PATMORE'S LAW, MEYNELL'S RHYTHM

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I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of immuendos,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after
—WALLACE STEVENS, "THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD"

"At rare intervals the world is startled by the phenomenon of a woman whose qualities of mind and heart seem to demand a revision of its conception of womanhood and an enlargement of those limitations which it delights in regarding as essentials of her very nature," Coventry Patmore writes in his 1892 tribute "Mrs. Meynell: Poet and Essayist." His idea of womanhood had been enlarged by "a very small volume of very short essays" published late in 1892, called The Rhythm of Life and culled from the literary journalism of Alice Meynell over the past decade. Meynell's Poems had also just appeared, most of them previously published under her maiden name of Alice Thompson in Preludes (1875); another very small volume of very short poems that try to "breathe, in every line, the purest spirit of womanhood, yet they have not sufficient force of that ultimate womanhood," Patmore concludes (762). Eager to "admire the poetess still more than her poetry" (763), Patmore considers the poems reprinted from Preludes a prelude to Meynell's later, greater work: if not in poetry, where she seemed to have fallen silent, then in prose.
But during the final decade of the century Meynell returned to publishing poetry, for which she received renewed critical acclaim. She became a much admired poetess of the fin de siècle: in 1895 she was proposed for poet laureate, and she continued writing poems from time to time until the year of her death, 1922. In “The Rhythm of Life,” the essay that gives its title to her collection, she announces the periodic return of her muse.

“If life is not always poetical, it is at least metrical,” she begins her essay, insisting that “periodicity rules over the mental experience of man.” Even more, it would seem, periodicity rules over the experience of woman. Ending her essay with a meditation on “the rhythmic pangs of maternity,” Meynell turns giving birth into a trope for poetic creation, the articulation of life experienced as “intervals between aspirations, between actions, pauses as inevitable as the pauses of sleep” (6). While “few poets have fully recognized the metrical absence of their Muse” (4), according to Meynell these recurring, seemingly vacant intervals of time measure the course of creation, in poetry and in life.

Not only was Meynell the “phenomenon of a woman” that appeared (at least to Patmore) at rare intervals, and not only did her poetry appear in publication at rare intervals, but the poems themselves mark the appearance of rare intervals, in highly refined forms of versification associated with the New Prosody toward the end of the nineteenth century. Meynell was influenced by Patmore’s “Essay on English Metrical Law,” first published in 1857 and circulating in different versions alongside Patmore’s poetry. In his essay, Patmore defines meter as “the function of marking, by whatever means, certain isochronous intervals,” and although accents might be the most obvious means of counting meter in English accentual-syllabic verse, he prefers to imagine meter as a temporal measure that “has no material and external existence at all, but has its place in the mind, which craves measure in everything, and wherever the idea of measure is uncontradicted, delights in marking it with an imaginary ‘beat.’” This idea (or idealization) of an imaginary beat led to an abstraction of meter, variously schematized and quantified in late-Victorian metrical theory and prosodic practice. Increasingly, meter was theorized as a principle of spacing that could formalize temporal relations between abstract quantities, mentally perceived in the act of counting and not necessarily audible.

The compulsion to measure poetry in “isochronous intervals” was part of a broader impulse toward the temporal and spatial demarcation of time in fin-de-siècle England. Of course the counting and recounting of days to the end of the century could be the mark of any fin de siècle, as Elaine Scarry points out in “Counting at Dusk (Why Poetry Matters When the Century Ends).” She speculates that a pronounced interest in poetic meter at the ends of centuries may have something to do with “the etymological identity of meter with measure, the intimacy between poetry and the act of counting, and hence the heightened poetic attention to numbers at the moment when the calendar turns over.” The poetry and prosody of the late-Victorian period in particular mark a turn toward forms of measurement and quantification that formalize the trope of counting, as George Saintsbury remarks in his History of English Prosody: looking back on “the polymetric character of the century,” he surveys many poets experimenting with “fancy prosodies.” Alice Meynell contributed to these metrical experiments at the end of the nineteenth century, and (not unlike Saintsbury) looked back on them in the early twentieth century in a poem entitled “The Laws of Verse.” Here, as we shall see, Meynell’s “fancy prosody” gives us insight into the heightened sense of periodicity and periodization that makes the fin de siècle a distinctive period—simultaneously an ending and a beginning—in English literary history.

