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Roger Pensom, *Accent, Rhythm and Meaning in French Verse*. Oxford: Legenda, 2018. 169 pp. £75.00. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78188-697-7.

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This monograph represents the culmination of Roger Pensom's work on the relationship between accent, rhythm, and meter in French poetry, as explored in previous publications, notably *Accent and Metre in French: A Theory of the Relation between Linguistic Accent and Metrical Practice in French 1100–1900* and *Le Sens de la métrique de François Villon: Le Testament*.^[1] As a note on the acknowledgements page informs us, the author sadly passed away soon after this book went to press, and as such it stands as a tribute to a career-long interest in the intricacies of verse rhythm. Pensom's aim is to disprove the generally accepted thesis according to which the guiding principle of French verse is syllabic by demonstrating, on the contrary, that it is built upon patterns of alternating accent. For the non-specialist, the widely held view might be summarized as follows: the metrical law governing French verse is the juxtaposition of lines which are measured by their number of syllables, usually ranging from two to twelve. The ten-syllable line (decasyllable) and twelve-syllable line (alexandrine) feature a built-in moment of pause, the caesura, which usually coincides with a break in sense and is, therefore, preceded by an accent. All the classical alexandrines of Corneille and Racine, for example, obey this 6/6 model—"Levez-vous l'un et l'autre, # et parlez à loisir" (p. 2)—as do the rhythmically inventive alexandrines of Victor Hugo, while the vast majority of decasyllables are traditionally scanned 4/6, as in this example from La Fontaine: "Maître Corbeau, # sur un arbre perché" (p. 11).

The most influential recent analyst of French verse meter—and the primary target of Pensom's critique—is Benoît de Cornulier, who has expounded his theory of *métrico-métrie* in *Théorie du vers: Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé* as well as *Art poétique: notions et problèmes de métrique* and *De la métrique à l'interprétation*.^[2] Cornulier offered verse analysts a clear system with which to identify metrically irregular lines such as the following alexandrine, which Rimbaud undermines by placing an unaccentuable element before the caesura, disrupting the 6/6 rhythm: "Qui courais, taché **de** # lunules électriques" (p. 3).

While Cornulier's work has been constructively critiqued and refined by scholars such as Clive Scott (*A Question of Syllables: Essays in Nineteenth-Century French Verse* and *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading*) and Jean-Michel Gouvard (*Critique du vers*),^[3] it remains a crucial reference and has provided a framework within which regularity and irregularity may be identified as contributing to the supra-semantic production of meaning which is crucial to the analysis of poetry. One problem, Pensom argues, with this metrical model is that "the reader

toiling through these dense and demanding critical texts" is struck by "the apparent irrelevance of these formal phenomena to the semantic values of the poetry" (p. 3), to the extent that "the metrical and the semantic are thus by implication completely independent of each other" (p. 4). Pensom is right to recognize that Cornulier's quasi-scientific adhesion to objectively identifiable data stops him from offering interpretative readings of that data on the level of individual poems. Yet Cornulier's stated aims lie beyond the particularities of textual exegesis, his ambition being to chart the gradual dissolution of the alexandrine across a vast nineteenth-century corpus, locating its point of rupture in the verse of Rimbaud and Verlaine in the 1870s and 1880s. It has been left to subsequent readers to apply his method to readings of particular texts, and my own experience of interpreting verse through Cornulier's framework has been an extremely productive one. For example, in that alexandrine above, taken from Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre," the metrical jolt which occurs as the caesura is undermined acts precisely as a prompt to scrutinize the semantic level more closely, so that we may identify how the poet's enthusiastic unmooring and plunge into the waves—immediately following the verb "courais"—is enacted on the rhythmical level.

Pensom's primary objection to the metrical model is the lesser status it assigns to accents within the line. In metrical terms, only the accented syllables at sixth and twelfth position play a defining role in the alexandrine, since it is only these accents which are predictable. Thus the accentual make-up of individual half-alexandrines, or hemistichs, while crucial to the rhythmical production of meaning, is not seen as playing a strictly metrical role because it can vary, mostly within the combinations 2/4, 3/3 and 4/2, as in these lines from Alfred de Musset (quoted pp. 5-6, scansion my own): "Le **mal** dont j'ai souffert # s'est enfui comme un **rêve**" 2/4//3/3; "Je n'en **puis comparer** # le lointain souvenir" 3/3//3/3; "Qu'à ces brouillards **légers** # que l'aurore **soulève**" 4/2//3/3; "Et qu'avec la **rosée** # on voit s'évanouir" 3/3//2/4.

