of life-sustaining gestures, taking the material of their songs out of the common human occasions, out of the democratic experience."[44] Na-

tive American poetry, Austin believed, had grown organically out of the American landscape, and the harmony between its rhythms and the environment meant that Native American poetry was almost a mimetic representation of America. Austin fantasized that the connection between the land and native poetry was so absolute that she could, simply by listening to the rhythms of "Amerindian languages," which she did not speak, "refer them by their dominant rhythms to the plains, the deserts and woodlands that had produced them" (18–19). While English-language poetry had become increasingly literary and book-bound, she argued, Native American poetry had developed organically, providing a template for the type of community-organizing poetry Gummere dreamed of.

Austin believed that Native American rhythms were the only basis on which a distinct American poetry could be founded because poetic rhythms were rightly derived from the rhythms of daily life. The rhythms of work and play in America were necessarily different from the rhythms of life in England; "the foot pace on the new earth, ax stroke and paddle stroke," gave rise to movements and patterns that were distinctly American (12–13). Because immigrants to the United States had experienced "an emotional kick *away* from the old [i.e., European] habits of work and society," Austin explained, "a new rhythmic basis of poetic expression [was] not only to be looked for, but [was] to be welcomed" as "evidence of the extent to which the American experience has 'taken,' among the widely varying racial strains that make up its people" (9). Derivative poetic rhythms were, for Austin, material evidence of a colonial mindset, while new rhythms were the sign of a new people beginning to feel their distinct identity. She argued that American poets had to be careful about the types of primitive rhythms they developed, however, as certain rhythms encouraged idiosyncrasy and fragmentation while others encouraged group cohesiveness. Austin was particularly wary of jazz rhythms because they were "a reversion to almost the earliest type of [rhythmic] response of which we are capable," and consequently "[implied] a certain amount of disintegration of later and higher responses, which would make an excessive, exclusive indulgence in jazz as dangerous as the moralists think it" (152).[45] An overdose of Whitman's rhythms was almost as bad as an overdose of jazz, according to Austin, because Whitman simply listed the diverse materials of American society without organizing and synthesizing them into a cultural type. Austin explained that "the genius of Whitman [was] not so much to be a poet as to be able to say out of what stuff the new poetry was to be made." He was "seldom far from the rutted pioneer track . . . Out of [its] dust, sweaty and raucous, we hear him chanting, principally of what he sees, so that his rhythms, more often than not, are

mere unpatterned noise of the street" (17). No less than jazz rhythms, Whitman's poetry was "bond-loosening" and "soul-disintegrating" rather than community-building (32).

A genuine American poetry would draw on the rhythms that promoted communal identity rather than those that mimetically reflected the fragmentation and racial heterogeneity of twentieth-century America, and, according to Austin, Native American poetry was the only communally-oriented form available to American poets. She argued that Native Americans never used poetry "for the purpose of conveying information"; instead, "the combination of voice and drum in the oldest Amerind usage is *never for any other purpose than that of producing and sustaining collective states*" (23). Austin cited many of the same ethnologists as had Gummere to argue that democratic societies were the products of environmentally-influenced poetic rhythms; she explained that, "if we go back in the history of the dance we find the pattern by which men and women, friends and foes, welded themselves into societies and became reconciled to the All-ness. Here we find economy of stress giving rise to preferred accents, and social ritual establishing the tradition of sequence" (9). By dancing and chanting together, in other words, members of a group produced a sort of tacit social contract that resulted in the production of a coherent group identity. Austin argued that "rhythmic performances" were in fact the only way to convince individuals to subsume their interests under the interests of a group, and to orient themselves communally rather than self-interestedly. As Austin colorfully phrased it, "the poetic orgy . . . is the only means that has ever been discovered of insuring the group mind" (36). Free verse, or early attempts at the creation of free verse like Whitman's, did not have the same power to organize a group.

Like Lowell and other, more self-interested promoters of the new poetry, Austin believed that contemporary American poetry marked a return to the primitive roots of poetic rhythm, and as such it constituted a more truly American literature than anything Whitman had written. She argued that the "extraordinary, unpremeditated likeness between the works of such writers as Amy Lowell, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters, exhibiting a disposition to derive their impulses from the gestures and experiences enforced by the American environment, to our own aboriginals" showed that a distinct American poetic tradition could finally be identified (46). The similarities of form between the new and the old American poetry showed that modern poets had finally realized that, "American poetry must inevitably take the mold of Amerind verse, which is the mold of the American experience shaped by the American environment" (42). If Whitman's prosody was useful at all,

it was only as a negative example of the centrifugal rhythms that would keep the American community from cohering.

