

## THE VICTORIAN VERSE NOVEL AS BESTSELLER: OWEN MEREDITH'S *LUCILE*

By Catherine Addison

BY THE 1860S, THE VERSE novel had become a significant feature of the Victorian literary landscape. According to Dino Felluga, this hybrid was a “perverse” and even “subversive” genre, firstly, because it undermined the “‘high’ autotelic” status of poetry by mixing it with the “heteroglot, carnivalesque, and polyphonic novel” and, secondly, because its specific fictions tended to oppose or parody the “middle-class heterosexual, domestic ideology” upheld by the prose novel of the period. In support of his argument, Felluga discusses a handful of texts that are normally regarded as “high” literature: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Amours de Voyage*, George Meredith’s *Modern Love* and Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (Felluga, “Verse Novel” 171–74; “Novel Poetry” 491–96).

But not all Victorian verse novels fit the designation of “high” literature. “Owen Meredith”’s *Lucile* was not marketed, at least not in its many reprintings, as serious literature, and it has largely been forgotten. And it was not the only verse novel seeming to inhabit the lower genres. *Lucile*’s American imitation, *Geraldine: A Souvenir of the St. Lawrence*, anonymously published by Alphonso Hopkins in 1881, was similarly taken as “parlour” literature and sank, after a few print runs, with little trace. Edmund C. Nugent’s 1866 *Anderleigh Hall*, which Felluga mentions (“Verse Novel” 171), is also no “high” art form; it is a silly, light-hearted piece of fluff, definitely belonging to the category of “light verse.”

Pierre Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* claims that the author of what will later become consecrated as “high” literature distinguishes him- or herself from the writer of popular or “commercial” literature by possessing “autonomy,” which Bourdieu describes as “independence with respect to external powers, political or economic” (61). But this autonomy is an elusive quality, since the author and the literary work are embedded in social and historical contexts that must determine, or at least explain to a large extent, both author and text. In fact, Bourdieu points out that the self-definition of important authors is crucially interconnected with the “second-rate” writers of their period. He exhorts the “analyst” who wishes to attain a “true understanding” of the autonomous authors of a milieu to pay attention to its lesser writers as well:

We note in passing something that is not acknowledged by the argument that the sociology (or social history) of literature, often identified with a certain kind of literary statistics, would somehow have

the effect of ‘levelling’ artistic values by ‘rehabilitating’ second-rate authors. Everything inclines us to think that, on the contrary, one loses the essence of what makes for the individuality and even the greatness of the [autonomous] survivors when one ignores the universe of contemporaries with whom and against whom they construct themselves. Besides the fact that they are marked by their membership in a literary field and thus enable us to grasp its impact and, at the same time, its limits, such authors, condemned by their failures or successes of doubtful merit, and simply and purely fated to be erased from the history of literature, also affect the functioning of the field by their very existence and by the reactions they arouse. (70)

Bourdieu thus claims that the autonomous creators of “high” art achieve their identities only in opposition to these more commercial writers. But the autonomous few may also, perhaps unknowingly, find their art endangered by the same market forces that govern these others. Elsewhere, Bourdieu claims that threats to autonomy may “result from the increasingly greater interpenetration between the world of art and the world of money” (344). These threats can lead to a “blurring of the boundaries” “between the experimental work and the *bestseller*” (Bourdieu’s italics; 347). A “*bestseller*” is, obviously, a superlatively popular, “commercial” work of literature, to Bourdieu a commodity conforming to the rules of current genres and reproducing without question the official morality of the times. The fact that an autonomous, “experimental” and even “transgressive” work can be infiltrated in this way by its nemesis (111) suggests a Derridean contamination of generic purity that is always-already there, at least to some extent, even in the “highest” literary works (Derrida 225).

*Lucile*, unlike other Victorian verse novels both “high” and “low,” was a bestseller. First published on both sides of the Atlantic in 1860, it was reproduced in over 2000 editions and issues, mainly in the United States, and it remained in print until 1938 (Huttner, *The Lucile Project*).<sup>1</sup> That it did not qualify for the title of “high” literature was argued in many critical reviews from its first appearance and is borne out by its present obscurity. And yet the work does not exactly fit the category of “popular” literature either: what Hans Robert Jauss calls “‘culinary’ or entertainment art,” to be found in a work “precisely fulfilling the expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste” (25). Ken Gelder states categorically that “popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction” (1) and, indeed, *Lucile*, from some points of view, does seem to be a generic romance. Its plot follows an old formula in which two men vie for the hand of one woman. *Pace* Felluga, it also does not – on a cursory scanning, at least – appear to question many aspects of heterosexual, domestic ideology. However, despite her expressed fealty to this ideology, the main character’s ethnicity and character are not at all formulaic: *Lucile* is a Franco-Indian with aspirations that appeared decidedly unseemly in the nineteenth century. More obviously, the text in which she features is a verse novel, a specialised and unusual generic form that has never been “popular” in any sense of the word. Felluga’s argument as it touches on form rather than content is that the use of verse as the medium of narration for a novelistic tale is in itself a transgressive act – a sign of the author’s autonomy in Bourdieu’s terms – and thus a symbolic rejection of the commercialism and conformity of the “popular” genres. And *Lucile* is composed not in the blank verse of its precursor, *Aurora Leigh*, but in anapaestic tetrameter couplets, an extreme form that places the work close to the edge as to difficulty of composition and non-transparency of narration. And yet – again – this extreme verse form may have contributed to the popularity of the text among its many middlebrow readers.