Pensom's conviction, however, as he freely admits, flies "in the face of the current consensus" (p. 155). He sets out in this study to argue that poetic texts in French from the twelfth to the twentieth century are based, not on syllable count, but on rule-governed accentual patterns formed mostly of iambs (01) or anapests (001), the basic units of English poetry, despite the very real risk, which he himself acknowledges, of distortion by "a native speaker of English who, like others brought up on accentual verse, may well be foisting his native accentual prejudices on French verse" (p. 16).

The book features two long chapters, the first charts the origin and history of word-accent in French and its role in verse, the second applies this word-accent model to texts in order to demonstrate what it adds to our rhythmic appreciation of poetry, "to discover the origin of its magic" (p. 88). The first, theoretical chapter begins by arguing that word-accent in French developed under "the influence of German speech-habits on the Latin spoken in Gaul" (p. 23), and proceeds from the analysis of Latin verse to nineteenth-century examples, via Old and Middle French, Renaissance and classical French texts in which unstressed syllables are shown to alternate with stressed syllables in largely iambic and anapestic patterns. From this Pensom concludes that "poets after five hundred years of linguistic change are clearly still concerned to avoid the juxtaposition of word-accents. This tendency implies that although word-accent in modern French is weaker with respect to intensity than that of Italian or Spanish, it is still present in the structure of the language" (p. 39). As critics such as Clive Scott have pointed out, foot-based readings can produce some unnatural interpretations of French accentuation and throughout this study, Pensom frequently places an accent on words in quite unnatural ways, as

in this small sample: "A ces mots, le **Corbeau** # **ne** se sent pas de joie" (p. 118); "Ce **Roi fit** toutefois # un tel bruit en tombant" (p. 119); "**Gent fort sotte** et fort peureuse" (p. 119); "Au **bras ivre** et nerveux # du sauvage Eurytus" (p. 123); "Et Cyllare aux **pieds blancs** # et le noir Macarée" (p. 124); "Comme sont les discours des sept **cent plats** belîtres" (p. 127).

These examples are interpreted as irregular juxtapositions of accented syllables, and thus, as meaningful exceptions to Pensom's rule of alternating accent, key sites of meaning in the texts; but a traditional metrical, and more natural, reading of these lines would not accentuate the words "ne," "fit," "Gent," "fort," "bras," "pieds," and "cent," thereby eliminating what Pensom claims are accentual clashes. Too often, extraneous accents are placed within lines which would otherwise provide perfectly regular examples of the generally accepted four-accents-per-alexandrine rule, and I cannot imagine a French reader accentuating the words underlined in the following lines, which leaves the regular scansion I provide after each example: "Les **hommes vont** à **pied** # sous leurs **armes luisantes**" (p. 130), 2/4//3/3; "Le **long** des **chariots** # où les **leurs** sont blottis" (p. 130), 2/4/3//3; "**Tant** les **bancs** sont mouillés, # **tant** les **bois** sont rouillés" (p. 136), 3/3//3/3. Most surprising is this extraordinarily over-accentuated reading of Chénier: "Les **belles font** aimer; **elles aiment**. Les **belles/Nous charment tous**. Heureux qui **peut** être aimé d'elles!" (p. 129). While these lines are certainly more fluid in their placement of mid-hemistich full-stops and *enjambement* than most classical 6/6 alexandrines, they still permit a traditional metrical scansion, and a much more natural reading, as follows: "Les **belles font aimer**; # **elles aiment**. Les **belles**" 2/4//3/3; "Nous charment **tous**. Heureux # qui **peut** être aimé d'elles!" 4/2//2/4. The scensions I provide here are in no way definitive, but they do conform to the legitimate consensus view which does not see iambs and anapests as the driving force behind French verse, owing to the natural accentual pattern of the language, which places accent at the end of a sense-group and not within it.

