"We are Folk / Who Understand Unhampered Language Best": Peter Oswald, T. S. Eliot, and The Possibilities of (Contemporary) Poetic Drama at Shakespeare's Globe

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Abstract: In 1998, artistic director Mark Rylance commissioned verse dramatist Peter Oswald as the first contemporary writer-in-residence for Shakespeare's Globe. Oswald's verse seemed on paper to suit what Rylance described as "a space… made for verse-speaking", but the three verse plays he produced in this setting repeatedly, and consciously, confronted the challenges of negotiating the venue's, and the form's, Shakespearean history. In producing verse drama in contemporary English, Oswald had to engage not only with the overbearing presence of Shakespeare as primary comparison point, but also with T. S. Eliot's earlier explorations of the possibilities of poetic drama. Oswald's three Globe verse plays – *Augustine's Oak, The Golden Ass,* and *The Storm* — thus situate themselves in dialogue with Eliotic, as well as Shakespearean, ideas about what verse drama should be, engaging in debates around spirituality, historical distance, and the formation of audience-as-community. This essay offers close readings of each of these works as self-conscious investigations of the presence, purpose, and effect of verse in contemporary English theatre, drawing on contemporary reviews, formalist Shakespearean criticism, and a new, unpublished interview with Tim Carroll, director of all three plays.

Résumé : En 1998, Marc Rylance, directeur artistique au Théâtre du Globe, a proposé la première résidence d'écrivain contemporain au dramaturge et poète Peter Oswald. Sur la page, les vers d'Oswald semblent correspondre à ce que Rylance a décrit comme « un espace… fait pour déclamer des vers », mais les trois pièces en vers qu'il a produites dans ce décor se sont heurtées, de manière répétée et délibérée, aux défis que pose l'histoire du lieu et de la forme, tous deux intimement liés à Shakespeare. En produisant des pièces en vers en anglais contemporain, Oswald a dû entrer en compétition avec la présence

très forte de Shakespeare, mais aussi avec la manière dont T.S. Eliot a exploré les possibilités du théâtre poétique. Les trois pièces de Oswald jouées au Globe – *Augustine's Oak*, *The Golden Ass* et *The Storm* – se positionnent ainsi comme des dialogues avec des idées eliotiennes et shakespeariennes, sur ce que le théâtre en vers devrait être, prenant sa part dans le débat autour de la spiritualité, de la distance historique, et de la façon dont les spectateurs deviennent une communauté. Cet essai offre des micro-lectures de chacune de ces œuvres qui se veulent des enquêtes sur la présence, le but et l'effet des vers dans le théâtre contemporain anglais, puisant dans des critiques contemporaines, la critique shakespearienne formaliste et un nouvel entretien, non publié, avec Tim Carroll, le metteur en scène de ces trois pièces.

Keywords: verse drama, Shakespeare's Globe, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, poetic theatre

Mots-clés : théâtre en vers, Théâtre du Globe, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, théâtre poétique

Shakespeare's Globe is a space built for plays in which "verse is always at the centre of the dramatic argument" (Cantoni 43). This was the case made by Mark Rylance, the London venue's first artistic director, in his application for funding to commission verse dramatist Peter Oswald as the theatre's first contemporary playwright-in-residence in 1998. Since its inception, the Globe has programmed a number of contemporary productions foregrounding the use of verse, including texts by Glyn Maxwell and Tony Harrison. This essay will, however, concern itself with identifying the particular challenges and questions which faced the first three verse plays commissioned by the new Globe, all by Peter Oswald. Together the three form a group of texts which, by definition, are centrally self-conscious about the presence, purpose, and effect of verse in contemporary English theatre.

Here I argue that because Oswald's three Globe plays cannot ignore the fundamental strangeness of their form – even in a venue defined

in large part by its namesake's use of iambic pentameter blank verse – they engage not only with Shakespeare but, more implicitly but no less seriously, with one of the other most famous proponents of dramatic verse in English, a writer with comparatively little association with the Bankside theatre space: T. S. Eliot.