The complexity of *Lucile*'s history of reception may be explained in terms of Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations." A "horizon" is an unconsciously recognized given in any perception; in the case of *Lucile*'s contemporary readership more than one "horizon of expectations" existed, since the highbrow critics and the middle- to lowbrow readers differed in their reception of the book. Jauss offers the prospect of a "change of horizons" affecting a literary work over time, which registers "along the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism's judgement." A work that is not entirely "culinary" has the power to make a "horizontal change" in its audience on its own: *Lucile* probably altered many nineteenth-century readers' expectations concerning not only the medium of poetry in the popular novel but also perhaps the glamour and virtue of non-Caucasian women. While the critics' responses to this work remained almost unchanged over time, its approving but mainly uncritical readership grew, remained high for decades and dropped off only late in the Modernist period. By 1938 even the more conservative Anglophone readers' "horizon of expectations" had probably adjusted to some Modernist precepts, such as an embrace of contemporaneity and free verse in poetry and a rejection of superlatively virtuous characters, melodramatic events and happy endings in the novel (Jauss 25).

This essay offers a reassessment of *Lucile* not only in terms of its relationships to popular and "high" literature but also with regard to its narrative and poetic qualities and the intriguing mutation it represents within the newly-evolving verse novel genre. As Bourdieu claims, understanding the important, eminently autonomous literary works of a period is impossible without gaining a sense of the more ephemeral, "second-rate" writing against which they construct themselves. Taking a less elitist approach than Bourdieu, the essay might even have the effect of "rehabilitat[ing]" a text that may be more accurately described as uneven than as "second-rate."

One of the ways in which *Lucile* differs significantly from most popular writing is in the intentions of its author, who was no Grub Street hack but a kind of heir-apparent, harbouring a sense of his own entitlement to the patrician ranks of literature. "Old man Bulwer has a son," the *Southern Literary Messenger* rudely announced in its 1860 review:<sup>2</sup> "Owen Meredith" was the *nom de plume* of Robert Lytton, son of Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The father was a well-established literary figure at the time that the son, still in his twenties, was writing *Lucile*. Moreover, Lytton had other illustrious literary connections, including the Brownings, whom he met in Italy in the 1850s. His verse novel was clearly intended as a successor to *Aurora Leigh*, which had appeared only four years earlier.

Lytton's seriousness about his literary endeavour can be overlooked in a superficial investigation of the contexts of *Lucile*'s production. The work can appear merely the Oedipal literary experiment of an ambitious young man whose real focus at the time of composition was on his preparation for a high-flying career in the diplomatic corps. (Relatively early in this career he was appointed Viceroy of India by Disraeli, after which he was made an earl.) When the work appeared, the *North British Review* and the *London Review* accused Lytton of writing far too fast, the *New Monthly Magazine* called him "slapdash," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* complained that he lacked "the faculty of taking trouble," *National Review* called him a "dilettante" and "third-rate" (Huttner, "Reviews," *Lucile Project*) and even his mentor Barrett Browning told him she felt that *Lucile* suffered from "diffuseness" (qtd. in Harlan 138). Bulwer-Lytton clearly had doubts about his son's literary abilities, for not only did he encourage Lytton's use of a pseudonym but he allowed him to publish his first collection of verse in 1855 only on condition that he wrote no poetry for two years

afterwards (Harlan 67). Nearly all of its critics from 1860 onward had serious reservations about *Lucile*. There was widespread concern over its choice of metre and even whether it should have been composed in verse at all; a furore broke out about what was seen as its plagiarism from George Sand's *Lavinia* and other French texts; the morality of its story and characters was questioned; and many commentators styled it as merely a "parlour" novel, a confection suitable only for a readership of young people, in particular young women, providing inadequate fare for the educated (male) elite (Huttner, "Reviews," *Lucile Project*). This type of response probably explains why the author himself came to regard *Lucile* with contempt – though his use of the pseudonym may suggest that he had nourished misgivings about his talents from the beginning. When a new edition was published in 1867, he wrote a preface which indicated that he had consented to the book's reprinting under duress, called the metre "slipshod," claimed the characters to have been "described rather than revealed" and asserted that "the whole subject of it [was] fitter for prose rather than verse" (Meredith 9–10).<sup>3</sup>

The fact that *Lucile* actually succeeded in the marketplace as a work of popular literature would seem to verify the lightweight or mercenary nature of Lytton's intentions. Sidney F. Huttner on his website *The Lucile Project* shows that the verse novel in many of its hundreds of editions was manufactured as a gift book, bound in a variety of luxurious materials such as silk cloth printed with ornamental designs or padded, embossed leather with gold stamps, its pages frequently gilt edged and decorated with lavish illustrations, coloured end papers, and silk markers.<sup>4</sup> This kind of marketing was not aimed at the intelligentsia; it labelled the text in the material culture as an anodyne object of exchange, guaranteed to please rather than disturb. In Bourdieu's terms, the publishers successfully appropriated it as "commercial literature," offering the bourgeoisie the values that they already possessed in attractive packaging.

But this commodifying and prettifying process belies the intentions of *Lucile*'s author. Despite the scepticism and even hostility of his father, who wanted him to devote himself to his public career, Lytton did not see himself as a producer of potboiling trash; he took his writing very seriously. He confided to John Forster in 1854 that "there [was] no greater name to be won, no higher life to be led, no loftier position to be obtained than that of the Poet" (Harlan 65). And some important figures were convinced of his potential and even of his achievement in this line. Barrett Browning believed that he had an "uncontestable faculty in poetry" (*Letters* 2: 126); and even George Saintsbury, who thought *Lucile* a "decided failure," nevertheless regarded Lytton as a significant minor poet, gifted in both "true lyric" and "ironical narration" ("Reviews," *History* 311–12).

Lytton may not have been the first trailblazer in the verse novel but, when *Aurora Leigh* was published in 1856, he recognized the new genre as a marker of the age and correctly inferred that there was space in it for other authors to innovate and experiment. Barrett Browning was of course not the verse novel's inventor, either: she acknowledged in letters that both Anna Seward in *Louisa* and Byron in *Don Juan* were her forerunners in the genre (*Letters* 1: 204; *Letters to MRM* 1: 49), but there were others, such as Arthur Hugh Clough, who had published *The Bothie* and *Amours de Voyage* in 1848 and 1849. Lytton both imitates and reinvents this relatively new genre. In narrative structure, *Lucile* contrasts strongly with *Aurora Leigh*, which is fictional autobiography, but it resembles *Don Juan* in provocative ways; and while *Lucile*'s story is unoriginal, its verse form is unique in its context.

