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Elizabeth Helsinger
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Poetics of Encounter

> The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route.* Its author stays with it. Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, in the encounter, *in the mystery of encounter?* …
> The poem becomes – under what conditions – the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation, often desperate conversation.
>
> —Paul Celan, "The Meridian"[1]

This book considers poems written with conversation in mind. Such poems make up a not-insubstantial group of otherwise quite different poems from the late eighteenth into the twentieth centuries, the very period when a more restrictive conception of poetry as the lyric product of the poet's solitary self-communing became entrenched among many readers.[2] *Conversing in Verse* looks back to older forms of verse conversation to consider what has happened to them since the late eighteenth century. What is at stake in what one might call the concept of conversation, in or out of poetry? When and why do some poets think of poetry as conversing? How does the idea of conversation then shape the structures, the tropes and figures, the language, and the rhythms and prosody of poems? Under what conditions might conversation in a poem become urgent or, as Paul Celan writes, even desperate, and what happens to the shapes of poems then? These questions have an all-too-present urgency in the moment in which I now write. Looking back at how poets have made conversations happen in verse may shed some light on what is happening to conversation in our own time of rancorous political distrust and a global pandemic, when mediated substitutions of very different kinds replace face-to-face conversing as that with which we must make do.

One might argue that a concern with otherness lies at the heart of all lyric poetry across its long tradition in the West – that every lyric "I" implies a "you," every poem a desire to communicate to its readers. But

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neither poets nor readers take the communicative intentions of poetry for granted. I am especially interested in poems that reach beyond lyric address or the prospect of readers to take conversation as inspiration for what a poem might do and how it can be made to do it, even when interlocutors remain silent and possibly hostile or indifferent – conversation, that is, between persons but also among beings and things; conversation with the varied phenomena the poet perceives. If we approach lyric poetry through what Peter de Bolla calls a "concept of conversation" – understanding with him that a concept "provides something like a scaffolding or architecture which enables one to think something else" – we might be able to think beyond the model of the solitary poet's self-communings.[3] We might then understand the desire for responsiveness to be less an exception than a feature of lyric more generously defined. An entirely different history of what lyric has been and might be comes into view: a history of lyric not only as solitary and private but also as multivoiced and sometimes public, turned toward the world, a history that looks back to Pindaric and dramatic odes, ecphrastic epigrams and idylls, to traditional and popular ballads, and to the social impulses driving eighteenth-century personification. Creating reciprocity – making present the unspoken responses of interlocutors even when they seem unlikely to answer – from this perspective appears as a way of making conversation occur in a poem against the odds.

The poets to whom I particularly attend, drawn from across the long nineteenth century, adapted the language and rhythms of vernacular, colloquial speech, with its interruptions and hesitations (marks of conversational improvisation) and its nonlexical interjected sounds (reminders that speech is embodied). But they also adapted models for conversing found in the long history of verse drama and poetry: the formal exchanges of classical dramatic stichomythia, the pastoral dialogues framing Hellenistic idylls, exchanges in Renaissance love poems and seventeenth-century prayer poems, the sociable world created by eighteenth-century personification, and the narration by conversation found in traditional ballads. They turned to poetry's conversational forms to write idyllic and not-so-idyllic dialogues (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Walter Savage Landor), choral dramas and dramatic monologues (A. C. Swinburne, Robert Browning), "conversational" poems and daring prosopopoeia (Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Clare), ecphrastic sonnets and odes (John Keats, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Michael Field), and ironic ballads (Christina Rossetti and Thomas Hardy).[4] They pushed the shape and prosody of their poems in radically new directions when conditions – social, political,

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or personal – challenged the poets' will to converse with anything at all. The desire for conversation under troubling social and political conditions provoked among these poets some of the most interesting formal experiments of the nineteenth century, including its best known, the dramatic monologue. Tennyson and Browning, Coleridge and Clare, Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne, Michael Field, and Hardy composed poems that might be described as opening conversations with phenomena outside themselves, whether these were gods or humans, a bird or a tree or the sea, figures in works of art or the ghostly dead. They wrote poems that we might do better to think of not as the overheard confessions of a solitary self but as efforts to engage through the poem-as-conversation with that which is not the self.