Writing in the wake of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Meynell was part of a generation inventing new measures for new women poets. Like Mathilde Blind, Amy Levy, Graham R. Tomson, Michael Field, A. Mary F. Robinson, Mary E. Coleridge, and other poetesses living in fin-de-siècle London, Meynell aspired to musicality in her versification. She is introduced in A. H. Miles’s influential anthology The Poets and the Poetry of the Century with reference to “the memorable passage in which Mr. Pater speaks of poetry . . . aspiring towards the condition of music,” because the distinction between matter and form is all but obliterated in her poems: “[F]ew of our generation have exhibited . . . more finely balanced harmony.” But while Walter Pater may have provided a general aesthetic frame for reading the poetry of female aesthetes such as Meynell, the theoretical frame for her prosody came from Patmore, who argues in “Essay on English Metrical Law” that “the relation of music to language ought to be recognized as something more than that of similarity” (17) and who develops a theory of meter to account for the musical effects of poetic language in particular.
Patmore’s relation to Meynell has been treated biographically as an older man’s fixation on a younger poetess, whom he worshipped as another “Angel in the House” after his wife’s death. He gave to Meynell a manuscript of *The Angel in the House* (1854–63) and *The Unknown Eros* (1878), and he dedicated a series of light verses to her; in one he recalls a visit to her house when he brought his review of her poetry: “I read her praise while, sweet / She smiles in contemplation / Of her fame and her small feet.” If we shift the emphasis from biographical to formal analysis of this poetic relationship, then we see that Patmore’s praise of Meynell’s “small feet” is more than personal. What he admired in her verse was its delicate pacing, the deft manipulation of subtle intervals according to his own prosodic theory. In his “Essay on English Metrical Law” he writes that “the language should always seem to feel, though not to suffer from, the bonds of verse” (8), a sentiment that Alice Meynell took to heart, as she writes in a notebook: “All true poets love the bonds of prosody, and, in lyrics, of rhythm: because all true poets have something of the wild at heart that looks for bonds.” Willingly, Meynell submitted to Patmore’s metrical law, allowing her language to feel the bonds of verse, and herself to love them.

*A Poetics of Pauses*

Like Patmore, Meynell was especially interested in the metrical value of pauses. According to the theory of isochrony developed in Patmore’s “Essay,” the measuring of a poetic line into “equal or proportionate spaces” assumes “an ictus” or ‘beat,’ actual or mental” (18) that can be heard in accents but might also be counted in pauses: “The marking of the measure by the recurrent ictus may be occasionally remitted, the position of the ictus altered, or its place supplied by a pause, without the least offence to a cultivated ear, which rather delights in, than objects to, such remission, inversion, or omission, when there is an emotional motive” (22). To give “a much fuller consideration of the element of pause than has commonly been given to that subject.” Patmore treats catalexis (the absence of a syllable from the beginning or end of a line) and caesura (a pause in the middle of a line) more systematically than other analysts of modern meter, to whom such pauses “appear rather as interruptions than subjects of metrical law.” For Patmore, on the contrary, forms of interruption such as catalexis and caesura are an integral component of English metrical law. The very structure of this law as he conceives it is the measuring of poetry (by analogy to music) into isochronous units that can be filled either with sound or with silence. This principle of spacing makes it possible to feel the beat even if the accent has been withdrawn from a syllable (“remission”), or if the accent has been placed on another syllable (“inversion”), or if there is no syllable to carry the accent (“omission”). In fact, “a cultivated ear” might take special delight in those silent intervals, as Patmore goes on to write: “We must reckon the missing syllables as substituted by an equivalent pause; and, indeed, in reading catalectic verse, this is what a good reader does by instinct” (23).

Meynell was a good reader of Patmore, turning his theory into a poetics of pauses that would appeal to cultivated ears. In an early poem from *Preludes*, entitled “To the Beloved,” she meditates on the musical effect of metrical pause as her own *ars poetica*. The first stanza is addressed to a nameless beloved, a “thou” whose subtle presence is felt in silence:

Oh, not more subtly silence strays
Amongst the winds, between the voices,
Mingling alike with pensive lays,
And with the music that rejoices,
Than thou art present in my days.

The beloved is heard in the intervals between sound (“amongst the winds” and “between the voices”) and also resounding (“mingling alike”) in music: by analogy to the temporal experience of music, the presence of this unnamed beloved one emerges over time, made “present in my days.” The regularity of the verse—iambic tetrameter, with musically mingling rhymes—suggests a harmonious alternation between what is heard and not heard, measuring the space between the presence and absence of the beloved.

In the following stanzas, the poem goes further in presenting the beloved as a form of silent music, measured in stanza 2 by the “pauses” of breath and the “hush” of melody, compared in stanza 3 to “silence all unvexed” and “unperplexed,” and then invoked in stanza 4 as a “most dear pause”: 

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My silence, life returns to thee
In all the pauses of her breath.
Hush back to rest the melody
That out of thee awakeneth;
And thou, wake ever, wake for me!

Thou art like silence all un vexed,
Though wild words part my soul from thee.
Thou art like silence un perplexed,
A secret and a mystery
Between one footfall and the next.

Most dear pause in a mellow lay!
Thou art in woven with every air.
With thee the wildest tempests play,
And snatches of thee everywhere
Make little heavens throughout a day.