Changes in Whitman's reputation were not linear, of course, and at the same time that Austin, Brooks, Lowell, and likeminded critics condemned Whitman's attempt to create an organic American poetry as a failure, critics such as Ruth Mary Weeks championed Whitman's rhythms as the first truly modern innovation in poetry. Weeks had studied under Scott at the University of Michigan in the 1910s, and in her 1921 article "Phrasal Prosody," she took up the argument he had advanced in "A Note on Walt Whitman's Prosody." At first glance, Weeks' article seems to support the standard narrative of Whitman as a metrical innovator who broke with tradition; hers was one of the first academic studies to call Whitman's poetry free verse,[46] and she predicted that Whitman's rhythms would be a vital part of the future of American poetry. But early academic accounts of free verse such as Weeks' were more complicated than the polemical accounts advanced by poets such as Ezra Pound. For Weeks, free verse was not a break with the metrical past, but rather a step towards an ultimate poetic harmony that would reconcile "Procrustean classic" meters with the innovative rhythms of modern life. Weeks, like Austin, held to the Gummerian view that poetic rhythms evolved in tandem with the rhythms of everyday life, so that "primitive" poetry was strongly rhythmical and communally oriented, while modern poetry was irregularly rhythmic and individualistic. These idiosyncratic rhythms were an inescapable part of modern life, but they needed to be reconciled with the needs of the American community if poetry was to become a useful force in contemporary life. Drawing on Scott's preferred metaphor, Weeks argued that, "[t]he new day has new needs; the long free stride of democracy cannot accommodate itself to classic dancing measures," and that Whitman had created the new measure of modernity by taking the "vocal wave" as his "rhythmic unit."[47] Unlike Scott, however, Weeks believed that the vocabulary of "traditional" metrical poetry, based on syllabic feet, was compatible with Whitman's "new rhythmus." She argued that he had "attempted to use the various types of [vocal waves] as other poets use arbitrary groups of syllables to produce rhythmic effects," shifting the emphasis from the syllabic unit to what she called the "phrasal unit." Whitman had invented many types of "phrasal feet," she explained, including the "trochaic emphasis foot," and Amy Lowell's "delicate trochees," Sandburg's "resounding dactyls and amphibrachs," Edgar Lee Master's "hesitating minor iambs," and Ezra Pound's "mixed measures" were simply "perfecting this new and more flexible rhythmic unit."[48] To Weeks, preserving the vocabulary of "classic meters" as a means of describing

free verse was important because it hinted at the ongoing evolution and the ultimate unity of poetic verse forms. She explained that free verse would not overtake "classic" meter, but would instead dialectically incorporate it, helping poets to develop "a richer, more pulsing measure than we have known, various yet sustained, combining syllabic and phrasal accent, pitch, time, pause, and rhyme—all the rhythmic values of spoken English" into a singular "rhythmus." Free verse was not a disruption or a break with the past, but "a new and beautiful note [in] the composite chord of the coming poetic harmony."[49]

Weeks extended Scott's utopian horizon beyond national boundaries; in her opinion, the rhythms Whitman invented had the potential not only to unify the heterogeneous national body of America, but, more broadly, to reconcile the past with the present, bringing the evolution of social life to a new pinnacle. If the gains of modern civilization had been offset by the loss of "the habit of social experience" that primitive civilizations had manifested in their tribal dances,[50] as Weeks, like Gummere, believed, then modern man needed the "golden strand of meter" to bind that ancient, communal mode of sociality to the present. Because rhythmic and social harmony were one and the same, Weeks argued, a completely harmonized poetry could overcome the fragmentation and alienation that had been ushered in by mechanized print and hastened by the industrial revolution.[51] Whitman's free verse pointed the way to this new incarnation of an Ur-rhythm, but only as part of a holistic vision of poetry that included both the embodied rhythms of free verse and the more abstract patterns of "classic" meter as integral parts of modern culture.

Bathybius whitmanii: Rhythm as Evolutionary Principle

The wildly different conclusions about Whitman's rhythms and his place in an American poetic tradition that Scott, Lowell, Patterson, Austin, and Weeks reached allow us to see the cultural work that prosodical fantasies did in the early twentieth century. For critics such as Weeks and Scott, poetic rhythms could point the way to an abstract social harmony, while for Austin, Lowell, and Brooks, among others, prosodical systems had very concrete effects on the evolution of the American "race." I have offered extended readings of these competing visions of American poetry because attending to these fantasies of rhythm not only allows us to better understand modernist poetic movements in context; it also allows us to see the ways in which these seemingly scientific approaches to rhythm have shaped the study of American poetry later in the twentieth century.

