

TAMPERING WITH SCHOLARLY FORM

Jeffrey M. Perl

Although the stress in *Common Knowledge* falls on content more than form, it is the journal's form and formats—our Little Reviews, notably—that tend to draw positive attention. *In camera*, we term these reviews “tendentious haiku,” the point being not that they are brief or subtle or inscrutable, but that, in a form presumed incapable of it, they can render and espouse a worldview. Hence, even where the form is fundamental, the stress here is on its content. Philosophically the journal takes exception to distinctions of the form/content variety and, furthermore, discourages tendentiousness when delivered unironically. Our resistance to artificial distinctions, such as form versus content, stems from desire for peaceful transactions in intellectual life and politics. *Versus* is a tool we use only reluctantly. The desire for peace, like any desire, can be uncompromising. Unlike other desires, however, this one recoils from its own strength and requires indirect expression. One way to achieve indirection is to tamper with forms in which a strong position finds natural expression. An encyclical or tractatus can be rendered lyrical in the right hands, just as a haiku can be made tendentious. Tampering with the distinction, disputably artificial, between narrative history and fiction, or between discursive philosophy and poetry, is a time-honored maneuver.

The tendency of *Common Knowledge* is to tamper with form rather than talk about tampering, because disclosures of the kind can be self-defeating. Occasion-

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ally, though, we are happy to sponsor conversation about whether, and if so how, to go about tampering at all. For our inaugural issue, published twenty-two years ago, Greil Marcus contributed, to a set of calls for papers by various members of the community, his own call (“if the editors are game”) for “a whole issue dedicated to experiments in scholarly form and to articles on the subject of scholarly form.”¹ The editors were game, and a symposium called “Experimental Scholarship” occupied most of the Winter 1996 issue. Marcus was joined by Hugh Kenner, whose scholarship had always been experimental formally, in writing a “dialogical introduction” to the symposium. Kenner began by addressing the science-versus-humanities distinction that had compelled him, during his schooling, to choose between mathematics and literary criticism as a career:

Leaving aside the fact that protochemists once babbled of “Phlogiston,” something they’d thank you to forget, whereas the parts of oratory as listed by Cicero have stayed pretty firmly in place for a couple of millennia, may we not observe that discourse implies a human presence? And that implies a voice, and a certain willingness to sound agreeable.

“Tell ’em what you’re going to tell ’em. Tell ’em. Tell ’em what you told ’em.” In short, tell ’em three times, just in case they tend to doze off. That was Ezra Pound’s summary of comp classes one afternoon. . . .

Myself, I once embedded a sequence of six iambic pentameter lines in a prose paragraph whence it squints at passers-by with its sly little eyes. No one to my knowledge has yet spotted it. . . .

“Form” is one way for a writer to keep himself entertained, so much does drudgery inhere in the endless spelling out of words. The reader who spots an absence of say-it and say-it and say-it, the comp teacher’s infernal trinity, ought to reflect that if indeed the writer is having a bit of fun, why, it’s there to be shared.²

As for Marcus, his part in the dialogue comprised a caveat: “experiments in scholarly form are merely vanities if they are merely novelties.” What experiments of this type should be, he concluded, is work that “leads readers to begin to ask questions about where it comes from, what it’s made of, how it works.”³

In the present issue of *Common Knowledge*, we resume this exchange of views where it left off: “Experimental Scholarship, Revisted” appears eighteen years after the release of that first escapade. (Another installment is on schedule for our Spring 2014 issue.) . . . As for the issue that you now have onscreen, the

1. Greil Marcus, “Call for Papers VIII,” *Common Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 8.

2. Hugh Kenner, “Experimental Scholarship: Dialogical Introduction,” *Common Knowledge* 5, no. 3 (Winter 1996): 68–69.

3. Greil Marcus, “Experimental Scholarship: Dialogical Introduction,” 69–70.

three guest columns—by historians Natalie Zemon Davis, Sir Keith Thomas, and Colin Richmond—concern microhistory: a genre of historical writing that, while some forty years old, remains controversial. Directly following, the symposium on “lyric philosophy” involves a genre less familiar than microhistory, though its inventor, the philosopher and poet Jan Zwicky, traces its ancestry to the later Wittgenstein. Readers may note the absence of poetry and fiction *per se* in this issue, the reason being that more than a third of its pages consist of a “pseudepigraphon” premised on its author’s conviction that not-for-credit truths are credible only when they appear as if fabrications. Still, “Shlomzion”—the pseudepigraphon—is not about its uncommon form. The piece is about peace, which we care to learn of only as a fantasy in fiction, lest otherwise we find it unpreposterous.