

## Techne and the Making of Poems and Suits

MARK VARESCHI

It's my real pleasure to offer comment on the essays of Brad Pasanek and Timothy Campbell. Brad Pasanek is associate professor of English at the University of Virginia. He is author of *Metaphors of Mind: An Eighteenth-Century Dictionary* (Hopkins, 2015) [and I'll say that I've pretty shamelessly taken Brad's book as a model for my own] along with numerous articles. Timothy Campbell is assistant professor of English at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Historical Style: Fashion and the New Mode of History, 1740-1830* (Penn, 2016) [which has a really terrific book cover] and a number of articles. What a delight and privilege it is to discuss these scholars' essays.

Pasanek's "Heaps on Heaps: Accumulating Verse" commits the heinous digital humanities sin of showcasing a project, but if it is a sin, it is one easily forgiven as he asks us to think hard about the use and re-use of verse in the poetry of the long eighteenth century. Campbell's "Eighteenth-Century Dress and the Arts of Measure" suggests an antidote to the privileging of abstraction in measurement and quantification by returning us to the embodiment and intimacy of the human body draped by a tailor. What unites these exciting papers is a shared interest in collectivity and craft; in making, over inventing; in shared knowledge over individual genius.

As Mallarmé observed, poems are made from words. This is an insight that shapes Brad Pasanek's pursuit in identifying those "heaps of verse" that appear and reappear throughout our period. Aided by machine learning, but mostly by the labor of marking bigrams—those adjective-noun pairings that are prone to re-use and re-cycling—to teach the robots how to read, Pasanek seeks to develop an account (a quantitative account) of how "new poems are intertwined with older ones, from which, and out of which they are composed."

Poems are made from words, but whose words? From where do those words come? My sense is that the first question is not a pressing concern for Pasanek; please correct me if I'm wrong. In my own work on authorial anonymity in the eighteenth century, I'm all too familiar with the fact that such questions often lead to a dead-end, particularly with literary artifacts as portable as poems. The question of "from where words come" strikes me as a more pressing concern than "whose," and one that quantitative methods are particularly adept at exploring. Human scholars are pretty good at catching allusion, but at a limited scale (Josephine Miles excepted)<sup>1</sup>. Machines are much better and much, much faster. In tracing bigram recycling algorithmically and thereby "leveling" literary history (or, more specifically, the history of poetry), the "heap" disrupts not only our sense—that is, the human sense—of literary prestige, but also the tendency toward a chronology based on date of publication. I mentioned just a moments ago the "portability of poems." Such portability via publication in magazines, anthologies, miscellanies, newspapers, oral recitation, and even (and this will be relevant to Timothy Campbell's paper) printing on textiles means that verse travels across different media, each bearing

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor's Note] On Miles, see Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan, "Search and Replace: Josephine Miles and the Origins of Distant Reading," *Modernism/modernity* volume 3, cycle 1 (April 11, 2018) <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/search-and-replace>

with them different temporalities that disrupt any neat account of influence based on chronology. One question I might pose, is how we account for these temporalities once the media have been flattened via remediation as text file?

We have been told by Wimsatt and Beardsley: “A poem does not come into existence by accident.” Immediately following this sentence in their “Intentional Fallacy” essay, with no detectable irony, they borrow the words of Professor Stoll: “The words of a poem... come out of a head, not out of a hat.”<sup>2</sup> Pasanek suggests words come not from hats, but from other poems that briefly pass through other heads.

From heads and hats we move to chests and jackets and Timothy Campbell’s really quite thrilling and (for me) revelatory essay on custom clothing and measure. Professor Campbell argues of tailoring and the intimate experience of measure that it entailed: “Perhaps no social practice of measure was as widely encountered in such richly embodied ways.” Campbell traces the resistance to quantitative measurement that we inherit, along with many other things, from British Romanticism. Quantification is, it seems, dehumanizing and reductive as figured, quite compellingly in Campbell’s reading of Wordsworth’s “The Thorn.”

Measure, as it was employed in tailoring up to 1800, wherein the measurement was not abstracted via units of measure (inches or centimeters) but fit to the body of the customer via marks on strip of paper is positioned in the literary texts of the period as the antidote to the dehumanization and reductionism. It is, as Campbell writes, “a more humane mode of measure.” And I’ll note here just how much this paper has provoked me to notice how pervasive the language of tailoring is in the texts I teach and write about regularly.

Positioned in this way, measuring as tailoring is the countervailing discourse to that of financialization in the eighteenth century, which has been the subject of many excellent studies over the last two decades. The growing credit economy in its development of ever more complex financial instruments moves further and further from the commodities on which such instruments ostensibly trade. That is, a world made ever more abstract via the quantitative description and statistical analysis of daily life and its objects might find a site of resistance in the practice of being measured for a suit of clothes and the quotidian task of getting dressed and noting that one’s clothes “fit well.”

At the outset of my comment I suggested that these essays might find common ground in a shared interest in collectivity and craft. That is, in the shared practices, sources, and methods of making. We might then say that it is *techne* that unites the concerns of these essays. Henry Staten writes of *techne*: “*techne* in the Greek sense is any historically evolved, systematized method by which some end is attained, whether in the ‘fine arts’ or in any activity of making and doing, to speak of art as *techne* is to focus on perhaps its least sublime aspect—the one it shares with crafts and social practices in general.”<sup>3</sup>

Techne, in Staten’s account (and it is one I’m quite fond of), brings together the making of a poem with the making of a suit or gown. Techne points to the sedimented activity of generations of agents that continues to shape the practices of making. It is an “accumu-

<sup>2</sup> W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>3</sup> [Editor’s Note] For Staten on *techne*, see his “The Origin of the Work of Art in Material Practice,” *New Literary History* 43:1 (2012), 43-64 and *Techne theory: A New Language for Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

lated, impersonal, and productive knowledge of how to produce a specific kind of object” (that’s Staten’s language). What Pasanek and Campbell bring together so beautifully in their essays is the sense of how adjective-noun pairings or the knowledge of translating measure to pattern (and pattern to measure) accumulates and changes over generations. They show just how impersonal these processes often are: we love to speak of poetic geniuses and designers of couture, but even they, or especially they, draw from the “heap” of anonymous verse or clothing design. It is this constant play between the impersonality of method and particularity of the literary artifact or the piece of bespoke clothing manifest through their respective methods that is, I would argue, the provocation to and the task of unraveling set for the literary or cultural historian.