This second comparison is one invoked by Oswald himself, who "sorrowfully" told *Guardian* journalist Lyn Gardner that "even T. S. Eliot admitted that verse drama was damned hard and said he thought you had to give your life to it"; in her phrase, in an article primarily focused on his Globe work, he "has become resigned" to "plugging away at a type of drama that everyone believed had expired sometime in the late 1950s, when Christopher Fry fell from grace and T. S. Eliot's unfortunate Celia Copplestone suffered a grisly if memorable martyrdom by killer ants in *The Cocktail Party.*" Michael J. Sidnell noted the negative impact for future verse dramatists of Eliot's use of the form: "Under Eliot's influence, 'poetic drama', as it was so infelicitously called, acquired utterly un-Brechtian connotations and an odour of sanctity" (151). Oswald's plays call attention to verse's value for twenty-first century theatre while showing themselves pre-emptively aware of many objections the form faces as a result of the overbearing, though distinct, cultural legacies of plays both by Shakespeare and Eliot, thus performing a kind of evolving creative advocacy balanced between optimism (about the possibilities of poetic drama in the modern world, in Eliot's terms) and pessimism (about the reception of poetic drama, in a post-Shakespearean *and* post-Eliotic age).

I will first present some wider biographical and cultural context for the problems facing Oswald as the first verse dramatist to step into the bright shared light of that Shakespearean space – across which, I will demonstrate, a more subtle Eliotic shadow also falls. I will then trace Oswald's responses to both these playwrights' models of verse by describing some of the ways in which meaning is made from, and value assigned to, the use of verse and prose across the three texts: the 1999 *Augustine's Oak,* 2002's *The Golden Ass,* and *The Storm,* first produced in 2005.

Between Eliot and Shakespeare

An interview for Oswald's local paper, the Torquay *Herald Express*, suggests that the anxiety of influence might even impact on a verse dramatist's decision over where to live. "Down here there isn't so much of a feeling of working in the shadow of the great verse dramatists", he comments appreciatively to a journalist who goes on to marvel at Oswald's bravery in the face of a kind of haunting: "You might think that with Shakespeare hovering like a massy presence at your shoulder, not to mention T. S. Eliot, it would be hard to find the gall to write in verse" (Clamp 10). An account of Oswald's Globe plays thus requires a detailed assessment of how a contemporary verse dramatist finds his gall in direct dialogue with these two overpowering examples.

Rylance, according to an interview I conducted with Tim Carroll who directed all three productions, became aware of Oswald's writing through an early success which Carroll had originally commissioned – the 1996 National Theatre production of Oswald's adaptation of a Japanese puppet play, *Fair Ladies at a Game of Poem Cards*.[1] One reviewer at the time already described how Oswald had, somewhat pitiably, allotted himself "the thankless task of keeping verse drama going as a living theatrical form" (Curtis 48). While largely praising the production, the *Evening Standard's* Nick Curtis was keen to note its fundamental abnormality and identify what for him was an implicit elitism: *Fair Ladies* should be as "just the kind of bizarre one-off that will earn you respect as a culturally varied and adventurous theatregoer when you mention it at a dinner party" (48).

In such a context of reception, Oswald's implicit "task" as a playwright therefore becomes the creation of a "living" verse drama which is *not* inherently "bizarre", "adventurous", or confined to discussion purely in bourgeois circles (the fatuous world, perhaps of Eliot's *Cocktail Party*); a challenge which his Globe trilogy partly acknowledges and partly refutes. But if the Globe itself, in selecting Oswald for their own experimental commission, viewed his work as an adventure, they initially seemed to see it as a necessary one: when the theatre's producers formally "listed seven key artistic strategies that

were deemed essential to Rylance's vision for the Globe in the coming years", the last on the list was a commitment "[t]o experiment with new verse writing" (Fallow 91).