Verse Conversing

Poetry and conversation: this should not be as odd a conjunction as it may seem. The social lyric is not an oxymoron; it has been part of poetry's past and remains a force in its present. Literature is a "social process," William Empson insisted.[5] Poetry is no exception. Lyric, Theodor Adorno argued, *is* social. It turns toward the social, partakes of its structures and assumptions (those of the poet's time and place), but can also make them seem strange.[6] Lyric poetry, or in the adjectival form Victorians often preferred, lyrical poetry (a poetry now textual but remembering its origins in vocal performance, including song), may also be sociable. The poet is solitary, but the impulse that realizes itself in the language and forms of poetry, as Celan wrote, "intends another" ("Meridian," 49).[7] Nineteenth-century poets, like their twentieth- and twenty-first-century descendants, sought the forms, the sounds, and the matter of sociability in both song and talk, returning to a long history of verse conversing to make, or remake, poetry as conversation.

Poets and poems seek encounters with other beings or things – encounters with readers and listeners, of course, but before that with all the phenomena toward which the poem turns its attention. That attention is a peculiarly concentrated and active form of awareness. As Celan put it in "Meridian," "The attention which the poem pays to all that it encounters, its more acute sense of detail, outline, structure, colour, but also of the 'tremors and hints' – all this is not, I think, achieved by an eye competing (or concurring) with ever more precise instruments, but, rather, by a kind of concentration mindful of all our dates" (51). Not "competing" nor yet "concurring" with novel instruments for enhancing perception,

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nor with the phenomena toward which the poet turns, the poem's task is neither to challenge nor to presume community with what it encounters. The others to which the poem turns its attention may remain resistant to ordinary cognition. They are strange, and beyond strange; that is why the poem's encounters can take poets and readers out of themselves. Or such is the hope of these poets. "The poem has always hoped," wrote Celan in "Meridian," "to speak also on behalf of the *strange … on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*" (48). The poet writes and the reader reads, necessarily "mindful of all our dates": anchored in the present of writing or reading but remembering the past, even a recent past that may seem to foreclose the possibility of conversing and portend a difficult future not only for conversation but for poetry. "Only the space of this conversation [the poem's]," Celan goes on, "can establish what is addressed, can gather it into a 'you' around the naming and speaking I. But this 'you', come about by dint of being named and addressed, brings its otherness into the present" (50). Writing under such conditions requires making language itself strange, rearranging it by the means that are poetry's: altering its rhythms and syntax and vocabulary, bringing out new patterns that may be musical, but without music, perceived by the ear but also by the eye, on the page; or may be conversational, more like the sounds and rhythms of everyday talk with others than like song.

Conversation has an intimate verbal connection with verse. Etymologically, both words derive from the Latin verb *versare*, to turn. Verse, from the nominal form *versus*, can mean either a turn of the earth (a plough furrow), a turn of the body (a dance step), or the turn of a voiced or printed line of poetry. Celan called these latter turns *Atemwende* (breathturns) and emphasized the pauses that accompany them as at once physically felt and psychologically and ethically weighted: pauses where the full burden of the strangeness, the otherness, of that to which the poem attends can be felt.[8] Conversation combines *con* + *versare*, making patterns of turn-taking for two or more participants. Until the seventeenth century, however, *conversare* and its French, Middle English, and English derivatives (including converse, conversing, and conversation) meant simply turning about together, by extension living familiarly together (the Italian *conversazione* retains the older sense).[9] Our more recent sense of conversation as spontaneous, informal speech exchanged between two or more persons describes an extended moment of turn-taking social interaction.[10] These interactions are at least potentially symmetrical; they are also repeated. Conversation can be talk without fixed purpose other than the establishment and maintenance of conversing.

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Though verbal conversations may produce knowledge or understanding, their turn-taking sequences and the strategies of repair that are undertaken by participants seem often to be driven primarily by the desire to sustain the interactions of conversation itself. Conversation, more broadly considered, then, is a verbal mode of keeping company with others, of living together with other beings or things.

Verse informed by the concept of conversation could be envisioned as verse for two or more participants moving together in figures. Multiple ploughed furrows trace the contours of a field, dancers moving together form intersecting figures on a dance floor, and different voices taking turns create the spoken figures of a conversation. Like these other kinds of shared turn-taking, verse conversing does so in patterns that may take the form of response, often with repetition, to an original question or statement; of incremental addition (together sharing and creating a mood or pursuing an idea); of difference (agonistic dialogue as disagreement, even when departing from shared grounds); or – of special interest in this book – of a series of swerves, apparent nonresponses or misunderstandings. Nonetheless, while turn-taking persists, poetry is sociable; not only the versed voicing but poets and their readers move in figures of sociability, living with or keeping company with others.

