

them.” Likewise, the spiritual world emerges through the imperfections and vicissitudes of the material. Color resides in stains, interest in impurity.

The line from Kafka that opens the book is revisited at its close and transformed. Here Kafka’s words stain, and are also elided by, the pure negative space of the page, which literalizes, even materializes, the spiritual world. The slow, deliberate rhythms deliver us to the brink of that world just as that rhythm begins to abate:

Kafka: fact

nothing

nothing but a spirit world  
nothing but

deprives

gives  
certainty.

*Crosses* is a book of Good Fridays, of crosses fashioned from struck trees that still absorb—and exude—the blood of bodies nailed to them. The light filtering through its pages is the light of the final hours of the Passion. The sun is awash in sacrificial blood—the blood of “an ongoing sacrifice,” an endless crucifixion on the cross of time and eternity. And if these poems are approached with the attention they call for, one might participate in the spiritual world they evoke, looking upon oneself as through a glass, stained.

Jeremy Biles

§

Simon Jarvis, *The Unconditional*. London: Barque Press, 2005. 242pp. \$35

It would defeat rhetoric to overstate the peculiarity of Simon Jarvis’s book, *The Unconditional: A Lyric*; this must be among the most peculiar books ever published, up there with Raymond Roussel’s *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, to which its multiple parentheses and interminable prosody seem to pay tribute. Imagine if you can an enterprise as formally intricate as Roussel’s, a continuous poem of 237 pages mainly in iambic pentameter,

in which whole pages pass without a full stop, but dedicated to a high level discourse on prosody, critical theory, and phenomenology; all this conducted in a philosophical language drawing on Adorno's negative dialectics and on critiques of Husserl and Heidegger, hybridized with a macaronic descriptive and narrative language which is the unnatural offspring of Wyndham Lewis and P.B. Shelley.

The poem is peopled, or one might say *characterised*, by a cast of discussants like refugees from an Iain Sinclair novel finally fed up with walking: these characters are =x ("For purposes of performance," the endnote advises, "the character could be rendered by so much of a gulp as can be achieved without swallowing"), Agramant, Qnuxmuxkyl, and Jobless. The action promises to involve a road trip, perhaps starting in Cambridge and heading for London, but it reaches no farther territorially than a pub in Stevenage, which is like setting out from Chicago to survey America and being detained for months in a bar in South Bend with ears chewed incessantly by its opinionated and improbably erudite denizens.

To describe this poem's prosody in terms of its metrics would be inadequate, for what it engenders in the reader's breast is far from the regularity and reassurance of Alexander Pope's numbers or from the stabbing and poking of a satirist like Charles Churchill. When it comes to low-life novels it may be commonplace to talk of a literary experience as a roller-coaster ride, but *The Unconditional* fully justifies the figure. Pages of impossibly headlong rhythm will be startlingly blocked, for example, by three or more lines ending with the same monosyllabic word, and after turning on this dime, will again charge off harum-scarum through a 300-word rhyme-propelled sentence. The poem transits between rhyming couplets and blank verse, with these transitions often near-imperceptible; caesuras are extremely rare and rhymes almost always monosyllabic, hence at once thumpingly marking the lines' enjambment and rushing across such traffic calming measures. Here are iambs with the insistence of rap.

After this description the reader may wonder if he or she is being invited to take such a caper seriously. But although the poem may be eccentric to a marked extent, it belongs to a serious enterprise; its matter is consistent with Simon Jarvis's published philosophical and literary critical work, and in a profound sense the poem acts as that work's exemplar. Jarvis's overarching thesis is specified by both the poem's title and the title of his essay in *Critical Quarterly*, "Prosody as Cognition." What Jarvis floats and what his poetical carry-on would demonstrate is that poetry is not only a linguistic practice, but that poetry (of a kind or kinds requiring to be identified) may arrive at a special kind of cognition wherein knowledge and information cannot be distinguished from formal attributes—and the tissue of references to a variety of music in *The Unconditional*, suggests one way in which this claim might

be understood. Jarvis's position evidently is related to Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, which gives precedence to a theory of art over a theory of truth, and might be supported by readings of Shelley (the poems and "The Defence of Poetry") or Celan (the poems and "Meridian")—or indeed of Wordsworth, the subject of a forthcoming book by Jarvis.