Oswald's experience at the Globe, however, was not one of unmitigated support for his aesthetic practice in this experiment, because in his account, and in the argument of Catriona Fallow, the pull towards the venue's eponymous dead icon was greater than that towards "living" verse drama. This Shakespeare-centrism had consequences for his ability to develop an independent voice, free from the paranoia of self-justification, in writing for that space:

> Shakespeare just dominated the place and all the thinking about it so much that you couldn't have a script discussion without everything being compared to Shakespeare in some way or another which is really, for a writer, very atrophying and very hard. (93)

Unlike an Elizabethan playwright experimenting within an accepted tradition, perhaps working for years with the same company, Oswald seems to have suffered primarily for the sense that the most important writer in the English language became his sole comparison point for verse use. This was certainly the view of some reviewers who engaged with the first play he produced: Terri Paddock, eliding the entire post-1616 tradition of verse drama in the Jacobean and Caroline theatres, described *Augustine's Oak* as "the first new play for Shakespeare's Globe since, um, Shakespeare", whose writing, the reader is encouraged to presume, rendered the entire subsequent course of verse drama obsolete. Paddock's reference to Oswald's use of "traditional Elizabethan verse", despite his modern diction, indicates that for some audiences, a metre can have an expiry date, and that its appropriateness for present theatrical usage might need to be directly addressed.

This is exactly what Eliot, one of the last verse dramatists to achieve mainstream success in England, believed when he lamented that audiences in the 1940s and 50s were "prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age" (141), but were unused to hearing poetry spoken by their own contemporar-

ies. Oswald thus seems to align himself at least theoretically with Eliot in the many interviews he has given where he confronts how, with regard to dramatic verse, his self-perception as a writer working *in the present day* seems to require particular emphasis. The playwright told Lyn Gardner in 2005 that "People often seem to think that what I am trying to do is re-create Shakespeare, which would be the worst thing imaginable. I am not. I am trying to write contemporary plays that use iambic pentameter because to me it seems like the most natural form to use."

What to make, in this context, of Oswald's choice to adapt three stories from the distant past rather than offering contemporary narratives at the Globe? Oswald's director Tim Carroll disagreed with Eliot, making the case that "the fiction of another period" can "open up" verse plays to "lift off into heightened language": far from making a historical play a "museum piece" or exercise in nostalgia, "it immediately engages our imagination and therefore we are in the right kind of mood to listen to verse." He also argued that Oswald pursued a conscious formal dialogue with Eliot and his successful contemporary, Christopher Fry (who was once a popular enough verse dramatist to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine): his work engaged with these authors "more than with Shakespeare, in that it was saying 'no, you guys have got it wrong, what we need to do is go back to something which is more regular, more clearly verse, isn't just calling itself verse by hitting the Return key before you get to the right-hand side of the page.'"

Oswald's practice, in using iambic pentameter rather than a freer twentieth-century line, thus comes to seem like a direct refutation of Eliot's insistence that in writing modern drama verse "the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare", and particularly to avoid "too much iambic" (Eliot 139). Curiously, despite his own comparatively free and Eliotic prosody, Fry had himself offered a similar riposte: he praised the "advantage" of the "five foot line" in its "being there already … in our blood", and challenged his friend Eliot's own metrical techniques as being no "nearer to our present-day speech rhythms, or

easier to speak" than the most famous lines from *Hamlet*: "if I were outside a door listening to the fearful buzz of a cocktail party, I should be at least as little surprised to hear the voices speaking the speech-rhythm of Shakespeare as that of Eliot" (150).

In primarily using historical settings himself, Fry may perhaps have partly aimed to avoid this very same conundrum. And indeed, Irene Morra suggests that Oswald's focus on the past was specifically an attempt to advocate for the value of poetic drama while at the same time recognising and allowing for the resistance it experiences from modern audiences in the wake, in part, of more recent perceptions of Eliot's 'contemporary' verse drama as a failed experiment. While it has never been entirely true that, as E. Martin Browne – founder of the Pilgrim Players, and the foremost director of Eliot's verse plays – claimed in 1976, "the whole verse-drama movement, as we spent our lives on it, has come to an end" (Wahl 68), Morra nonetheless views Oswald's turn towards the past as fundamentally post-Eliotic, impelled by a resistance to the now-outdated claims to present relevance made by and about Eliot's "decidedly unfashionable work" (204). Oswald's choice of historical settings instead argues "implicitly for the contemporary resonance of earlier theatrical traditions in which poetic expression was a more dominant, natural idiom", but in the process frees their author from "any direct engagement with the social, political and aesthetic expectations of the contemporary naturalist stage" (204).