To create conversation in modern verse means eliciting voice from text: both *figuring* voice (through apostrophe and prosopopoeia, for example) and *configuring* it, in David Nowell Smith's useful phrase, by prosodic means.[11] Jonathan Culler, who makes the figuring of apostrophe central to his *Theory of the Lyric*, suggests that the turning-aside of voice (*apo* [away from] + *strephein* [to turn]: *apostrephein*, to turn aside or away) is a ruse, or (as he prefers) a triangulated form of address, where a lyric speaker pretends "to address someone or something else, while actually proffering discourse for an audience."[12] It is also a ruse to elicit voice from text. An address to a nonhuman being, abstraction, or thing, by presuming "the potential responsiveness of the universe," creates "what it desires: a reciprocity between the speaking of the poet" and, for example, "the prattling of the spring" (as in Horace's ode, "O Fountain of Bandusia"); it allows the reader to imagine what is written as what can be heard.[13] (Prosopopoeia verbalizes that reciprocating response: the fountain speaks.) For some of the poets I discuss, configuring voice overlaps with the configuring of voice as song, aiming to bring out the lyrical sounds and rhythms of song even in voice mediated wholly by text. Others (particularly Browning but to a more limited extent Coleridge, Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads*, and John Clare) aim to capture the sounds and rhythms of vernacular speech,

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whether its interruptions, hesitations, and silences; its differences of dialect and class; or even the throat clearings, grunts, and other vocal noises that mark it as embodied, not textual, in origin. Both aims (and sometimes both within the same poem) belong to the poets' desire to reach and touch the phenomena of the world: to converse, in verse.

Nowell Smith offers a more historically specific account of poets' troubled efforts to encounter other beings and things in his study of "the multidimensional figuring of voice" since the beginning of the nineteenth century – that is, both the figuring of voice through apostrophe and its configuring in the tension between meter and the contours of speech.[14] Prosody creates for the reader what Nowell Smith calls the "temporal movedness of voice broadly conceived."[15] Considered as doubly figured and configured, Nowell Smith suggests, voice might be thought of as "not simply latent 'matter', but also *medium* – that is, bound up in forms of relation at once referential and communicative."[16] Conversing in verse for the writers I examine, then, involves not one but two levels of mediation: in the first, the written or printed text mediates spoken conversation; in the second, voice – figured and configured in verse – mediates communicative exchanges between the poet, readers, and the phenomena of the world. Anahid Nersessian is describing that double mediation when she points to the figurings and configurings of voice among Romantic poets writing in what they perceived as a disturbed social and natural world. The figuring of apostrophe through which voice becomes medium in the text of a poem, she suggests, is a crucial rhetorical move in Romantic attempts "to redesign social space" by "testing the possibilities of using grammar to open up metaphors of relation, and to charge them with the energy, incline, and pitch of some desiring movement."[17] Apostrophe "may trope on a conversational circuit of give and take, but it also tropes on this: how paying close attention to something can make it assume 'a graceful … kind of nonabsence', a spectral immediacy."[18] The medium of poetic voice thus, in Nowell Smith's words, "becomes the vehicle for a decentring of the individual perspective."[19]

In the poems I examine, conversation is sometimes an event to which the poem refers (a represented event, as in the poems to which I turn in Chapters 2 and 3). But it is also, as Nowell Smith's and Nersessian's arguments suggest, an experiential event for the reader. In the vocal medium of the poem, conversation becomes a necessarily cooperative venture between poet and readers in animating language and conjuring from text voices other than our own. Encounters with others in the material medium of the poem, if they are to happen at all, make demands on us as readers.