In support of his accentual readings, Pensom marshals evidence from three different modes of oral performance: French verse read aloud, declaimed on stage, and in song. Firstly, he quotes Eduard Koschwitz's phonetic transcription of Sully-Prudhomme reading out his own verse, as recounted in *Les Parlers parisiens: anthologie phonétique*.^[4] Since the syllable count in alexandrines recited by a Nobel prize-winning poet varies from ten to twelve, does that not, Pensom asks, make a mockery of our attachment to metrical structure (p. 10)? I would suggest not. It is perfectly possible to read verse aloud according to many different imperatives, since its existence when read silently on the printed page differs completely from its oral performance. Indeed, in his final chapter, Pensom himself demonstrates the highly subjective, and variable, nature of this practice. A few years after Koschwitz, researchers at the Sorbonne recorded Apollinaire reciting his poem "Le Pont Mirabeau" (available on YouTube), and in a perfectly metrical—and highly artificial, declamatory—reading he pronounced every syllable including each word-final "e". The fact that Stéphane Hessel, in a recent, unreferenced recording of "La Jolie Rousse," recites the poem "without a single word-final schwa" (p. 140), does not undermine our metrical understanding of verse, nor does it suggest widespread confusion. Neither performance is more valid than the other and, moreover, "La Jolie Rousse" is written in *vers libre*, a form in which the very value of the word-final "e" becomes unstable, a crucial difference which Pensom does not mention.

As for the theatre, Pensom quotes an experiment recounted in Georges Lote's *L'Alexandrin d'après la phonétique expérimentale* in which professional actors from the *Comédie française* were recorded reading from Racine's *Phèdre* (Sarah Bernhardt) and Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*

(Constant Coquelin).^[5] It transpired that both actors frequently produced alexandrines with fewer than twelve syllables, leading Pensom to remark that “[e]lectronic analysis of these recited texts must have surprised those who had learned at school that French verse was defined by a recurring syllabic count” (p. 9). Yet the stage performance of alexandrines in verse drama is not simply a mechanical exercise, since many other factors are in play, and while twelve syllables may remain the overarching abstract principle, it was widely recognised in the nineteenth-century French theatre that an over-metrical performance detracted from its expressive purpose. Indeed, Fernand Calmettes recounts in *Leconte de Lisle et ses amis* how the young Leconte de Lisle bored his salon audiences with this monotonous reading style: “En craignant d’atténuer l’accent pour un seul de ses vers, il communiquait à tous cette uniformité solennelle qui lasse.”^[6] Moreover, when the poet confronts an actress at L’Odéon over her butchering of his alexandrines in *Les Érinnyes*, she tells him, “Au Conservatoire on ne fait pas sentir les e muets,” in response to which he fumes, “Eh bien au Conservatoire on estropie la poésie...et les professeurs, si vraiment ils enseignent ainsi, n’ont plus de respect pour la métrique que les chanteurs des rues.”^[7] As such, we should not take the dramatic interpretation of alexandrines in performance as evidence, one way or the other, of their fundamental structural principle.

Thirdly, Pensom analyses the musical interpretation of verse from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in settings of French libretti by Lully, Rameau and Gluck, as well as excerpts from Berlioz’s *Les Troyens*, with libretto by the composer himself, and song settings of Leconte de Lisle and Verlaine by Fauré and Debussy. Pensom argues that since musical accent largely (but not exclusively) coincides with iambic or anapestic accents in the text then this provides proof of his method, but as Helen Abbott has recently demonstrated in *Baudelaire in Song 1880-1930*, no song setting is definitive, each being an independent interpretation with its own expressive agenda.^[8] The contexts in which all these different settings were produced vary significantly, and one finds, in the second half of the nineteenth century especially, song settings which undermine the accentual patterning of the text to specific communicative effect. It is problematic, therefore, to extrapolate from particular songs proof of an underlying truth about the nature of accentuation in the French language and French verse.

Despite my significant hesitations about Pensom’s argument for foot-based accentual patterns in French verse, the passages of verse analysis in which he shows how form contributes to meaning are frequently illuminating, and the work of a sensitive and nuanced reader. He is right to suggest that “accent in French has an informational function” (p. 155), but this observation perhaps is most productive when in dialogue with an awareness of the importance of meter, rather than replacing it altogether. Yes, “accent is indispensable for the perception of metricality” (p. 3) but accent is no substitute for meter, nor need we claim it to be. My objections, then, mainly concern the framing of the “problem” and the totalizing ambition of the theory. The multiple “woes” (p. 2) which Pensom claims befall the reader of verse are not, in fact, problems. Juxtaposing examples of verse from the medieval period to the twentieth century, as well as notable exceptions to the rules (pp. 2-3), might make it seem as if there is chaos at the caesura, but all the examples given are either perfectly standard practice for the Middle Ages or deliberate and expressive contraventions of metrical rules by the nineteenth-century avant-garde. As modern readers are well aware, two forms of medieval caesura had disappeared from French poetry by the Renaissance: the *césure épique*, where a word-final “e” after the caesura (#) was not counted: “De vassela # (ge) fut assez chevalier” (p. 2, *La Chanson de Roland*, C11th) and the *césure lyrique*, where the word-final “e” comes before the caesura but is counted as a fully pronounced syllable: “Et fromages # est fors a digerer” (p. 2, *Froissart*, C14th). As for the following example, it is not the