"The unconditional" is a term surely intended to evoke the great concluding passage of Theodore Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, where a negative utopianism, that is a redemptive utopianism, which is understood to be impossible, even absurd as conceived in Celan's "Meridian" address, is articulated as the necessary horizon for art, philosophy, and political struggle. Indeed it becomes a condition for thought:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.

The polemical tendency of Jarvis's book *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* is precisely to reassert this imperative for negative utopianism in the face of postmodern dismissals of grand narrative and eschatology. Jarvis's fear is that the extinction of a utopian horizon for the left leads necessarily to the installation of capitalism as an historical terminus, as a new nature succeeding that obsolete natural world now thoroughly subordinated and exploited.

How then do prosody as cognition and negative utopianism meet in *The Unconditional*?

Lovers of harmony though heard it shine  
 in K. 491 in '48  
 the obsolescence of whose vinyl corps  
 adds exercising inexplicitness  
 with every surface flaw upon the scale  
 unloosing chromaticism from its lock  
 to waver gently out into the air  
 of a new planet treading shakily  
 or as a lamb will wobble on the grass  
 so this cadenza lacked all certainty  
 other than that belief which bears us up  
 from one step to the next before we think  
 how to fall over into earth or drink))))))

It is characteristic of Jarvis's dialectical habits that the utopian horizon of Mozart's music becomes persuasive only when heard through the surface flaws of a vinyl record, the danger of derailment attending every ethereal melody. "Lovers of harmony" must be set on edge so as not to float into a complacent sphere beyond all struggle, equipped with SACD, DVD-A, and the consumer clutter purporting to unveil some absolute original, a "performance" like the creation of the world. Similarly poetry should be constituted corporeally rather than divided from the loam of language as a pure showing-forth; poetry should not be understood as a discursive intervention, subordinate to theoretical or critical prescription, nor as a set of objects for adjustment in the workshop, followed by contemplation and categorization. The poetry which concerns Jarvis, and which he aspires to make, plays out of the body as instrument and substrate—so reputedly Jarvis declines to read from his poem but will recite it from memory. Thus while prosody may refer to form, form itself must be understood in its emergence, by acknowledging that the embodied memory which utters it has itself been shaped collectively. Prosody mediates between language, the flesh, and the collective. Divorcing the semantic content of the poem from its prosodic disposition re-enacts the Cartesian cleavage of mind and body.

Jarvis's choice of a traditional English poetic meter has nothing anachronistic about it; it permits him to assert a collective history and experience as a ground-bass to his exceedingly wayward meditations and poetic flights. Furthermore he plays very fast and loose prosodically, some passages slamming in a four-beat and others doubling up to ten:

As in the end of deference referring its slaves with less of a little incision  
 As an unending vale of suffering shedding allegory with a little  
 inattention  
 As in an undated marvel of a laved trove bleeding mythful goth with a lot of  
 flotation

Nevertheless the pentameter asserts itself throughout, a continually breaking wave, both predictable and ever-mutative. The poem's prosody works both with and against the pentameter's pulse, alarmingly jittering into cardiac overdrive, grinding down to treadmill trudge.

What are the conditions under which formalistic verse might encode a cognitive adventure, rather than an exercise in a different, reactionary kind of ideological complicity? Some quite different instances come to mind; the poems of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, written at the structuralist moment but remaining under the spell of late Victorian artifice and enamoured of William Empson's example; the sports of John Ashbery; and perhaps the nearest relative to *The Unconditional*, Edward Dorn's oddly disregarded poem *The Cycle*, an interlude in rhymed quatrains to Dorn's free verse epic *Slinger* and like Jarvis's poem filled with Shelleyan echoes:

I see cars drawn by rainbow-wingèd steeds  
Which trample the dim winds: in each there stands  
A wild-eyed charioteer urging their flight  
On a long take-off roll, this is the purging of the beads.

*Slinger* in its entirety and especially *The Cycle* and *The Winterbook* (Book III), is one of the most convincing large-scale enterprises of prosody as cognition in English besides Shelley's; for Jarvis surely jests when he points to the poetic truth of John Dyer's *The Fleece*, an instructional epic on sheep-rearing from 1757. The characters of *The Cycle*, The Janitor, Rupert, the Atlantes, ViceVersa and *um*, might readily take a break in Stevenage with the Jarvis gang, even if their discourse is more pre-Socratic than negative-dialectical.