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The "'meaning' of meter," Isobel Armstrong writes – the interplay among its metrical and semantic patterns that we experience as a process while we read in real time – "is brought alive with every reading."[20] The same is true for the sonic possibilities of voicing (and hence of meaning) that a poem presents on many other levels. Voice, or voices conversing, is "generated out of text as we share our voices with it, implicate ourselves within its vibratory articulation."[21] The text's "moments of intonational ambiguity," as Eric Griffiths calls them, require a reader to hear more than one possible voicing (and not, he insists, to choose among them).[22] Nowell Smith, doubting Griffiths's claim that readers don't attempt to resolve ambiguities of voicing, locates the reader's work in the way our own voices – and hence the embodied habits of voicing bound up with our sense of ourselves – are called upon even in mental acts of voicing texts. The process can take us out of ourselves, into the territory of the other. Our speech patterns "become other to themselves in order to fit [the poem's] prosodic movements."[23] "To reattune our ears to voice … as a site in which the subject is made, unmade, and remade anew," Nowell Smith continues, "is to attempt to redistribute our own sensible, to open up alternate points of access to sense experience." These, he concludes, "are the political stakes of poetry's exploration of voice."[24]

The poets I study in this book explored the possibilities of a multi-voiced poetry as a social, and sociable, form. They sought in their quite different ways to discover through poetry possibilities for a sociability seen as threatened or lost. The models for a sociable lyric were there in still vigorous traditions of popular verse from which these poets drew, in the longer history of literary and popular verse to which they turned, and in the new forms they invented as they extended their ideas of what it might mean for poetry to keep company with other beings. That they felt poetry needed conversation, as conversation needed poetry, is itself a testimony to the extent that these poets remained, in Celan's words, turned toward phenomena, toward the world. Their own world of rapid change and with it seemingly many losses in the possibilities for relating with other beings, mortal or divine, made conversing in verse an urgent matter. In a surprisingly wide range of nineteenth-century poems, figures of sociability inscribed in the turns and pauses of verse enact difficult or impossible exchanges between persons, or between persons and nonhuman beings or things: gods, ghosts, birds, animals, works of art.

The eighteenth century, at least in Britain, has been more especially celebrated as an age of conversation (not least by eighteenth-century writers themselves) and the heroic couplet taken as the poetic site of its culture of

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witty verbal exchange.[25] But conversation was certainly regarded as a necessary social skill for both men and, increasingly, women throughout the nineteenth century. Almost always practiced within the boundaries of one's own class, conversation was associated not with the salon or coffee house but with social gatherings in domestic settings. Instruction books aimed at the rising middle classes (and especially at women) offered advice for how to make conversation a mode of social care in which good listening and turn-taking were essential. "While we tend to see conversation as 'a maximally effective exchange of information'," E. A. W. St. George observes (in a 1993 study of Victorian conversation manuals and Browning's late verse), "the Victorians saw it more as a means of passing the time, of making others like us, and of instructing and improving oneself and others … [they] always keep an eye on the social consequences."[26] The Anglo-Irish classical scholar J. P. Mahaffy, a passionate Unionist and outspoken opponent of the Gaelic revival, and himself a conversationalist noted for the brilliance (and often the acerbity) of his wit, insisted nonetheless in his own 1887 manual *Principles of the Art of Conversation* that sympathy was the "whole root" of good conversation.[27] It was, as he had reason to know, not an easy feeling to maintain. But curmudgeon and snob though he might have been, Mahaffy was also known for his warmth and spontaneous kindness. Conversation's other "moral conditions," he wrote, included modesty, simplicity, wit, and humor, but the latter two only "if coupled *with kindliness of heart and with tact*."[28] Mahaffy promoted "unselfishness" on the part of speakers no less than of listeners. "To take up what others say in easy comment, to give in return something which will please, to stimulate the silent and the morose out of their vapours and surprise them into good humour, to lead while one seems to follow – this is the real aim of good conversation," he wrote.[29] "Being agreeable in conversation," Mahaffy claimed, "may be called the social result of Western civilisation, beginning with the Greeks"; "every civilised man and woman feels, or ought to feel, this duty; it is the universal accomplishment where all must practise."[30]

What were the poetic forms suited to a Victorian ideal of conversation as social care? Prescriptive advice like that of Mahaffy testified at least as much to growing anxieties that conversation – especially sympathetic conversation, where listening was accounted important and no one spoke too much – was meant to address: a fear that intractable social, political, and economic divisions were making sociable talk among persons increasingly difficult. Strains on sociable converse were produced for Mahaffy by Irish nationalism. For others, these strains included imperial wars abroad, fierce social and economic competition at home, and the monetization