Lytton's narrator is not part of his story despite belonging to the same world and admitting to have met one of the characters (Meredith 171). Though he develops his own views in extended Byronic digressions, he frequently steps aside and allows characters to focalise in a kind of free indirect discourse. The characters are also able to express themselves as short-term narrators in many embedded letters. But while the Byronic narrator was adapted by a number of verse novelists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the epistolary mode was conventional in the eighteenth-century and common in the nineteenth-century verse novel, the dramatic mode which Lytton uses regularly throughout *Lucile* is a real innovation. Unusual in any narrative fiction, it crops up only from time to time in the nineteenth-century prose novel, for example in parts of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. It could be argued that printing the speaker's name outside the text of his or her speech is an easier option than trying to fit tags such as "he said" and "she asked" into the anapaestic lines; but the technique is nevertheless effective in giving characters a way of expressing themselves that appears unmediated by a narrator. Lytton is not quite fair to himself in his complaint that the characters are "described rather than revealed" (10).

The basic story of *Lucile* is not one of its innovative features. The first part is borrowed from George Sand's 1844 novella, *Lavinia*, as many reviewers noticed in the 1860s. Lytton felt obliged to point out in his 1867 preface that *Lucile* resembled Sand's text only in its "opening portion," that it was dissimilar in characterization and that, being composed in verse, it was a very different type of work from *Lavinia* (7). But the story of *Lucile* in its entirety has a formulaic feel to it: two men, one English and one French, are both in love with a beautiful widow, Countess Lucile de Nevers. The two male characters are of course also both titled aristocrats. Although in love with the Englishman, Lord Alfred Vargrave, Lucile eventually renounces him because he is engaged to Matilda, an innocent young Englishwoman – who is, naturally, as beautiful as Lucile. Lucile also refuses the French Duke de Luvois, and becomes a nun. Later she turns up at the front of the Crimean War as a French Florence Nightingale, where she nurses back to life the son of Matilda and Vargrave and pleads with Luvois – now a general in the French army – to allow a marriage between this son and Luvois' niece, which Luvois has forbidden. Luvois relents and the withheld happy ending is permitted to the second generation. This story looks in its bare outline like many popular romances, but in its details lie a trove of surprises, including the character of Lucile herself.

Of the two heroines, Lucile is the dark one – in many novels a colour code for the worldly, experienced or evil member of a pair in which her fairer counterpart is virginal and pure of heart (Hardin 41; Fiedler 302; Frye 101). On the surface of things, this Manichaeian binary is clearly expressed. Lucile, in strong contrast to the golden-haired Matilda, is the stereotypical *femme fatale*, dark-eyed, low-voiced, and sexually experienced: she is a widow and a woman who has had a passionate love affair with Vargrave in her early youth, before her unhappy, arranged marriage. But Lucile is not just a brunette counterpart to Matilda; she is a non-Caucasian, potentially exotic Other. The child of an aristocratic French adventurer and an Indian heiress, Lucile "Neither felt, nor affected, the wish to conceal / [her] half-Eastern blood" (67). And yet she turns out to be neither the fatal woman that she seems, nor the sexualised or inscrutable exotic that postcolonial theory might predict. She does not take on the role of focaliser as often as Vargrave, whose male gaze the narrator both uses and ironises, but Lucile's inner life is nevertheless the ground of the verse novel's affective



Here the separate arousals of “Pity” and “conscience” are deeply private experiences, known only to Lucile. The questions that the passage goes on to ask are also her own, spoken by her inner voice, this time rendered as free indirect discourse, allowing the reader to eavesdrop on – and share – her secret anxieties.

While this kind of discourse represents her internal thoughts and sensations, the dramatic and epistolary sections of the narrative give her a more public voice. In a letter to Vargrave she acknowledges a surprising need and habit of independence:

“Yes, Alfred; you start?  
But think! if the world was too much in your heart,  
And too little in mine, when we parted ten years  
Ere this last fatal meeting, that time (ay, and tears!)  
Have but deepen’d the old demarcations which then  
Placed our natures asunder; and we two again,  
As we then were, would still have been strangely at strife.  
In that self-independence which is to my life  
Its necessity now, as it once was its pride,  
Had our course through the world been henceforth side by side,  
I should have revolted forever, and shock’d  
Your respect for the world’s plausibilities, mock’d,  
Without meaning to do so, and outraged, all those  
Social creeds which you live by.” (111)

Lucile confesses that whatever the compulsions of the love she has borne Vargrave for the past ten years, “self-independence” is crucial to her – once her “pride,” it is now her “necessity” – and she recognizes that this feature of herself is what caused the “strife” between the two of them as young lovers, placing their “natures asunder.” She understands the source of their strife to be her own “revolt,” which, far from regretting, she would continue “forever.” Though she appears to sympathise with Vargrave whom, in their hypothetical future together, she would “[shock],” “[mock]” and “[outrage],” her rebellion against “all those / Social creeds which [he lives] by” is presented without regret or apology as inevitable, given who she is.

Even the narrator’s descriptions of Lucile that initially focus on her appearance typically proceed deeper than this. On her first introduction he declares that she is the possessor of “Genius,” an attribute that, according to him, is somewhat of a curse, for he laments:

Alas! why is Genius for ever at strife  
With the world, which despite the world’s self, it ennobles?  
Why is it that Genius perplexes and troubles  
And offends the effete life it comes to renew?  
'Tis the terror of Truth! 'tis that Genius is true! (62-63)

For a Victorian lady, discretion, not “Truth,” is generally the key to success. Perhaps because of this, Lucile’s genius is described as not merely “at strife / With the world” but more seriously “at war” “with her life”:

Lucile de Nevers (if her riddle I read)  
Was a woman of genius: whose genius, indeed,

With her life was at war. Once, but once, in that life  
 The chance had been hers to escape from this strife  
 In herself; finding peace in the life of another  
 From the passionate wants she, in hers, failed to smother.  
 But the chance fell too soon, when the crude restless power  
 Which had been to her nature so fatal a dower,  
 Only wearied the man it yet haunted and thrall'd;  
 And that moment, once lost, had been never recall'd. (63)

This internal “war” is waged because the “social creeds” to which Vargrave ascribes are more oppressive to women than to men, requiring women to take more trouble to conceal and bowdlerize the “terror of Truth.”