When Edmund Gosse joked in 1896 that Whitman was "mere *bathy-*

bius," he was unable to anticipate how apt his characterization would turn out to be. The *bathybius haeckelii* affair was one of the more notable scientific events in the nineteenth century, as it provided a rallying point for anti-Darwinians. In 1868, the British biologist Thomas Henry Huxley began to study sediment samples collected during the installation of the first transatlantic telegraph cable in 1858. Huxley believed the samples contained a sort of primordial ooze that was the missing link between inanimate and animate matter, and he quickly published his findings. It was not until 1875, when the Challenger Expedition undertook a sustained analysis of the ocean floor, that scientists realized that Huxley had mistaken a simple precipitate for the common ancestor of all living organisms. In many ways, this story is the perfect analogue to the story of Whitman's canonization. F. O. Matthiessen is the Huxley figure, promoting a vision of linear evolution from a single organism into the multiplicity of modern life. In his field-shaping work *The American Renaissance* (1941), Matthiessen relied heavily on the evolutionary theories of rhythm espoused by Gummere and Austin to argue that Whitman was the first modern poet to realize the physical basis of all poetic rhythm. Whitman understood that words had to be "grasped" with the senses before they could be effectively deployed, according to Matthiessen, and this understanding freed American poetry from the confining concept of "language as something to be learned from a dictionary." Indeed, Matthiessen went so far as to argue that Whitman had actually undergone a "crude re-living of the primitive evolution of poetry" from its "origin . . . in the dance, in the rise and fall 'of consenting feet' (in Gummere's phrase)" to the modern day. Whitman's primary "experience of natural rhythm" as the most basic source of poetry allowed him to move away from what Matthiessen, citing Austin, called the "conventional" poetry "of instructed imitation" to "the internal pulsations of the body, to its external movements in work and in making love, to such sounds as the wind and the sea," and so to forge an entirely new poetic tradition out of those primary sense experiences.[52] Whitman's poetry was consequently "more authentic than something Longfellow read in a book and tried to copy,"[53] and was thus far more suited to founding a truly native poetic tradition. As the product of an organic evolution of rhythm, Whitman's poetry was the foundational text that would create a new species of poetry that was better adapted to the rhythms and demands of modern life.

The endless critiques of Matthiessen's American canon have not lessened the power of his interpretive paradigm for later scholars of modernist poetry and poetics. The idea that primitive poetry could point the way to more socially effective modern rhythms remains particularly strong

in the contemporary discourse of ethnopoetics, as can be seen in Jerome Rothenberg's 2002 introduction to the "Ethnopoetics" section of Ubuweb, a website devoted to archiving twentieth- and twenty-first-century avant-garde poetry and art. Rothenberg argues that modernist artists in the early twentieth century found analogues to their avant-garde practices in the traditional cultural practices of many of "the world's deep cultures—those surviving *in situ* as well as those that had vanished except for transcriptions in books or recordings from earlier decades." According to Rothenberg, such practices have historically helped Western artists to change the perception of formal innovations that "have been seen and heard as radical, even disturbing departures from conventional practice" by showing that such practices in other contexts have been viewed as "traditional" and "culturally acceptable."[54] Like the evolutionary view of Whitman, Rothenberg's pluralist vision encourages a naturalization of the unconventional as a way to prove the relevance of avant-garde art to contemporary life.

The idea that embodied rhythms, whether imagined as "primitive" inventions or modern rediscoveries, can revitalize metrical traditions that have become too constraining or too far removed from everyday life, has become a part of modern poetics, and there is no excising the effects of this idea from contemporary debates and discussions. But as Scott's coda to his article on Whitman indicates, imaginary constructions of rhythm can be registered as such even as they continue to shape the material practices of poets and critics. As he closed "A Note on Walt Whitman's Prosody," Scott noted that his vision of Whitman's prosody was only powerful if other readers believed in it—and he had his doubts that they would. He explained that even for him, Whitman's poetry did not hold up to multiple readings, making it unlikely that "his mode of versifying would pass into the consciousness of the race and seem as much a matter of course as iambic pentameter." Scott's moment of doubt, which he narrated as a moment that "[shook his] faith,"[55] indicates that, in some way, he understood his abstraction of social relations into poetic rhythm to be an ideologically motivated wish rather than a description of an empirical phenomenon. For many critics working later in the century, this belief hardened into dogma, crystallizing Scott's fantasy of a poetically mediated social order into truth. Returning to Scott's moment of doubt helps us to see how prosodies, as systems of belief, help to create and uphold the imagined continuities and lineages that make up our literary histories. By attending to the multiplicity of these systems of belief rather than pitting metrical tradition against rhythmical revolution, it will be possible to construct alternative lineages and histories that might tell different stories

about the metrical past and the metrical present than those to which we have become accustomed.