At several points in his poem Jarvis confronts individualist or ultra-materialist heresies; he swipes at biologism, Rawlsian contract ethics, and fashionable dismissals of metaphysics. Jarvis seems to espouse a phenomenology reminiscent of Levinas in the importance of the face-to-face encounter and an ethics of redemption. Rather than seeking a phenomenological fullness-in-recognition, however, he courts "the not-made, truth" through following (or accompanying critically) the unfolding of works of art. Fullness-in-recognition would depend too abjectly on an expressivity in accord with the ideal of the perfect rendition, one sought in the recording studio or in an actor's declamation of verse. In this sense it would correspond to what Roland Barthes terms an "expressive reduction" in his essay "The Grain of the Voice," whereas "the not-made, truth" entails a following of the grain, with the conceptually-emergent and the corporeal united in an exploratory prosody.

But aesthetic objects to be followed surely must constitute a special class, exceeding the solicitations of impact, presence, and sublimity held to

diagnose an object as an artwork. For instance the conception of Shelley's poetry as ethereal and vague neglects its materialism, both political and scientific; the work is animated by contradictions which it never overcomes but which prosodically are held in a meteorological cycle of formation, ethereality, dissolution, material fertilisation, sterility or destruction, and re-suspiration. Hence its flights and faints, rendered by Jarvis as follows:

Determinedly comprehend each most extended tongue of spirit in my  
Dim yet still clarifying cloud map as of listening or dumb not deaf or glistening  
Determinedly erase when what evasing vague areas of spiritlessness can  
or will claim  
Disesperatively revive with vir or cano of minute compassion this bashed up  
Diminishment of own soul sunken in the abashed lossface and its nerveless  
cheek  
Dyspraxially to disprefix a a praxis or are that is one good  
Disincarnation not sliding aloft but singing open at open Love

For Jarvis, politics demands a prosody competent to animate the lamb—a lamb of God, a Blakean lamb—since without such a redemptive moment, politics subsides into administrative reason. On the other hand, one cannot entirely disconnect politics from the fantasy of a realised eschatology. While there are moments in *The Unconditional* which seem to accept Christianity as a redemptive structure, there is also a caveat that Christianity's authority must be kept in abeyance. As Joseph Joubert wrote in 1797 in an uncanny anticipation of negative utopianism, "The staircase that leads us to God. What does it matter if it is make-believe, if we really climb it? What difference does it make who builds it, or if it is made of marble or wood, of brick, stone, or mud? The essential thing is that it be solid and that in climbing it we feel the peace that is inaccessible to those who do not climb it." Such bracketing of eschatology is critical to the negative dialectics of Jarvis's utopianism.

It has become a required gesture in discussions of Anglo-American modernism to condemn all aesthetically-founded politics. But in order to accept the invitation of *The Unconditional*, one must interrogate this broad condemnation. For even the (politically) perilous aesthetic of Imagism could take a dialectical turn in the poetry of Zukofsky and Oppen, and later open into the non-human universe with Olson. Each of these modernist inheritors espoused a different version of poetry as cognition which led to work exceeding any *position*. Olson's argument with Descartes and his insistence on a collective history-making and proprioception, not to belabor the implications of breath as measure, anticipate Jarvis's remarkable adventure. It is a sign of the importance of Jarvis's work as a whole that it reconfigures the past so that Shelley and Olson can be aligned in an unanticipated way.

This short review represents a first attempt at positioning *The Uncondi-*

*tional*, an ironical traducing which a reviewer can hardly avoid. A reviewer selects a theme and, now subservient to the production of evidence, betrays the poem. So this will end with another passage designed to support points established, like crampons in an avalanche.

yet holding secret all its inner sense  
a fine one particle within him sings  
doing what A's fat textbook says you can't  
willing a meaning to the edge of birth  
renewing thought in beating down all dearth  
as when apparently from scraps of noise  
apparently not placed but simply thrown  
or simply falling through the atmosphere  
a non contingent pressure or a sense  
patterns a ripple or a pulse of skin  
or reaches with a tongue tip to announce  
both what it wants to taste and what it speaks  
or trips along a lawful palate so  
as magic floating down to earth or so  
ascending to no other place than this  
circumference of objects thinking bliss  
or central bosom of all mutual aid  
infinitesimally melody  
willed and invented or retrieved and made

John Wilkinson