Significantly, genius causes the young Lucile to possess “passionate wants” that she “fail[s] to smother.” Though the narrator recommends “finding peace in the life of another” as a remedy for this inordinate female desire, he is clear throughout the text that Vargrave, the object of Lucile’s passion, is inadequate to her needs. Vargrave wearied of her as a young woman because he could not comprehend or reciprocate her changing moods. As he explains to Cousin John:

She bored me. I show'd it. She saw it. What next?  
 She reproach'd. I retorted. Of course she was vex'd.  
 I was vex'd that she was so. She sulk'd. So did I.  
 If I ask'd her to sing, she look'd ready to cry.  
 I was contrite, submissive. She soften'd. I harden'd.  
 At noon I was banish'd. At eve I was pardon'd. (27)

At the heart of his ennui is the fact that Vargrave cannot keep up with Lucile emotionally. And even though later, in her serene, accomplished maturity, she evokes in him a grand passion, the reader is aware that he could never become a satisfactory lover for her. After he proposes to her during a violent and self-exposing storm, which temporarily draws aside their inhibitions and self-control, he experiences qualms and regrets (104-07). And when he returns to Matilda after Lucile has apparently rejected him, he thinks: “Was I blind / To have dream'd that these clever Frenchwomen of mind / Could satisfy simply a plain English heart”? (155). The narrow-minded xenophobia and sexism revealed in this internal comment may represent the cosmopolitan Lytton’s ironic judgment on the “plain English” gentleman. Certainly it clarifies, once and for all, Vargrave’s shortcomings.

Despite her fatal gift of genius and the frustrations of living in love with a man who is so patently inadequate, Lucile manages to make enough capital of her beauty, charm, and position to remain for many years the toast of the fashionable watering-places that she frequents. However, the “World” “abuse[s]” her in private:

'Twas the woman's free genius it vex'd and attack'd  
 With a sneer at her freedom of action and speech. (178)

Significantly, what affronts society is not her exoticism but her “freedom.” And this fictional society was not the only one to regard Lucile as transgressive. Reviewers of Lytton’s text similarly accused his character of libertine tendencies,<sup>5</sup> for she lives and travels alone, speaks

her mind and makes all her own decisions. She even – ironically – takes it upon herself to further the interests of the reigning ideology, using her somewhat “unwomanly” power over both Vargrave and Luvois in Ems, when she firmly reminds the former of his duties as a Victorian husband and points out to the latter a possible rake’s reform. When she renounces the world at last to enter a convent she realizes that, in her own case if not Matilda’s, “We are our own fates” (269) and “When the soul arms for battle, she goes forth alone” (275). Her reincarnation in the final canto as an angel of mercy is not merely a melodramatic transformation oblivious to character consistency; it is a sign that a woman’s freedom – including especially her freedom from the obligations of both matrimony and the social “World” – is necessary to her making any significant meaning out of her own life. In her final appearances Lucile speaks with an authority that chastens even the once-demonic Luvois in his new incarnation as a military general, and yet she lives and works completely outside the structures of society. Though her life is a failure as far as romance is concerned, it is a triumph of self-liberation. Perhaps she inspired some of her young female readers with something other than a yearning for true love.

Thus, character, plot, and narration retain just enough of the familiar clichés of popular romance to hold the attention of a middlebrow or even lowbrow reader while offering some serious, realistic, and even slightly subversive fare as well. Fortunately for many of the publishers who made money out of *Lucile* (Lytton received very poor terms from its publication [Harlan 144]), some features that were realistic for the author were the stuff of fantasy for most of its readers. Titled lords and ladies must have held a fairytale quality for the bourgeois or the republican, but Lytton’s father was a baron and Lytton himself later became an earl. The spas of Europe populated by the aristocracy of many nations were commonplace for him, but they would have seemed exotic to small-town Americans and provincial Englishmen alike.

But one astonishing aspect of Lytton’s text could not be glossed over or transformed into a stereotype of popular fiction. *Lucile* is not just a romance novel; it is a romance novel *in verse* – and the verse is of so extreme a nature that it cannot be ignored. In fact, it must comprise an important reason for the text’s popularity. The metre is certainly a cause of its unpopularity with most reviewers. Nevertheless, its many thousands of enthusiastic readers must have appreciated the effects of the anapaestic tetrameter, rushing them onward, perhaps lulling them to sleep, enforcing a specific intonation on phrases and sentences in a way no prose novel, popular or classic, ever did. Felluga’s pronouncement that poetry was regarded as a “high” literary genre in the Victorian period perhaps does not apply to the poetry of *Lucile* in the ears of its majority readership.

Derek Attridge emphasizes the tendency of a four-beat rhythm to dominate and all but obliterate other possible linguistic sound contours, once the pattern is established (76-84). This tendency is taken to an extreme in anapaestic metre, which makes the discourse sound, first and foremost, as “dedeDUM dedeDUM dedeDUM dedeDUM.” Though the occasional iamb (“deDUM”) will substitute grudgingly for one of these anapaests, the rhythm will tolerate very few other variations. The end-rhyme almost invariably accompanying this metre not only works to emphasize the final syllable of each line but, by marking off the unit, further foregrounds the whole line. In performing such a text, a reader finds the semantics of the discourse to be decidedly secondary to this cantering (not “marching,” “dancing,” or “galloping” as various reviewers of *Lucile* describe it<sup>6</sup>) rhythm. This of course makes the text much less readerly than all prose and most poetry. The metre insists on a specific intonational

contour, removing nearly all of the reader's freedom to choose emphasis and nuance; and the rhyme enforces audible pairings – rendered in both pitch and intensity – of words that he or she might not otherwise perform as meaningfully connected. A highbrow reader may reject the book because the intonation selected is often far from the best semantic option, placing emphasis on words that are either unimportant or not idiomatically stressed.