In the pauses "[between one footfall and the next," Meynell's poem is also presenting the rise and fall of its own metrical feet as a musical interplay between sound and silence. According to Patmore's prosody, there is not much room for counting pauses in tetrameter: for him the basic unit of iambic verse is the "dipode" (a double foot of four syllables, with a minor and a major accent), and in a line of four iambic feet (or two dipodes) the syllables are all filled with sound. But while it is possible to scan Meynell's lines this way, she leaves room for variation. For example, in line "Between one footfall and the next," does the accent fall exactly where it should, or might it fall between the feet?

The space between this line and the next stanza must give us pause as well, since Meynell goes on to invoke the very pause she inscribes in the poem: "Most dear pause in a mellow lay!" The stanzaic break has already created a silent pause in the melody of the poem, and if we scan this line in isochronous intervals of two dipodes, as Patmore would suggest, we would also have to imagine a silent beat before "Most." Thus we hear a pause even before it is voiced, making it "in woven with every air"; "thou" is felt in the "air" or breath of the spoken word, and in the "air" of melodious song, and even dissolving into empty air. As the object of address is diffused into "snatches of thee everywhere," the comparison of "thee" to music gradually proves to be an address to the lovely music of pausing itself.

While "To the Beloved" begins with an intimate address in the second person singular (a form that Meynell hoped the English language would retain), it concludes with a formal apostrophe ("O pause"): 

Darkness and solitude shine, for me.
For life's fair outward part are rife
The silver noises; let them be.
It is the very soul of life
Listens for thee, listens for thee.

O pause between the sobs of cares;
O thought within all thought that is;
Trance between laughter's unawares:
Thou art the shape of melodies,
And thou the ecstasy of prayers!

In these final stanzas, Meynell's poem turns away from the outward sounds of life and "[listens for thee" internally. The reiteration of "Listens for thee, listens for thee" produces a caesura, or pause, in the middle of the line that allows us to listen for a sound within. Listening for the pauses "between" and the "thought within" each of these lines makes it possible to think about the beloved as an abstract form: "Thou art the shape of melodies," the poem concludes, turning "thou" into a musical performance or the formalized "ecstasy" of silent prayer.

The invocation of the beloved as a formal abstraction makes "To the Beloved" a curiously impersonal poem, less concerned with addressing a person than apostrophizing a metrical effect. Nevertheless this is a relation of love, articulated as a relationship between sound and silence. The Pull Mall Gazette referred to Meynell as "the prophet of silence and dejection, the herald of abstention and pause." Yet this prophetic pausing is not a form of self-silencing or abstaining from communication with others, but rather, as Maria Frawley argues, the projection of a mental experience. Frawley traces "a trajectory of Meynell's thinking about thought," an ongoing effort to give form to the movements of the mind in poetry and in
prose. Measured in the silent music of her meters, thinking was a metrical performance for Meynell, beginning with early poems like “To the Beloved” and continuing periodically throughout her life as a poet. Although she outlived the fin de siècle, her poetry recalls the past century as a period when prosody was regularly used for the regulation of thought. To imagine meter as a living, embodied form thus became Meynell’s poetic calling.

A More Vital Union

Reviewing Meynell’s Poems of 1892, Francis Thompson writes that “the footfalls of her Muse waken not sounds but silences.” As Meynell’s friend and admirer, he considered her the “foremost singer of a sex which is at last breaking the silence,” paradoxically because she was giving new forms to silence. In Thompson’s prediction, “[S]he will leave to her successors a serener tradition than masculine poets bequeathed to men,” for “she has given them the law of silence.” Her calling, in Thompson’s view, is to transform English metrical law through the rhythms of women’s poetry: “That high speech must be shod with silence, that high work must be set forth with silence, that high destiny must be waited on with silence—was a lesson the age lacked much. Our own sex has heard the nobly tacit message of Mr. Coventry Patmore. But by an exception rare as beautiful, the woman’s calm has been austerer-perfect than the man’s” (191). Indeed, the poetry of the woman might surpass the theory of the man, making his “tacit message” into her poetics of pauses, turning Patmore’s law into Meynell’s rhythm.

Included in Meynell’s The Rhythm of Life is an essay titled “Mr. Coventry Patmore’s Odes,” which examines some points of convergence, but also divergence, in the poets’ metrical practice. Although Meynell admires the octosyllabic stanza of Patmore’s earlier poetry (as in The Angel in the House) for demonstrating “a composure which was the prelude to the peace of the Odes” (96), and although she praises some of the later odes (as in The Unknown Eros)—for “a truer impetus of pulse and impulse English verse could hardly yield” (95)—nevertheless she raises some questions about Patmore’s versification in these odes. His use of pauses to fill up a measure seems to her, at times, an arbitrary enforcement of his own metrical law: “[H]e rather arbitrarily applies to liberal verse the laws set for use,” she protests (94). The free iambic verse of these odes “can surely be bound by no time measures—if for no other reason, for this: that to prescribe pauses is also to forbid any pauses unprescribed” (95). Without altogether rejecting his “principle of catalexis,” Meynell resists an artificial imposition of isochrony that tries to prescribe pauses; she prefers a more natural variation according to a more natural measure of time.

