

ELEVEN

'Hardly they heard'

JEFF DOLVEN

If thou wilt not be seene, thy face goe hide away,
Be none of us, or els maintaine our fashion:
Who frownes at others' feastes, dooth better bide away.

But if thou hast a Love, in that Love's passion,
I challenge thee by shew of her perfection,
Which of us two deserveth most compassion.

Sir Philip Sidney, 'Come, *Dorus*, come', 13–18¹

In the first eclogues of Sidney's old *Arcadia*, the shepherds gather to sing the customary mix of plaint, praise, and game that holds their little community together. Among them on this particular afternoon is a newcomer, a nobleman in rustic disguise: Musidorus, prince of Thessaly, who has fallen in love with the Arcadian Duke's daughter Pamela in her pastoral exile. (His cousin, Pyrocles, has fallen for her sister Philoclea, and he too joins the entertainment, disguised as an Amazon.) Dorus looks the shepherd's part, but his lovelorn melancholy singles him out, and so one of the shepherds – Lalus, accounted the best of their singers – challenges him to a contest in praise of their mistresses. 'Come, *Dorus*, come', he begins,

let songs thy sorowes signifie:

And if for want of use thy minde ashamed is,
That verie shame with Love's high title dignifie.

No stile is held for base, where Love well named is:
Ech eare suckes up the words a true love scattereth,
And plaine speach oft then quaint phrase better framed is.

(1–6)

The invitation is a little condescending, allowing that Dorus may be out of practice, and reassuring him that there is no shame in a plain (read, beginner's) style. Still Lalus seems to be genuine enough. He wants to make a show of his skill, but he also wants to bring this outsider into their company. Dorus takes up the challenge:

Nightingales seldome sing, the Pie still chattereth:
 The wood cries most, before it throughly kindled be,
 Deadly wounds inward bleed, ech sleight sore mattereth.
 Hardly they heard, which by good hunters singled be.
 Shallow brookes murmure most, deep silent slide away;
 Nor true love loves his loves with others mingled be.

(7–12)

Lalus has opened with two handsome stanzas of hexameter in terza rima, a linked form that gives Dorus his first rhyme. The rhythms are conservative, varied only by a possible opening trochee in the first line, and the caesurae gravitate to the middle. If this is a representative specimen of their eclogue verse, then the Arcadian shepherds are well up-to-date. Next, Musidorus's answer gamely takes up the rhyme word, but the imagery immediately takes a dark turn, and more significantly, the rhythms are very different – you might even say, *avant garde*. This is no shepherd's song. It must fall upon the gathered shepherds' ears like a Rite of Spring.

That claim wants some justification, justification that will have to happen at three scales: the fiction of attention that Sidney has written between these two characters (which continues for another hundred and sixty-two lines of close poetical combat), the attention that he was soliciting from his contemporaries, and how we, four hundred some years later, should tune our own attending ears to what he has made. For you could think of Dorus's listening to Lalus, and then responding, as a kind of fantasy of reading, and therefore as a possible recommendation to anyone who has in his or her hands the book that records that fantasy. If what is at stake is reading, however, it is not interpretation – or if so, only in the

trivial sense in which everything is interpretation. Certainly there is no explicit attempt on Dorus's part to say what the preceding stanza might mean. The idiom of response is 'poetry, not prose; imitation, not exegesis. And while such a response requires the closest attention, its aims and its techniques are different from what we tend to practise today under the banner of close reading. This essay is a brief study in the kind of attention that this short stretch of song calls for, as a way of asking ourselves what it would mean to read closely without putting interpretation first.

I want to consider that kind of attention under two heads, skill and style, beginning within the fiction, as though Lalus and Dorus were improvising their songs in something like the real time it takes to read them once. They commit to being judged in relation to a standard that will be set on the fly, which means that they must attend closely to poetic form not as an ideal and immanent architecture, but as a set of rules for carrying on. Imagine how Dorus has to listen, hearing first the iambic movement (after that initial trochee), then the hexameter, then the three-syllable rhyme ('signifie', 'dignifie': surely an aggressive challenge to set someone you take for a beginner!). The rhyme scheme unfolds, *ababc* – so far, it seems likely to be a sixaine, with a closing couplet. (The Arcadian forest has already heard three of them, from various singers.) Then comes 'framéd is', repeating the *b*-rhyme, signalling that the form is in fact terza rima, and handing Dorus 'scattereth' at the very last moment. He has to adapt as he goes – he has the form, but again, as a way of proceeding, and it is his turn now. As he gathers all this, he must also listen for how Lalus is setting the form's tolerances. They are more or less standard for the hexameter line of the 1570s, as a poet like George Gascoigne might write it: a settled caesura, occasional inversions, mostly in the first position, decorums which were shared by the pentameter line.²