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of all kinds of relationships (as figured in Thomas Carlyle's cash nexus, Marx's dancing commodities, and the animated objects of Dickens's fiction, masking and mocking the reduction of laboring persons to things).[31] Tennyson shrank before the specter of "raw mechanics" with their "bloody thumbs" and importunate, sometimes violent demands (impoverished laborers left out of even the enlarged electorates of 1832 and 1866) handling the privacies of lyric verse once it reached print.[32] While such disruptions seemed likely, to Tennyson and Landor, to sour even the discourse among friends, each nonetheless used poetic dialogues modeled on Theocritus' Idylls to create order in the midst of disorder. Swinburne and Browning, on the other hand, turned to the example of Greek drama where agonistic stichomythia between characters and charged exchanges between individuals and the plural voices of a community addressed the challenges to social speech they observed around them. Possibilities for conversing with nonhuman natural things seemed to many poets in the nineteenth century to be dwindling too, in an industrialized landscape darkened both literally and figuratively by John Ruskin's "storm cloud of the nineteenth century" (literally, industrial coal dust) while lessons of Providential benevolence once read in the book of Nature were steadily undermined by revelations of a nature "red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson again), soon to be confirmed by Darwin's deeply unsettling observations on the origins of species and the survival of the fittest.[33] While most Victorians resisted their deepest fears – that God had withdrawn, that human cruelty or carelessness or greed had permanently damaged prospects for living together – poets from Coleridge and Clare to Christina Rossetti and Hardy were only too well aware that conditions for sociability, including living with nonhuman beings, with works of art, with the dead, and with any god, had radically changed. Nineteenth-century poets, I suggest, responded to damaged social relations with what are in effect mediated forms of conversation: conversing in verse.

Celan, Levinas, Blanchot, and the Future of Poetry

How and why might this matter to poetry and to our prospects for living with others? There is a considerable body of twentieth-century philosophical writing addressing these questions, principally put forward by phenomenologists building on the work of Heidegger, Husserl, and, more distantly, Hegel. While they were responding to different circumstances, social and political as well as literary and linguistic, their arguments for why conversation matters for the prospects of an ethical life and, indeed,

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for the future of poetry suggest some of the larger conceptual, ethical, and political questions that will be at play in my discussions of nineteenth-century poetry written with conversation in mind. I want to use the second section of this Introduction to explore these questions in the forms they were to take a half-century and more later. Poetry as a possible form of conversation became a subject of intense philosophical interest after the Second World War, particularly in the writings of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, his long-time friend Maurice Blanchot, and, building on their work, more recent French thinkers from Jacques Derrida to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. For all of them, Celan – living in Paris, writing in German, and struggling to imagine any future for poetry after the war and the Holocaust – was a key figure. Adorno, in a much quoted (and misquoted) pronouncement, had suggested that to write poetry after the Holocaust at all is to participate in the barbarism of the times.[34] In the wake of his pronouncement, as Gerald Bruns remarks, "The word barbarism has had poetry under surveillance for at least the last half-century."[35] Adorno has usually been taken to mean that after Auschwitz poetry itself is unthinkable, though he was more particularly concerned with the impossible stance of the cultural critic who is necessarily implicated in the very thing that he condemns – a society that turns everything, including poems, into cultural wares, objectifying and commoditizing even Auschwitz. Levinas, Blanchot, and, more tormentedly, Celan himself took such warnings seriously. Celan feared that his poems – even what is perhaps his best-known and harshest condemnation of German barbarity toward Jews ("Todesfuge" [Death's Fugue]) – had been appropriated by contemporary German audiences to aestheticize horror. And yet, Celan insisted, poetry is that which must happen despite the risks of appropriation. But it will be poetry differently conceived, both formally and thematically bound not to "revelation, destiny, or truth" but to the "mystery of encounter": poetry as conversation. "In remembering Celan," Lesley Hill writes, "both Blanchot and Levinas were endeavouring to respond, each in his own idiom, to … the possibility and impossibility of poetry itself, in other words: its future."[36] Celan suggested that a future for poetry might lie in its reorientation toward conversation.

For Levinas and Blanchot at mid-century, conversation was already both a subject for phenomenological study and a form that philosophy might take – not the formal, clearly pedagogic dialogues inherited from the academies of Athens and the writings of Plato but the more intimate, ordinary forms of conversational talk among contemporaries and friends. Levinas's *Noms propres* (*Proper Names*, 1975), for example, is a collection of essays

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