The following stanza on a Crimean battlefield demonstrates this occasional awkwardness:

Time pásses. The dúmb  
 Bitter, snów-bound, and súllen Novémber has cóme.  
 And its snóws have been báthed in the blóod of the bráve:  
 And mány a yóung heart has glútted the gráve:  
 And on Ínkerman yét the wild brámble is góry,  
 And those bléak heights hencefóρθ shall be fámous in stóry. (283)

Though fairly conventional, the rhyme couplings here are relatively good by W. K. Wimsatt's classic standard, in the sense that they mostly connect words of different parts of speech and spark off mild irony in the pairs "brave / grave" and "gory / story" (Wimsatt 157); but the rhythm is another matter. In pronouncing these quite proficient anapaests, the reader must de-emphasise the whole of the word "Bitter" at the beginning of the second line, because both of its syllables are in the unstressed positions of the initial anapaest. "Bitter" is part of a list of adjectives, so this demotion does not make sense, as the voice indicates parallelism by equal stressing. A similar distortion of emphasis reverses the usual intonational contours in both "yóung heart" and "bléak heights." Stressing the adjective over the noun in this way is not normally acceptable in English, unless in contradiction – here perhaps of "old heart" and "warm and welcoming heights" – or in a formula such as "trúelove." The metrical intonation of the phrases in question does not make absolute nonsense of them, but it dulls the sharpness of their edge, giving the discourse an inexact and formulaic feel instead of a precisely adjustable point. It also encourages the reader not to attend to details of reference but simply to "go with the flow," an invitation probably accepted only too readily by the consumers of popular literature.

Lytton himself may have heard his verse as following a slightly less emphatic rhythm, however. If his verse novel had been more successful with the educated and highbrow audience towards which it was aimed, it might have permanently shifted perceptions of the anapaestic metre in the minds of Anglophone poets and poetry readers. When Lytton left his public school, his father sent him abroad to learn modern languages instead of enrolling him at an English university. Saintsbury is convinced that Lytton consequently developed a kind of hybrid ear which blurred his sensitivity to the sounds of his mothertongue (Huttner, "Reviews," *Lucile Project*). But such hybridity may have made him more capable than most English speakers of importing the tunes of another language into the repertoire of his own. For years, Lytton immersed himself in French, the language of nineteenth-century diplomacy, and its influence shows itself in *Lucile's* plot, setting, and characters. He admits in his 1867 preface to the metrical influence of Alfred de Musset, which might seem surprising because of the profound phonological differences between French and English. Since French lacks – or perhaps backgrounds – lexical stress, the rhythms of English cannot exactly imitate the rhythms of French. But in basic numbers and groupings of syllables, English anapaestic

tetrameter does bear a resemblance to the French Alexandrine. The fact that both lines are almost invariably associated with – perhaps even entail – a couplet rhyme scheme highlights the resemblance. Traditionally, the French twelve-syllable hexameter is divided, exactly in the middle, into two hemistiches, each of which is normally also punctuated by another, less salient pause than the central caesura. A phrasal stress lightly touches the last syllable in each grouping. In lines in which the pauses are very regularly spaced, the effect is, to an Anglophone ear, at least, decidedly close to anapaestic tetrameter:

Demandant | aux forêts, || à la mer, | à la plaine,  
 Aux brises | du matin, || à toute heure, | à tout lieu,  
 La femme | de ton âme || et de ton | premier vœu! (de Musset 2.44)

*(Demanding of the forests, of the sea, of the plain,  
 Of the breezes of morning, every hour, every place,  
 The woman of thy soul and of thy first desire!)*

The metrical similarity is well caught by comparison with lines from *Lucile* in which, as in the de Musset passage, word- and phrase-boundaries coincide exactly with the rhythmic units:

So the day | – so the night! || So by night, | so by day,  
 .. .. .  
 In the trench | flooded through, || in the wind | where it wails,  
 In the snow | where it falls, || in the fire | where it hails. (282)

The rhythmic echoes between these two passages may provide the critical clue to Lytton's choice of metre in *Lucile*. Anapaestic tetrameter is an eccentric speciality in English verse, appearing mostly in humorous contexts such as Christopher Anstey's eighteenth-century verse novel, *The New Bath Guide*, or in fast-moving action poems like Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" and Robert Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix." Alexandrines, in contrast, are the staple of serious poetry in France, including even the classical drama of Racine and Corneille, in which, as in *Lucile*, couplet rhyme is used. Although the clear artificiality of representing spontaneous speech using end rhyme, particularly couplet rhyme, which brings the paired syllables maximally close, is built into both languages, French pronunciation makes ternary metre a more subtle matter than English. The French metre becomes evident only as an ordering principle in the serene series of slightly-tipped phrases flowing by as the segmented Alexandrines unfold themselves. At their best, that is how Lytton's anapaestic tetrameters almost sound.<sup>7</sup> But, generally, because of this language's strong lexical stress, and also of course because of many readers' unshakeable memories of rambunctious, cantering precursors in this form, *Lucile*'s metre tends to be a much more rollicking and domineering presence than the French hexameter.

Lytton's attempt can be compared with that of Clough, who did get a proper university degree and, partly in consequence, adapted classical dactylic hexameters to his verse novels. But while Clough managed to forge a surprising simulation of the cadences of English speech out of his apparently Greek metre (Prins 102–06), Lytton had a much harder task in attempting to bend anapaestic tetrameter couplets into anything other than a singsong. The

novel, at least according to Ian Watt, requires a style that does not call attention to itself, that may even appear clumsy and unstructured in its illusion of verisimilitude and spontaneity (28-30). The great challenge of any verse novelist is to suggest these effects in the stylized medium of poetry.