All of which is to say that Lalus is proposing a technical challenge and, at the same time, setting a standard by which the skill of both participants can be measured. Skill is a matter of the well-handling of agreed-upon rules.³ It solicits praise for technical accomplishment, and does not particularly ask for a given performance to be

distinctive in its manner. On the contrary, the rules can be shared entirely, the same for all. (You might say that art here comes closest to sport.) It is open to Dorus to respond in like kind, adopting Lalus's deference to love as an enabler of good verse along with his implicit account of how good verse sounds. But that is not what he does. Granted, the first line is rhythmically similar to Lalus's, with its opening inversion, and the second, though its image is arresting, is an even run of iambs. But his answer is no docile imitation, and indeed, however carefully he may be listening, it is not clear that he even addresses his opponent when his turn comes. In the new stanza, Lalus is cast as a chattering magpie, while the dayworld of pastoral plunges into darkness and the trees that shade the singing burst into flame. This revolution takes hold of the verse with the third line, 'Deadly wounds inward bleed, each slight sore mattereth'. How to hear its rhythm? There is a trochee to start, to be sure; perhaps the iambs stabilise after that, '*Deadly wounds inward bleed, each slight sore mattereth*'. Or perhaps the second half of the line starts the same way, with another inversion, '*each slight sore mattereth*'. Not so uncommon in the period, an inversion after the caesura. But the effect repeats itself in the middle of the next tercet, '*Shallow brookes murmure most, deep silent slide away*', scanned here to allow both inversions again. Such a double symmetry, within and between the two lines, is a bravura effect. There may moreover be a provocation to something still more radical, if we hear those openings as dactyls and allow them to coax the rest of the line to follow suit in triple rhythm: '*Deadly wounds inward bleed, each slight sore mattereth*'; '*Shallow brookes murmure most, deep silent slide away*'. Four-beat lines are intruding in a poem of sixes. Where are Lalus's rules now?

These are strong words, 'revolution' and 'radical', to use for effects that may sound subtle to unpractised ears. But not too strong. Sidney's book was written at a moment of ferment for English poetry, when metrical skill was still asserting itself precariously in relation to norms only beginning to command wide agreement. Sidney stages within his pastoral a little scene where these new norms matter greatly: the audience of shepherds is,

after all, an audience of fellow makers, cultivating the same art, measuring themselves against one another even as they rely upon the standards of that measurement to hold them together. Dorus plays by the rules he is given for the first two lines, to show he can do it. But the departure that follows is sufficiently strange and defiant to carry us beyond what the rules compass, into the territory of style. If skill is expressed in relation to a standard, style will always trouble that relation: it is a word used then and now to talk both about a shared idiom and a distinctive, individual departure from it, whether wilful or not.⁴ Dorus has broached the problem of style to the extent that he offers his verses not as a proposal for new norms, but as a badge of his unbridgeable difference – his virtuosic, aristocratic suffering among these shepherds, the agonised eloquence of a class of one. (Or perhaps of two, if we include his cousin Pyrocles.)

Lalus's response has something unmistakably defensive about it:

If thou wilt not be seene, thy face goe hide away,
Be none of us, or els maintain our fashion:
Who frownes at others' feastes, dooth better bide away.
But if thou hast a Love, in that Love's passion,
I challenge thee by shew of her perfection,
Which of us two deserveth most compassion.

(13–18)

The first line returns us squarely to the conservative metrics of his overture: steady iambs, a caesura in the middle, that caesura moved a foot backwards in the second line and then to its centre of gravity again in the third. If you insist on being unseen, he says (and perhaps he means, on being unrecognisable), then you do not belong here. If you want to stay, you must maintain our fashion. 'Fashion' is an important word, one that you might say he recaptures from style – Dorus's adventurous singularity – and reassigns to skill. Play by the rules, he says, and he goes on to restate those rules as he makes a second invitation to join the game

of paragons. This exchange is only the beginning of the contest. The remainder plays out this routine of thrust, counter-thrust, and retreat several times as Lalus sets new technical challenges, and Dorus meets them and then more than meets them. Needless to say, the prince could be said to win on skill alone, and William Ringler's edition of Sidney's poetry wonderfully describes Lalus's retrenchment, from triple to double to single rhymes, in the face of his opponent's inexhaustible resources.⁵ But Dorus manages, at the same time, to make mere skill seem a poor part of the true poet's gift.