Meynell locates such “natural” measures in a different experience of rhythm. In “The Rhythm of Life”—published in the same collection as “Mr. Coventry Patmore’s Odes”—metrical law is redefined as a “law of periodicity” that is made manifest in various cycles and orbits and seasons: in the return of each day and in “the tides of the mind,” in the recurrence of sorrow and in disease “closing in at shorter and shorter periods toward death,” in the “metrical phases” of the moon and in the “sun’s revolutions,” and finally (as noted earlier) in “the rhythmic pangs of maternity.” So Meynell projects the metricality of verse into the universe, as a universal metrical experience that cannot be precisely measured but is felt inside and outside the body. According to Meynell, “Thomas a Kempis knew of the recurrences, if he did not measure them” (2), and Shelley was able “to guess at the order of this periodicity”; these two writers are singled out because “no deliberate human rules, infractions of the liberty and law of the universal movement, kept from them the knowledge of recurrences” (2–3). Implicit is a critique of English metrical law as formulated by Patmore: as an imposition of “deliberate human rules” on verse, his theory may work to limit “the liberty and law of the universal movement,” and “the knowledge of recurrences.”

Although Meynell’s essay may be read as an attempt to naturalize and perhaps even feminize rhythmic experience, it proceeds by a recurring series of associations that function as figures for meter. Rather than rebelling against Patmore’s metrical law, she turns his argument about meter to her own purposes by insisting that life is “at least metrical.” In “The Unit of the World” (another essay published in The Rhythm of Life), Meynell again insists that nature is best understood as a metrical phenomenon: “[I]f I may assert that though nature is not always clearly and obviously made to man’s measure, he is yet the unit by which she is measurable.” By the same logic, we may assert that though Meynell’s poetry was not always clearly and obviously made to Patmore’s measure,
he was yet the unit by which her poetry is measurable. She had learned much from Patmore, as her daughter would later recall:

Even after my mother had given her immeasurable praise to Coventry Patmore’s poetry, the full extent of her feeling remained unexpressed, and in a letter to him she breaks off suddenly to say: “I have never told you what I think of your poetry. It is the greatest thing in the world, the most harrowing and the sweetest. I can hardly realize that he who has written it and who is greater than his words is celestially kind to me and calls me a friend.” As far as his teaching, his “gospel,” was concerned, she was docile, receptive, impressed.20

Along with his Catholicism, Meynell shared in Patmore’s “gospel” of poetry, giving “immeasurable praise” to the metrical law that had made an impression on her own ideas about rhythm, in theory and in practice.

Meynell wrote about Patmore’s poetry on multiple occasions and edited selections for publication, proving through her praise that she owed much to him.17 In a later and longer essay, simply titled “Coventry Patmore,” Meynell comes closer to associating his law with her own sense of rhythm than in her earlier review, “Mr. Coventry Patmore’s Odes.” She explains that “a mind trained in the less obvious measures and restrains of thought and of verse is needed to recognize the law of The Unknown Eros,” and she identifies herself as just such a reader.18 By setting an example for how to read his odes, she hoped to show how “any reader should pause upon the mere intervals in poetry so profound and penetrating as, in a hundred passages, shakes the metre with a hand of control” (104). Here Meynell is more able and willing to appreciate the musical pauses in Patmore’s free iambic verse: “When he wrote the Odes, and used thus a free metre because he knew himself at liberty by his very knowledge and love of law, that heart beat in the sensitive line, and he caught rapturous breath, or sighed, as a spirit blowing whither it will” (100). In these figures of rhythmicized embodiment (like rapturous breathing, and the beating of the heart), Meynell rationalizes the versification of his odes in language reminiscent of her own meditations on meter. She read his odes to reiterate her own conviction that poetry “is to be figured . . . by a more vital union: mind and body, where tidal thought and feeling are quick with the blood and various with the breath of life, give a juster as well as a simpler and a human image of a vital poem” (96).

This “image of a vital poem” with “a more vital union” of mind and body has a long history in nineteenth-century women’s verse, in which Victorian poetesses measure the pulse of their poetry by the quickening of blood and breath. The impulse, or aspiration, to give new life to the rhythms of poetry is articulated by Aurora Leigh, the prototype for the poetess in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel-poem:

O life, O poetry,
—Which means life in life! Cognizant of life
Beyond this blood-beat, passionate for truth
Beyond these senses!—poetry, my life.19