Perhaps Clough's greatest advantage over Lytton, in taking up this challenge, was that he chose an unrhymed model for his versification. Donald Wesling regards rhyme in English as the mark of poetic stylization itself, "the surrogate of all other devices" (x); Peter McDonald points out that the existence of unrhymed poetry in a culture "plays a central role in the way that rhyme becomes self-conscious as a stylistic feature in poetry" (8). Using a rhymed form to create the casual referentiality of the realist novel raises the degree of difficulty significantly. Barrett Browning, who selected English rather than French or Greek models for her verse novel, avoided the formal influence of Byron and followed Shakespeare and Milton in her choice of the traditional English unrhymed form, blank verse. Robert Browning followed her example later in *The Ring and the Book*, as did "Violet Fane" in *Denzil Place*. Lytton strove for the illusion of verisimilitude and spontaneity against heavier odds – and he did succeed to some extent.

Though it is easy to imagine the half-educated chanting a meaningless singsong through the many cantos of *Lucile*, complaisant in the belief that it was true poetry, ternary rhythm does not run counter to all aspects of English pronunciation. In fact, it accommodates many phrases that are either omitted from, or exist as disruptions to, iambic texts. This is the strength of Clough's dactyls. English is awash with unstressed monosyllabic words such as articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and auxiliaries, which often occur in pairs before stressed elements. These structures appear in profusion in *Lucile*: "For a mán," "And the ghósts," "We have móre," "If I knéw" (268, 300, 35, 323). Together with the prosody of polysyllabic words, which also often feature contiguous pairs of less-stressed syllables, as in "Unaccómplished" and "féarfully," this phrasal tendency makes series of anapaests quite natural occurrences: "just abóut to be háppy," "Everlástingly féd," "In the fóliage obsérvable hére" (307, 324, 102, 291, 162). Even longer sequences can sound normal and unforced (if we background rhyme for the moment): "The grámmar of lífe we have góttén by héart, / But lífe's sélf we have máde a dead language – an árt / Not a vóice" (166). Where the iambic impulse insists on a reduction of the merely grammatical elements of an utterance, anapaests often allow a more natural, less telegram-like syntax. Angrily leaving *Lucile* after returning her letters, Alfred Vargrave, quite naturally as to expression, "Bow'd his héad and depártd without a replý" (84). In iambs this would have to condense to "Bow'd héad and léft without replý," an annoyingly bouncy utterance which is so bare of determiners as not to sound quite idiomatic.

Perhaps because of its accommodation of this sort of phraseology, *Lucile* includes some surprisingly convincing passages of dialogue, such as the following in dramatic mode. It begins with a metrically counted snort on the part of Alfred Vargrave, plausibly elicited by Luvois' (here the "Stranger"'s) trenchant comments on their mutual acquaintance, *Lucile*:

ALFRED

Humph! . . . I sée you have fínish'd, at lást, your cigár:  
Can I óffer anóther?

STRANGER

No thánk you. We áre

Not two miles from Serchón.  
 ALFRED  
 You know the road well?  
 STRANGER  
 I have often been over it.  
 Here a pause fell. (50)

In this passage, the rhymes (“cigar / are” and “well / fell”) are decidedly useful to the reader trying to keep track of line and metre at the same time as following what seems quite spontaneous conversation.

The device of dividing a line of verse into discrete phrases by placing each one at a different vertical level but indented laterally is quite effective in some narrative passages, too. It appears strikingly in the following conclusion to a meeting between Lucile and Luvois; adding to its effect, all the stresses fall accordantly on semantically important words:

The voice ceased.  
 He uplifted his eyes.  
 All alone  
 He stood on the bare edge of dawn. She was gone. (276)

This kind of use of the white space of the page is generally considered a Modernist tendency; Lytton’s usage here is a felicity of his personal invention, inserting moments of silence between his anapaests in order to imitate, in the reader’s interrupted progress through the text, a character’s moments of realization and of acceptance.

However, these moments in which the metre appears to fuse and adapt itself to the necessary rhythms of the utterance are not continuous in *Lucile*. No matter how skilled the poet, English four-beat metres probably cannot for long achieve the matter-of-fact phrasing of French hexameters. Whereas iambic pentameter, particularly blank verse, may be backgrounded for a time, usually by means of enjambment and midline pauses, rhyming anapaests insist on the spotlight, even when they incorporate apparently “natural,” unemphatic utterances. For example, taken out of its poetic context, the sentence “He felt ill at ease with himself” in the mouth of a mothertongue English speaker is likely to coalesce unremarkably around a principal stress on the word “ease.” The unstressed syllables, especially the prepositions “at” and “with,” would be quite reduced in normal fluent speech. But in the context of *Lucile* all the syllables must be enunciated and the stressed ones almost equalized, so that “ease” no longer so clearly tops a hierarchy:

He felt ill at ease with himself. He could feel  
 Little doubt what the answer would be from Lucile. (105)

A reader is aware of a vehemence here that is at odds with a straightforward presentation of everyday reality. The rhyme augments this effect by bracketing off the utterance discretely, making the second line reflect the first and vice versa. This inward-turning arc of correspondences inclines the reader to pronounce the whole couplet in an almost chant-like fashion. The word “singsong” has been used of *Lucile* as a term of disparagement here and

elsewhere;<sup>8</sup> it may be a style of reading to which an alert reader must develop a constant but not absolute resistance.