alexandrine or the caesura or metrical theory which is at fault, but rather a rebellious adolescent cocking a snook at the establishment:—*Au Cabaret-Vert*: "je # demandai des tartines" (p. 2, Rimbaud, C19th).

Furthermore, we do not necessarily need to base our understanding of French verse rhythm on iambic and anapestic feet in order to recognize the rule of alternating accent. Since the mid-nineteenth century at least, many critics have argued that adjacent accents should be avoided within the primarily metrical structure of French verse, such as Louis-Marie Quicherat, Auguste Dorchain, Albert Cassagne, Maurice Grammont and Margaret Hudson.^[9]

This monograph certainly provides a stimulating challenge to proponents of the metrical model of French verse analysis to provide a robust defence of their conception of rhythm, and Pensom is certainly not alone in the claims he makes for the role of accent—the book is dedicated to Paul Verrier, who offered a similar argument in his *Le Vers français*, and Pensom builds on his insights.^[10] There is ample evidence here of productive and engaging dialogue with colleagues in other disciplines, some of whose contributions feature as personal communications dating back to the 1970s. The legacy of this book, and of its author's life's work, does not have to be, indeed, does not deserve to be, relegated to the lone furrow which he sometimes suggests he is ploughing. There is ample proof here to suggest that the accentual has a vital role to play within the metrical, that the peculiar tensions and hesitations of verse rhythm are produced, precisely, by the interplay between the two. Rather than replacing Cornulier's model, then, it might be more productive to integrate Pensom's theory of alternating accent into our understanding of isosyllabism. Accent is perhaps not the single generative principle of French verse, and alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables is a fact of the language as well as of its poetry. Were it otherwise, the piling up of accented syllables would produce a language and a poetry similar to this line from Baudelaire, which is itself a rarity, and the only such example of adjacent accentuation in all of *Les Fleurs du Mal*: Son pareil le suivait: **barbe, œil, dos, bâton, loques** ("Les Sept vieillards," l. 29). What is undeniable, though, is that such rhythmic textual events are highly noteworthy, and to appreciate them properly requires a particular blend of accentual and metrical awareness, to which Pensom's work makes a welcome and valuable contribution.

NOTES

[1] Roger Pensom, *Accent and Metre in French: A Theory of the Relation between Linguistic Accent and Metrical Practice in French 1100–1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000) and Pensom, *Le Sens de la métrique de François Villon: Le Testament* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004).

[2] Benoît de Cornulier, *Théorie du vers: Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1982); Cornulier, *Art poétique: notions et problèmes de métrique* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1995); and Cornulier, *De la métrique à l'interprétation* (Paris: Garnier, 2009).

[3] Clive Scott, *A Question of Syllables: Essays in Nineteenth-Century French Verse*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Jean-Michel Gouvard, *Critique du vers* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000).

[4] Eduard Koschwitz, *Les Parlers parisiens: anthologie phonétique* (Paris, 1896).

[5] Georges Lote, *L'Alexandrin d'après la phonétique expérimentale* (Paris: La Phalange, 1913-1914).

[6] Fernand Calmettes, *Leconte de Lisle et ses amis* (Paris: Librairies-imprimeries réunies, 1902), p. 43.

[7] Calmettes, *Leconte de Lisle et ses amis*, pp. 289-290.

[8] Helen Abbott, *Baudelaire in Song 1880-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[9] Louis-Marie Quicherat, *Traité de versification française* (Paris: Hachette, 1850), p. 133; Auguste Dorchain, *L'Art des vers* (Paris, 1905), p. 184; Albert Cassagne, *Versification et métrique de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1906; Geneva: Slatkine, 1982), p. 31; Maurice Grammont, *Le Vers français: ses moyens d'expression, son harmonie* (Paris: Champion, 1923), p. 418; and Margaret Hudson, *The Juxtaposition of Accents at the Rhyme in French Versification* (University of Philadelphia, 1927).

[10] Paul Verrier, *Le Vers français* (Paris: Didier, 1932).

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