Throughout Aurora Leigh, Aurora struggles to unify mind and body in poetry, extending beyond the “blood-beat” of her own heart into a song that will capture “the full-veined, heaving double-breasted age” (book 5, 216). To embody the spirit of the age, the poetess must transform the rhythmic figure of the body into the rhythm of the poem, the rhythmic figure of the poem into the rhythm of history, and the rhythmic figure of history into the rhythm of nature: the heart beating in the verse of the poetess could then be understood, at least in its ideal form, as a law of the universe. So Meynell, who praised Elizabeth Barrett Browning for “the continuous impulsiveness of her passion for truth,” was also eager to transform the impulsive figure of the Victorian poetess into a universal pulse: “[S]uch impulses are those of perpetual motion; they are flights like the flight of planets,” she writes in one of several introductions to the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.20

In Meynell’s reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, we can see how Patmore’s law and Meynell’s rhythm are juxtaposed and transposed through the medium of women’s verse. Meynell was a passionate collector and editor of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry, and although she was aware of faults in some of the poems that came from “a too conscious and too emphatic revolt against her time, a too resolute originality,” nevertheless she admired this revolutionary impulse. Even if the blank verse of Aurora Leigh seemed at times so “defiant” that “the reader should keep his own composure in order to feel the value,” Meynell knew enough about the
composition of meters to value "the leap of the spirit" in Aurora Leigh; she also valued "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning 'relaxes the rush of her manner and gathers herself in to a shape of gravity," and she admired "a pause of style" in "The Sea-Mew" and "Sonnets from the Portugeuse" (163) as well. In these sonnets Meynell discovered a poetics of pauses not unlike her own: "Mrs. Browning is strictly Petrarchan in rhymes though not in pauses," Meynell observes, locating "the noble impulse of her thought" as much in the pauses of the sonnets as in their audible pulse: "Every sonnet of the series has a subject fit for it, a thought with a close. As you come to the last line, and the heart of the poem that has throbbed strongly, subsides, you acquiesce in the last word" (166). The sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning are figured by Meynell as a more vital union of mind and body, with thought embodied in the throbbing heart of each poem.

Meynell wrote another essay about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, on "The Art of Scansion," in which she praises the poetess "in her quieter moments, when she is not marching, in doublet and hose, the march of her blank verse, but pacing softly in the strictest measure of the bonds that all true poets so love—the bonds of numbers, stress, quantity, rhyme and final shape." Echoing the entry in Meynell's notebook that claims "[a]ll true poets love the bonds of prosody," the essay on scansion follows Patmore while also proposing a woman's response to his "Essay on English Metrical Law." Meynell reiterates a commitment to "strictest measure" and suggests, through the example of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that women poets are best heard "pacing softly." The implicit gendering of English metrical law as a feminine form becomes explicit at the end of Meynell's essay, when she refers to Patmore by name, simultaneously deferring to his authority and using it to authorize the vocation of the poetess: "Coventry Patmore held poetry to be the gravest among the undertakings of man, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—child, maid, and wife—took her vocation with gravity, passion and delight" (ix). Here the vocation of poets in general is transformed into the specific example of a poetess who wrote as "child, maid, and wife": a passionate undertaking not only for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but for Meynell as well. Thus, while following Patmore's directive "to feel, though not to suffer from, the bonds of verse," Meynell also follows in the footsteps of poetesses who were expected to embody this feeling as the passion of their poetry.

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**Dear Laws**

To feel the bonds of verse, Meynell incorporated English metrical law into the rhythms of her poetry, most succinctly in a late poem entitled "The Laws of Verse." Composed in 1921, the year before her death, and published posthumously in Last Poems (1923), this short lyric looks back on a life dedicated to poetry. Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who "took her vocation with gravity," Meynell invokes the laws of verse in order to feel their weight:

Dear laws, come to my breast!
Take all my frame, and make your close arms meet
Around me; and so ruled, so warned, so pressed,
I breathe, aware; I feel my wild heart beat.

Dear laws, be wings to me!
The feather merely floats. O be it heard
Through weight of life—the skylark’s gravity—
That I am not a feather, but a bird.

The rising and falling accents sustain the hypothesis of this poem, namely, that its lyric subject comes to life through rhythmic beats like those of a heart or of a bird's wings. In the first stanza, this rhythm is figured as a weight bearing down on "my breast," measuring "all my frame" in a pattern of stressed syllables that animate the poem "so ruled, so warmed, so pressed" into a living body; the reiteration of "so" is a rhythmic marker, allowing the stress to be felt on "ruled" and "warmed" and "pressed" in a series of iambs. The stanza ends "aware" of the rhythmic pulse of its own breath, and able to "feel" a wild heart that beats within the regularity of its iambic pentameter lines. Thus metrical law is embodied in a "more vital union" of mind and body, perfectly illustrating a point made by Patmore (in his "Essay on English Metrical Law," paraphrasing Hegel): that "art, indeed, must have a body as well as a soul; and the higher and purer the spiritual, the more powerful and unmistakable should be the corporeal element" (7).

Against the weight of this corporeal element, the second stanza rises toward a spiritual element, more abstract and less human. Here the accents
something heard, a mental apprehension of meter in the mind’s eye and
the mind’s ear.