Notes

1. Edmund Gosse, *Critical Kit-Kats* (New York, 1896), 97.

2. Betsy Erkkila, introduction to *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

3. David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix.

4. Erkkila, *Breaking Bounds*, 7.

5. Walt Whitman, preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Michael Warner (New York: Penguin, 2004), 334.

6. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 107.

7. Michael Cohen, "Popular Ballads: Rhythmic Remediations in the Nineteenth Century," in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 206.

8. Scott MacPhail, "Lyric Nationalism: Whitman, American Studies, and the New Criticism," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44, no. 2 (2002): 137.

9. Ibid., 133–34.

10. Ibid., 139–40.

11. Notable exceptions include Max Cavitch's "Stephen Crane's Refrain," *ESQ* 54, no. 1–4 (2008): 33–54, and Patrick Redding's "Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912–1931," *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 669–90. Cavitch notes that the narrative of "[p]oetry's liberation from the shackles of meter" remains popular even though the "long and complex history of versification in English is poorly suited to teleological narratives of liberation" (33), while Redding looks to "non-Whitmanian theories of democratic poetics" to explore the multiplicity of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American poetics (670).

12. Meredith Martin and Yisrael Levin, "Victorian Prosody: Measuring the Field," *Victorian Poetry* 49, no. 2 (2011): 150, 153.

13. Gertrude Stein, *Narration: Four Lectures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 17.

14. Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 5.

15. John Stuart Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions* (New York: Henry Holt, 1874), 89.

16. Fred Newton Scott, "The Most Fundamental Differentia of Poetry and Prose," *PMLA* 19, no. 2 (1904): 254.

17. Ibid., 262–63.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Jason David Hall, "A Great Multiplication of Meters," in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 7.

21. Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 2. Any number of prosodic tracts posit a link between the body and temporal units of meter; see, for instance, Oliver Wendell Holmes' "The Physiology of Versification," *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 92, no. 1 (7 Jan 1875):

6–9. Holmes posited that "the respiration and the pulse . . . are the true time-keepers of the body," which directly influence "the structure of metrical compositions" (6). See also Alice Meynell's *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1893), which argued that the "rhythmic pangs of maternity" influenced the meters used by female poets (6).

22. Scott, "The Most Fundamental Differentia of Poetry and Prose," 259–60.

23. Fred Newton Scott, "A Note on Walt Whitman's Prosody," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 7, no. 2 (1908): 149. Emphasis added.

24. Ibid., 149.

25. Percy Ellen Frederick William Smythe Strangford, (8th Viscount), "Walt Whitman," in A Selection from the *Writings of Viscount Strangford on Political, Geographical, and Social Subjects*, ed. Viscountess Strangford (London, 1869), 298–300.

26. See, for instance, Edward P. Mitchell, "Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the Future," *New York Sun*, November 19, 1881, http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1881/anc.00082.html, and the anonymous "Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92)]," *Poet Lore*, (1892): 286–87, http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/index.html.

27. Scott, "A Note on Walt Whitman's Prosody," 137.

28. Ibid., 149–50.

29. Amy Lowell, "Vers Libre and Metrical Prose," *Poetry* 3, no .6 (1914): 214.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 215–17.

33. Lowell intensified her criticism of Whitman in later years; see Lowell, *Poetry and Poets: Essays* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1971) for the text of "Walt Whitman and the New Poetry," a lecture delivered at the Contemporary Club of Philadelphia in 1920, in which she declared that "Walt Whitman fell into his own peculiar form through ignorance . . . Whitman never had the slightest idea of what cadence is . . . he had very little rhythmical sense," and that he "did not write in metre" (63, 70). She argued that the more intellectual new poets promoted true democracy, while Whitman's work was "as dangerous as a Bolshevik pronunciamento" (75). See also Melissa Bradshaw, *Amy Lowell: Diva Poet* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2011). Bradshaw notes that Lowell's negative stance on Whitman was prompted in large part by her anxieties about socialism, which was causing unrest among workers in her family's mills (84).