The scene could be said to be Sidney's fantasy of how his own gift might express itself in a field of poetic conformity. Lalus's inability to keep up, and his preference for shared norms over individual achievement, are a polemical foil for a poetic project in which Sidney may not exactly seek followers. He gives us in Dorus a voice meant both to incite and to defy imitation, that elusive charisma that makes us sometimes speak of style as a secret, even though it consists only in what we can see and hear. How then – how technically, and in what spirit – did he expect the poem to be read? It is important that his first readers, like his shepherds, were an audience of poets. Mary Sidney, *Arcadia's* dedicatee, finished his translation of the psalms after his death; manuscripts of his poems passed through the hands of courtly makers (in Puttenham's phrase⁶) like Edward Dyer and Fulke Greville. Perhaps the Earl of Oxford, no friend of Sidney's, was looking on, and certainly Edmund Spenser and Gabriel Harvey were straining for a glimpse, from Leicester's household and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, respectively. For all of them, these subtle matters of poetic technique were tokens of membership and estrangement, of lineage and community and the desire to stand apart from both. Spenser and Harvey's arguments about the rules of quantitative meter make such manoeuvrings patent: 'I would hartily wish', writes Spenser, 'you would either send me the Rules and Precepts of Arte, which you obserue in Quantities, or else followe mine, that M. Philip Sidney gaue me ... that we might both accorde and agree in one: leaste we ouerthrowe one

an other, and be ouerthrown of the rest.'⁷ A version of the same half-competitive, half-collaborative adjustment is happening in Sidney's verse, implicitly, and with the same high cultural stakes.

The challenge for us as readers is to imagine having an ear tuned to such discriminations, where technical perceptions and value judgments and social proprioception are all mixed together. Such an ear is a greedy ear, as Lalus allows: 'Ech eare suckes up the words a true love scattereth'. To listen or to read for style is not a neutral disposition, such as the interpreter is often advised to adopt. It is covetous: at the least, sensitive to the self-fashioning ambitions of others, and ideally a little ambitious in its own right. It also requires experience, a wide acquaintance allowing for the recognition not only of forms, but of their origins and their tolerances and their manifold purposes. Reading with an imitative ear breaks down the differences between reading and writing upon which our modernity characteristically insists. Making a poem is a good way of knowing the poems you have read, just as making an essay can be a good way of knowing the essays you have read, when you are self-conscious about the sources, not only of your thoughts, but of your sentences. Such practices have a very long history in literary pedagogy.

Which is to say that this kind of making, in which all of the Renaissance writers we read were trained, is another form of attention, of close attention, even close reading. The contest between Lalus and Dorus is a little master class for readers of *Arcadia*. I have emphasised attention to rhythm, but the attention of the singing contest – and every poem ever written is caught up in some singing contest or other – can fall upon anything, the way the vowels grow more lax over the course of the half-line 'deep silent slide away', the dogged repetition of 'love' (a Sidneian signature), or for that matter whatever these stanzas might be said to be *about* (for example, the way such repetitions figure impasse, and the varieties of impasse).⁸ What is required is an active disposition towards making and the community of makers. *I want some of that; I want to sound like that; or I can imagine what it is like to want to sound like that, I can imagine someone wanting to sound like that, I*

know who wants or wanted to sound like that or consort with others who do or did and so on. Such networks of imitative desire are what hold literary history and literary communities together. There is no way of really knowing them without being part of them, without knowing how to want skill, even style; without the mutual contamination of likeness and liking. In some basic way, the New Criticism, still chief sponsor of our close reading, got its start by suspending questions of what a poem is like in favour of questions about what it means. But likeness, relations not of allusive intertext (a particularly happy hunting ground for interpretation) but of stylistic affinity, has always been a vital part of literary knowledge, of literary life, pointing as it does back into the past, around us to our sects and schisms, and forward into possible futures, poems yet to be made. 'Maintain our fashion,' says Lalus. 'Nor true love loves his loves with others mingled be,' says Dorus. Skill and style. There is a *like* inseparable from *hom*, and you can only get so close to a poem without it.