Meynell also articulated this formal principle in “Symmetry and
Incident,” published in The Colour of Life, and Other Essays on Things Seen and
Heard, a volume (not incidentally) dedicated to Coventry Patmore. Link-
ing repetition and interruption of pattern in the visual arts (specifically,
in Japanese compositions) to symmetry and variation in musical com-
positions, Meynell points out the value of empty space: “But as time, not si-
ence, is the subject, or material, of contrast in musical pauses, so it is the
measurement of space—that is collocation—that makes the value of
empty intervals” (145). Her argument about formal patterning proceeds
not simply as a comparison of temporal and spatial forms, but also as a
conversion of one into the other through the law of rhythm. Although
things heard and things seen take different material forms, they all de-
pend on symmetry (literally, a “measuring together”) as their basic law.
But symmetry depends in turn on “incident,” an interruption that allows
the law to materialize in a particular medium and to be felt precisely in
its absence: that is the value of empty intervals.

For Meynell the best example, and indeed the very definition, of sym-
metry is the law of meter, for in poetry we have the convergence of what
is seen and what is heard, in patterns marked by interruption. This under-
standing of meter defined by metrical variation is drawn from Patmore,
quoting by Meynell at the end of her essay in order to conclude her med-
itation on symmetry and incident. According to Patmore, “Law . . . should
be the poet’s only subject”; the poet should demonstrate how “the
music of verse arises, not from infraction but from inflection of the law
of the set metre . . . in correspondence with feelings and passions.” In-
deed, it is the inflection of meter that produces passion, as “law puts a
strain upon feeling, and feeling responds with a strain upon law” (151).
This mutual restraint defines the lyric strains of Meynell’s poetry, bend-
ing the bonds of verse without breaking them, creating inflection without
infraction.

Following Patmore’s claim that “the poet’s only subject” should be
“law,” Meynell made the laws of verse the subject of her poem “The Laws
of Verse.” But in versifying the argument of Patmore’s essay, Meynell re-
verses his claim into a question about what it would mean to make met-
rical law into her poem’s object. Is the title of her poem announcing the
Law of versification or the versification of the law? Should we read “The Laws of Verse” as subjective or objective genitive? The poem does not simply propose a grammatical inversion or pose a rhetorical question; it suggests the possibility of reading meter nonimmetically and nonexpressively: not as the metrical embodiment of its meaning, not as the metrical expression of the poet’s feeling, but as the performance of affect produced by formal abstraction.

The intimacy of address to “[d]ear laws” suggests a passionate attachment to form itself, variously interpreted by recent critics as Meynell’s expression or repression of personal feeling. In her feminist recovery of Meynell as “poetess among poets,” Beverly Schlack approaches “The Laws of Verse” as a poem of “erotic abandon” that also “gives poignant expression to woman’s insecurity as artist,” while Vanessa Furse Jackson emphasizes the irony that “one of [Meynell’s] most passionate, even sensuous poems, should be devoted to an expression of her poetics.” Despite the difference in perspective, both critics read the poem expressively, assuming that its lyric subject can be referred back to a person, and identifying Meynell with the desire to be the bird in the poem.

But what if we read the first-person pronoun as a metrical mark, another “empty interval” that is present only to mark an absence? The first-person singular is introduced gradually in the poem, first as a possessive pronoun (“all my frame”), next as a direct object (“around me”), and only then as a grammatical subject in “I breathe” and “I feel.” If we scan this line, the “I” is an unstressed syllable, and it is not until the second stanza that the pronoun is a stressed syllable: first, as a direct object of the imperative (“be wings to me!”), and more emphatically in the final line: “That I am not a feather, but a bird.” Here “I” emerges as the subject, grammatically and rhythmically speaking, except that it is identified with a bird that must be read as a metrical figure and not a human being. The detachment of the pronoun from the person makes it difficult, then, to read the poem as self-expression.

This detachment has led other critics to understand “The Laws of Verse” as repression rather than expression of personal feeling. In Angela Leighton’s reading of Meynell, “[T]hose laws, of metricality, impersonality, exactness, but also of a certain meager and precious dispassionateness, became a lifelong poetic creed,” a self-imposed faith not only in poetry but in the law of the father and of the Catholic church. To reinforce the feeling of constraint and self-restraint, Leighton mentions a familiar description of Meynell as a “tethered angel” behind the bars of a cage, quoted from the novelist Phyllis Bottome: “The sense of this disciplined self-control was so severe, and yet so impassioned, that it hurt me. I wanted to break down the bars and I knew that I never could. A.M. meant never to have the bars broken down.” From this, Leighton concludes there must be “an unbreakable imaginative bar to passion,” except perhaps when “Meynell’s poetry risks becoming impassioned about the bars” (247). But the “risk” of “becoming impassioned about the bars” might be the primary reason for reading her poems metrically, not as a bar to passion but as the performance of passion through these metrical bars. Meynell’s attachment to the “[d]ear laws” of verse is a formal relation best understood as a detachable form of intimacy: not her own passion, but a disciplined affect that produces passion as its effect.