34. Patterson praised Lowell's "vigorous sense of 'swing,'" an "undeniable [gift]" that made her the ideal vocalizer for their experiments (William Morrison Patterson, "New Verse and New Prose," *The North American Review* 207, no. 747 [1918]: 264); Lowell reported that Patterson called her "aggressively rhythmic" (Lowell, "Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry," *The Musical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 [1920]: 130).

35. William Morrison Patterson, "New Verse and New Prose," 264.

36. Such conclusions were not isolated to English departments. P. M. Jones, who taught modern French at University College of South Wales, Cardiff, and Cambridge in the 1910s and who established himself as an authority on Whitman's influence in France with two articles on the subject in *The Modern Language Review* in 1915 and 1916, argued that *vers libre* and Whitman's innovations were two distinct developments in two separate national traditions. He explained that the principles of *vers libre* had been "innate in French versification from the earliest times," and so *vers librists* were simply helping French versification to realize its entelechy. Whitman was, at most, "a foreign master who had accomplished a revolution in poetical art similar to that which

[French *vers librists*] . . . were attempting," but his experiments were necessarily distinct from those that were shaped by the rules of French prosody ("Influence of Walt Whitman," 192–94). Whatever Whitman had created, in Jones' opinion, was not *vers libre*. See Jones, "Whitman in France," *The Modern Language Review* 10, no. 1 (1915): 1–27, and Jones, "Influence of Walt Whitman on the Origin of the '*Vers Libre*,'" *The Modern Language Review* 11.2 (1916): 186–94.

37. Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1915). Brooks' polemic was a variation on a theme established by George Santayana in his 1911 address "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy." Santayana had similarly argued that Whitman's poetry was a formal failure, though he believed that this was due to Whitman's "unintellectual, lazy, and self-indulgent" personal character (53). See George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 37–64.

38. Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age*, 10.

39. See Michael Cohen, "Poetry of the United States," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Stephen Cushman and Roland Greene, 4th ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012): 1480–85, for the long history of this idea, from Elihu Hubbard Smith's *American Poetry, Selected and Original* (1793) to twenty-first-century anthologies of American poetry.

40. Patterson, "New Verse and New Prose," 266.

41. Lowell, "Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry," 130.

42. Lowell and Patterson's nostalgia for an imagined state of primitive rhythmic experience is part of the strand of American poetic thought Virginia Jackson traces elsewhere in this volume, wherein, "lyric became a repository of the socializing effects of rhythm at the same time that lyric indexed the loss of the communal, racial origins of that rhythm." Though Lowell and Patterson are not explicitly concerned with the lyric, their work extended what Jackson names as Gummere's "field-defining emphasis on rhythm as the socializing principle of poetry," as well as the convoluted logic involved in "imagining poetic rhythm as racial in origin and post-racial in effect."

43. This was the thesis behind some of the most influential collections of the New Poetry, including Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson's *The New Poetry: An Anthology*, (New York: Macmillan, 1917), which posited that modern poets were trying to "return to [poetry] at its great original sources, and to sweep away artificial laws . . . which have encumbered it" (xii). Louis Untermeyer's competing collection *Modern American Poetry: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1919) similarly posited that modern poets were not creating something entirely new; they were "respond[ing] to indigenous forces deeper than their backgrounds" (xi). See Erin Kappeler, "Editing America: Nationalism and the New Poetry," *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 4 (2014): 899–918.

44. Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1930), 18. Subsequent citations of this text are given parenthetically.

45. Austin's ambivalence toward "primitive" poetic rhythms was typical; many white scholars and critics during this era were careful to distance themselves from the racial otherness of "primitive" rhythms at the same time that they embraced the "primitive" as a source of cultural renewal.

46. Whitman's poetry had been casually named *vers libre* and free verse in critical articles published in non-academic magazines prior to Weeks', but academic studies

published in specialized journals during this era largely concurred that Whitman had not written free verse.

47. Ruth Mary Weeks, “Phrasal Prosody,” *The English Journal* 10, no. 1 (1921): 14–15.

48. Ibid., 17–18.

49. Ibid., 19.

50. Ibid., 13.

51. Ibid., 19.

52. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), 564–65.

53. Ibid., 567.

54. Jerome Rothenberg, “Ethnopoetics,” *Ubuweb*, October 2002, ubu.com/ethno/index.html.

55. Scott, “A Note on Walt Whitman’s Prosody,” 153.