The slightly ritualized language evident in the quoted passage seems to suit not the realist novel so much as the poetic romance, with its equally ritualized stories of extremity, including love, magic, quest, glamour, and coincidence. *Lucile*, whose plot includes some of these features, was taken by its publishers and general readership as belonging to the generic offspring of the traditional poetic romance: the modern, normally prose romance. While not usually as fantastic as traditional romance, modern prose romance is still unrealistic in that it offers a more lurid or glamorous world than actually exists, and a plot in which apparent plausibility is a cleverly-constructed mask for wish-fulfilment. The genre comprises wholly “culinary” or “commercial literature,” for it does not transgress but merely mirrors the desires of its consumers (Jauss 25; Bourdieu 61). As Bourdieu recognized, the nineteenth century witnessed the triumph of the novel as a genre that did not simply pander to but attempted to shape and anatomise society. Those aspects of *Lucile* that resemble not the romance but the realist novel show Lytton at his most autonomous. In Jauss’s terms, *Lucile* could claim some “artistic character” because in its deviations, both poetic and novelistic, from the contemporary prose romance, a degree of “distance between horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the ‘horizontal change’ demanded by the reception of the new work” was perceptible (25).

*Lucile* manages, by and large, to retain its status as verse novel rather than romance. As already discussed, the main character and her life story are not quite typical of romance. Nor is the degree of interiority afforded to several characters by various narrative techniques. The settings, whatever they might seem to readers, are not actually unrealistic. Both Luchon in the French Pyrenees and Ems in the Rhineland are presented in the text in authentic, tour-guide detail. India, which is not a setting exactly, as it is merely described by Lucile in a letter before she travels there, is more glamorously portrayed, as the land of the “palm, and the fountain” (155) and “the birthplace of morn” (160). But Lucile is inclined to mythologise India at this point because she sees it as a refuge from her present emotional pain; and it was a very real country for the author, who was to spend four years as its *de facto* ruler. An alarming and realistic warning is in fact embedded in Lucile’s letter when she unexpectedly tells her female friend about the colonial European “craft or . . . power” that will “master our East” (159). The setting of the last canto, which moves about the French and British soldiers’ camps on the Crimea, would not have been a distant memory for some readers, since the war described in that section had ended only four years before *Lucile*’s first publication. The narrator there attempts an unexpectedly brutal version of realism, reminiscent of Byron in *The Siege of Corinth* and prophetic of the poetry of the Great War six decades later:

Ring’d round by a rain  
Of red fire, and of iron, the murderous plain  
Flared with fitful combustion; where fitfully fell  
Afar off the fateful, disgorged *scharpenelle*. (282)

This “realism” is a non-euphemistic realisation of horror rather than a simple verisimilitude; it is paradoxically based on a metaphor in which the battlefield is figured as hell in a sublime wide-angle image recalling the first books of *Paradise Lost*.

While not usually treating peacetime landscapes metaphorically, *Lucile*'s narrator is inclined to present them sublimely, too, though not always in a manner that can be described as realistic. The most extreme description is the spectacle of a storm over the Pyrenees (90–99). In this passage he confesses that he himself has experienced a Wordsworthian epiphany in looking on Oo Lake, near where his characters are riding when the storm begins. This visionary experience, in which he claims to have “seen . . . the whole vast design of the ages; what was and shall be!” is in fact a travesty of Wordsworth's evocations of the “presence that disturb[ed him] with the joy / Of elevated thoughts” (164). *Lucile*'s narrator experiences transcendence in a much more prosaic manner than Wordsworth's speaker: he sees a “dread pageant” and hears a “great choral chant” that neatly explains “The divine Whence and Whither of life!” in language resembling some of the more clichéd Anglican hymns (99). Part of what rings false in this section is the fact that the narrator has already established himself in a much more pragmatic relationship to his reader and his landscape. Most of the time, he regards the mountains ironically as commodities that a tourist may enjoy for a price – and the price is the fee of Bernard le Sauteur, “the king of all guides,” whom he recommends unconditionally for travellers in the Pyrenees who want to get the best out of their tour (87). This free advertisement, smacking of Byron and his unsolicited advice on hangover cures and what to pack when visiting Italy during Lent is not so much realistic as reality itself.

Watt distinguishes the realist novel from the romance and other genres in its preference for “minute exactness” over “the general and universal” (16–18). Like more recent exponents of “thing theory” he characterizes the novel as including many individually described and placed mundane objects as semiotic markers not only of political, social and economic codes but also of materiality itself (see, for example, Wall 109–10). The novel's habit of “making an object come up close, drawing it into a zone of crude contact” is essential, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, to the genre's tendency to “demolish fear and piety,” feelings essential to the reception of non-novelistic, poetic genres such as the epic (23). Although more vulgar novelistic objects such as the chamber-pot that crops up in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Byron's *Don Juan* and even, according to David Lodge, in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*<sup>9</sup> do not defile the pages of *Lucile*, this is not the sign of a complete dearth of the mundane things of the reader's familiar world. One famous example is a visiting card left in Vargrave's hotel room by Matilda's uncle, Sir Ridley MacNab. It is represented in the text as an actual object by a large rectangle of black lines which boxes in the character's name, typed in bold uppercase letters (148); the name displayed is part of the verse. Other objects include a “slender valise . . . whose dimension / Excluded large outfits,” a man's collar and a woman's shawl, cigars and cigarettes, a pillow, a carriage, a “blood stain'd dressing,” and written “daily reports” from the war front on a table in the general's tent (191, 20, 41, 44, 193, 210, 287, 150, 287).

Some characters and events are very mundane and unpoetic, too. Vargrave's extremely down-to-earth Cousin John admires above all not a flamboyant hero but the kind of English squire who loves hunting but spends his days, “forgo[ing] all his tastes and destroy[ing] his digestion,” listening to the “dreary debate” in Parliament for the sake of “duty” (202). Commonplace events include getting a broken bracelet repaired by a jeweler, taking a pet to the “dog doctor” for suspected “mumps” and “unbuckl[ing] the cloaks from the saddles” when weather changes during an excursion (20, 91). Perhaps the most unromantic event of all is a run on the Bank in London caused by the swindler Ridley MacNab, which results in “Twenty families ruin'd,” including Vargrave's (242–43). This episode even afforded part

of *Lucile* a place in an anthology called *The Poetry of Business Life*, compiled in 1994 by Ralph Windle (31).