While Leighton considers “The Laws of Verse” a poem of personal “dispassionateness,” its impersonality could be considered the mark of Meynell’s passionate style as a female aesthete. In The Forgotten Female Aesthetes, Talia Schaffer emphasizes Meynell’s construction of “an inviolable public persona, behind which she could hide her private self,” a self so private that even her daughter recalled that “with her children she had always preserved the privacy and formality of a stranger in her personal things.” Yet the formality of her self-presentation created a kind of intimacy, within the family and in public, so that Meynell was widely read as a woman of letters who revealed true womanhood, in poetry and in prose. Already as a girl, Meynell recognized the literary conventions of such self-revelation: she wrote in her diary that any girl who “thrills through every nerve and fibre of her intense self-consciousness” might “if her nerves are tolerably in tune with one another” grow into “a great woman—a writer, say, famous for laying bare the melancholy secrets of the female heart to the curious gaze of material-minded man.” Toward the end of her life, when she had indeed grown into “a great woman,” she would write “The Laws of Verse” as if to lay bare the secret rhythms of the female heart: “I feel my wild heart beat.” But what the poem reveals to “material-minded man” is the spiritualization of meter: the rhythm of the woman’s wild heartbeat has been transformed into the metrical form of her poem, intensifying its effect (and its affect) through a formalization rather than personalization of passion.
An Inverse Flight

The spiritualization of literature was part of a fin-de-siècle aesthetic urged by Arthur Symons in his manifesto *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). With the French symbolist poets as his inspiration, Symons writes about their perfection of form as a necessary annihilation of traditional poetic forms: “It is all an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric,” he claims, adding that “the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings.” But for Meynell, verse did not need to be broken in order to fly on subtler wings; she preferred “the skylark’s gravity” to the free-floating feather of free verse, as we have seen, following Patmore’s insistence, in his “Essay,” on “the necessity of the material counterpoise afforded by metre to the high spirituality of poetic thought” (41). Instead of turning to the example of French poetry in order to break the regular beat of verse, she returned to the English metrical law exemplified in Patmore’s odes. At a time when meters were breaking up in English poetry, Meynell was one of last readers to feel the difference between bending and breaking metrical law, between feeling the bonds of verse and (no longer) suffering them.

Meynell’s late essay “Coventry Patmore” can be read as a response to Symons and his contemporaries. Although Patmore’s odes might have looked and sounded like free verse to many, Meynell knew their irregular meter had been written in accordance with his theories to demonstrate the power of infection without infradiction of the law. To recognize the law at work in Patmore’s poetry required not only “a mind trained in the less obvious measures and restraints both of thought and of verse,” as we have already noted, but also “liberty, flight, height, courage, a sense of space and a sense of closeness, readiness for spiritual experience, and all the gravity, all the resolution of the lonely reader of a lonely poet.” It seems that Meynell alone was still able to read *The Unknown Eros* with a sense of gravity. Reaching the height of language by feeling its weight, Meynell tried to trace the “profound flight” of Patmore’s odes, showing how he went “far in an inverse flight—intimately into time and space, remotely into the heart of hearts.”

Or perhaps this inverse flight was hers. Even more than showing us how to read Patmore’s odes, her essay suggests a way of reading “The Laws of Verse” as a poem that performs his law in verse. Flying “remotely into the heart of hearts” is an apt phrase for her poem’s revelation of a heart beating, and flying “intimately into time and space” is an equally apt phrase for the poem’s identification of, and with, a bird in flight. Figured in “the skylark’s gravity” is the temporal and spatial movement of Meynell’s poem, an abstract pattern that is perceived in the rise and fall of its meter and is, as I have suggested, simultaneously remote and intimate. Despite the final proclamation, “I am not a feather but a bird,” the formal abstraction of the poem makes it difficult to identify Meynell personally with this bird.

Easier to identify within the poem is the skylark of Percy Bysshe Shelley. In his “Ode to a Skylark,” the bird is invoked as a figure for the poetry that the poet has projected into nature:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit! 
Bird thou never wert—
That from Heaven or near it
Fourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Meynell’s poem aspires to embody in the first person the “blithe spirit” addressed by Shelley in the second person, with full knowledge that “[b]ird thou never wert.” But rather than treating this figure as an inspiration for “unpremeditated art,” Meynell’s poem is artfully premeditated to feel its own lyric strain: not “in profuse strains” but as a brief meditation in carefully measured pauses, not “full” with sound but better heard in moments of silence. While Shelley appeals to the skylark to teach its skills—“better than all measures / Of delightful sound”—to man, Meynell’s bird has already incorporated those measures as a man-made (or woman-made) discipline.

In “The Laws of Verse,” Meynell therefore seems to reverse the movement of Shelley’s ode, by performing the trope of the skylark in an inverse flight: rather than invoking nature as a figure for poetry, she invokes poetry as a figure for nature. Despite these different points of departure for their flights of fancy, Meynell shares common poetic ground with Shelley in trying to project the laws of verse as a universal phenomenon. As we recall from “The Rhythm of Life,” Shelley was singled out by Meynell as one of the few who have knowledge of “recurrences” in nature.
he is mentioned as a poet who refused “deliberate human rules” when these proved to be “infractions of the liberty and law of the universal movement” (3). Meynell considered Shelley a poet of inflections and not infractions, attending to the laws of the universe even when he seemed to rebel against the human rules of verse. At the end of his “Ode to a Skylark,” Shelley has become an intermediary for the skylark’s song, projecting his own poem into the future so that “the world should listen then, as I am listening now.” In listening to Shelley’s skylark, Meynell’s poem does not echo its song but reiterates the lesson that Meynell read in his poetry: refiguring the laws of verse as the rhythms of nature, she can claim, as she does in “The Rhythm of Life,” that if life is not always poetical, it is at least metrical.

And often life did appear to Meynell in a metrical form. She notes the daily song of a blackbird, more mundane than that of a poetical skylark:

The blackbird is generally in the major, but he knows the minor scale, and now and then sings a more than usually lovely phrase in it. . . . By listening you may hear the same phrase for several successive days, especially from such a tree at such an hour; but it is not certainly, though it is probably, the same bird every time. He comes while the dawn is still dark and cool, and sings his few and intelligible notes aloud, in their definite shape and form. Other kinds of birds are still whispering, without rhythm or rest. He is the only singer of perfect and valued pauses.11

Although it is “not certainly” the same bird every time, Meynell carefully measures the timing of its song. With the same phrase heard on successive days, in the same tree at the same hour, in the same definite shape and form, the regularity of this song makes the blackbird sound metrical: a “singer of perfect and valued pauses” not unlike the pauses that Meynell cultivated in her poetic meters. The phrase she admires in particular is in the minor scale, heard in more subtle intervals by a more subtle ear as a variation on the major key: another exercise in symmetry and incident, a formal pattern defined by interruption that is heard but not seen.

Increasingly, the blackbird sounds like an embodiment of English metrical law, and indeed in her “Coventry Patmore” essay, Meynell mentions that hearing “the blackbird at dawn . . . brought him in full the message of the wild suggestion that never left poet’s heart at rest” (109). That wild suggestion of song, never leaving any poet’s heart at rest, stirs in the heart of her own poems as well; given her claim to be “not a feather but a bird” it is possible to place Meynell within a long tradition of identifying poetesses with birdsong. Thus, not long after her death, she was remembered for “a bird-like quality in her writing, which is at once intense but detached.”12 But insofar as Meynell’s writing was “bird-like,” it also performed its detachment from that traditional trope for spontaneous song: her poems took the form not of singing but of listening for the pauses, incorporated, as we have seen, in the silent music of “To the Beloved” and in the metrical impulse of “The Laws of Verse.” In such poems we are startled by a phenomenon that is neither bird nor woman but meter itself, perceived in rare intervals by poets at the end of one century and the beginning of the next: in the beauty of inflections and innuendos, in the silence heard just after.

Notes


7. The friendship between Patmore and Meynell began in 1892. Their initial intimacy and later estrangement is described by June Badeni in The Slender Tree: A Life of
Alice Meynell (Falstaff, U.K: Tabb House, 1981), chap. 11. According to Badeni, the gift of Patmore’s manuscripts to Meynell “acknowledged both his love for her and her love for his poetry” (105); Badeni reprints two of Patmore’s poems written in praise of Meynell (105–6). See also Derek Patmore, *The Life and Times of Coventry Patmore* (London: Constable, 1949).

8. Alice Meynell’s notebook entry, quoted by Badeni in *Slender Tree*, 243.


10. In her essay “The Second Person Singular,” Meynell laments the improper use of this grammatical form. “Must we needs, as we go on, grow so lax?” she wonders, and concludes it would be worthwhile “to recall, responsibly, the second person singular” to “make our language again more various and more charming” (Alice Meynell, *The Second Person Singular, and Other Essays* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924], 138–39). I am grateful to Emily Harrington for stimulating conversation about various forms of address to “you” in Meynell’s poems.


14. Meynell’s theory of meter as a “universal movement” that is also a measure of thought corresponds to the work of E. S. Dallas, one of the nineteenth-century prosodists reviewed by Patmore in his “Essay on English Metrical Law.” I wish to thank Adela Pitch for sharing with me her work on forms of metrical thinking in Dallas and Patmore.


28. From the diary of Alice Thompson in 1865, quoted in Badeni, Slender Tree, 28.


31. Quoted from "The Wares of Autolycus," Alice Meynell's column in the Pall Mall Gazette, in Badeni, Slender Tree, 208.