The narrator is also alert to technological realism. Overland transport in *Lucile* is strictly by means of horses and horse-drawn carriages. Unlike many writers, Lytton does not treat horses as if they were machines; both of the important male characters, Vargrave and Luvois, narrowly escape death while riding highly-strung animals that take fright in the mountains (41, 97). (Horses may actually have had something to do with the cantering metre chosen for this verse novel, since the author claims in the 1867 preface that “the greater part of [it] was composed on horseback, in the Pyrenees” [9].) But new technologies are about to start competing with horses and these also make a showing. Because the time of the story is not precisely contemporary with its writing – and reading – the first part being set a short generation before the Crimean War, the narrator feels the need to point out developments that have occurred since then. He does so in a rhyming footnote:

These events, it is needless to say, Mr. Morse,  
Took place when Bad News as yet travell'd by horse;  
Ere the world, a like a cockchafer, buzz'd on a wire,  
Or Time was calcined by electrical fire;  
Ere a cable went under the hoary Atlantic,  
Or the word Telegram drove grammarians frantic. (243)

The narrator is having fun here, as the comic rhymes, “horse / Morse” and “Atlantic / frantic” attest. To start with he appears quite conservative in the simile “like a cockchafer, buzz’d” and the metaphor “Time was calcined”; but later his teasing of the “grammarians” – with their punningly etymological relation to the “*Telegram*” – suggests that he has been satirizing the attitudes of those who disapprove of progress all along.

The humorous tone of this footnote, which is both witty and knowledgeable, is widespread in *Lucile*, though more thickly in earlier parts of the text. Clearly imitative of some of the “Aurora Borealis” of moods displayed by *Don Juan*’s narrator (6.335), this tone is especially evident, as in that poem, in the digressions. The humour is essentially realistic and pragmatic, for example when it juxtaposes “Young ladies and strawberries, – ‘only just out’” (14) during the London season or where it notes the preparedness of the “thorough-bred Englishman” for any occasion: “nothing can find [him] unprovided” with an “oath” (41). In both of these examples, the slightly insulting reflection is aimed at bringing pretensions down to earth, as is so often the Bakhtinian goal of the novel.

Lytton’s *Lucile* is thus a profoundly uneven work, marred by the features that probably made it so popular in its time but showing many unique and innovative qualities as well. The tired plot in which virtue triumphs, the exoticism and purple passages, the singsong and false intonation, all argue for the justice of this verse novel’s “eras[ure] from the history of literature” (Bourdieu 70). And yet the work is strikingly effective in many aspects of its novelistic realism, its ironic narration, the psychological complexity of at least one character, and the ways in which several different characters’ voices are transmitted. Above all, it represents a valiant, if not always successful, attempt at sustained novelistic narration in anapaestic tetrameter couplets, one of the most intractable of poetic forms.

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## NOTES

1. I have made much grateful use of Huttner's well-researched and comprehensive website in preparing this paper.
2. All the nineteenth-century journal reviews of *Lucile* cited in this essay are to be found on Huttner's website. They are on sub-pages accessible via links from the site's "Reviews" page, from which they were accessed on 9 May 2014. From this point on, references to these "Reviews" will be made parenthetically in the text.
3. References to *Lucile* will, throughout this paper, refer parenthetically to the 1867 edition (reprinted in 1871), rather than the first edition of 1860. I have chosen to use the later edition because its preface is very revealing of the author's attitudes to and investment in the text, because it is the edition most widely available on the internet and in print, and because I believe that in many cases the deletions and summaries of the narrator's ramblings that distinguish the later from the earlier edition are actually improvements to the text. Huttner describes the differences between the 1860 and the 1867 editions, which he displays in detail on his "Texts" webpage, as "very substantial"; but they are mostly mere deletions. The nature of the passages deleted, however, does alter the general feel and fabric of the verse novel. What are deleted are not only sections that seem to resemble de Musset and Sand too closely, but also many long-winded poetic invocations and other "purple passages." Since the more matter-of-fact narration is left intact, or even slightly increased, the overall effect of the changes is actually to make the later edition more novelistic than the earlier one. The text used in this paper does not offer poetic line numbers; the *Lucile* references are to page numbers only.
4. Huttner has included an encyclopaedic – but still unfinished – catalogue of editions and issues of *Lucile*, including photographs, on the many sub-pages of his website accessible from his "Publishers" page.
5. See the 1860 review in the *North British Review* in particular, but also a similar judgment in the *Literary Gazette* of the same year. These are available on Huttner's "Reviews" page.
6. *National Review* (July–Oct. 1863), *Literary Gazette* (5 May 1860) and *Dublin University Magazine* (April 1861) respectively (accessible on Huttner's "Reviews" page).
7. Significantly, Frances Henrietta Jobert had translated Lamartine's hexameter poem *Jocelyn* into English anapaestic tetrameter couplets in 1837. Lytton may have known both the original and the translation of this work and he perhaps approved the translator's claim to have "adopted" "the measured and rhyming language of the author" so "literally" that the translation was in fact "*not english verse but french poetry in an english dress*" (author's italics) (Jobert 3–4).
8. See *Dial* 23 (1897), Huttner, "Reviews," *Lucile Project*, for example.
9. On a fateful day for the young Tristram, "the chamber maid had left no \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\* under the bed" (Sterne 369). In *Don Juan*, 1.cxliv, Don Alfonso and his servants, searching in his wife Julia's bedroom for her lover Juan, look under the bed "and there they found— / No matter what—it was not what they sought" (Byron 6.58). A character in one of David Lodge's novels is writing a thesis on "Sanitation in Victorian Fiction" and is convinced that the "small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use" mentioned in *The Ambassadors* is a chamber pot (Lodge, *British Museum* 40, 121; *Year* 42; James 40).

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