"No tribute to the past"?: Oswald's dramatic verse in practice

Oswald's experimental trilogy for the Globe demonstrates a complex engagement with inherited ideas around the role and effect of stage verse familiar from both Shakespeare and Eliot. It is particularly pertinent to begin by considering how these negotiations function with regard to the distribution of verse and prose lines. For comparison, one enduring view of the resonance of prose in a largely-versified stage world is as an indicator of class and status, associated (often somewhat simplistically) with Shakespeare's treatment of these social factors. This also bears upon questions of genre: as Tony Harrison memorably puts

it in "Them & [uz]": "You're one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose" (133). When asked how transitions between prose and verse were to be understood in Oswald's plays, Carroll identified the issue as primarily a question of register rather than motivated by social class and position. Prose, for the director, lends itself better to quickfire comic dialogue or long, absurd monologues, but the fact prose-speakers are often disempowered ironically offers them a verbal gift: "it's mostly … lower class characters … who are allowed to do showy-off verbal pyrotechnics and so on, because they're not busy with affairs of state."

Eliot largely avoided this issue in determining for his own work that "a mixture of prose and verse is generally to be avoided" because "each transition makes the auditor aware, with a jolt of the medium" and thus "in verse drama prose should be used very sparingly indeed" (133-4); Oswald, by contrast, not only follows a more Shakespearean model in using such transitions, but consciously draws attention to their use. His Globe writing across all three plays thus continually troubles the question of who verse belongs to, and in what situations it is appropriate, but in ways which touch on the spiritual as much as the social. Some fifty years earlier, Eliot wrote of a religiously-inflected desire to communicate in poetry what he held to be impossible in prose: the numinous "fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus" (145). These comments on the realms of feeling to which verse allows access illuminate a crucial moment where verse and prose are self-reflexively scrutinised in Oswald's 1999 *Augustine's Oak.*

The play's plot concerns the arrival of the Christian bishop Augustine in a politically- and spiritually-fragmented post-Roman Britain, and religious affiliation seems at first to be the prime formal divider. King Ethelbert of Kent, along with his pagan retainers, stubbornly speaks prose to his wife and daughter; the Roman delegation led by Augustine speak only verse, as do the Christian Celts in Wales. The fact that even Kings speak prose indicates how little social rank relates to verse in this first Globe outing. Bertha, Ethelbert's Christian

queen, is however able to code-switch to verse when conversing with other Christian characters.

The clash of cultures and imperatives that takes place when Ethelbert and Augustine meet is thus presented through a kind of formal incompatibility; like Mortimer and his wife in Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* ("My wife can speak no English, I no Welsh", 3.1.188), neither is able to speak the other's 'tongue' until Ethelbert converts and adopts verse. This linguistic shift seems to bring in its wake an attempt at national unification, heralded by a "thunderstorm / Of baptisms":

> BERTHA. Augustine, God is sitting on your shoulder,
> If you can spread throughout this fighting island
> The light you have set up in one small corner,
> You will have saved four peoples from destruction. (52)

Despite being implicitly associated with this unifying impulse, however, Oswald's use of verse also suggests more divisive discourses. Prose here represents the 'pagan' tongue of the ancient Britons, and verse the formal Latin of the 'civilised' Roman visitors, which the Celtic Christians have retained. Augustine and his associates arrive speaking in tones of pride, if not arrogance: the bishop's first line, "Laurence, this place is not like Italy" (21) is an implicit denigration of Britain and its inferiority to the climate he is used to. Verse does not *have* to be spoken in a high-handed, ceremonial manner: as one Welsh religious leader comments, "We owe no tribute to the past, Augustine" (68). But given the play's general progress towards "Christ's throne" (95) and the triumph of Christianity – a pattern noted as central to Eliot's "sacramental aesthetic" by William V. Spanos, who explores how Eliot brings each protagonist "into awareness of the paradoxically benign nature of his condition" (194) whereby, thanks to Christ's sacrifice, "man and nature are reunited with the transcendent from which they had been separated" (26) – there is an implicit association between prose and barbarism, with verse as the bright new hope which will save the backward Britons from their bad old ways.

This transitional encounter does not read as simply or unambiguously progressive. The agents of change arrive speaking a form the audience is predisposed to hear as dated: "traditional Elizabethan verse" (Paddock) "from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age" (Eliot 141). Oswald thus poses the question of whether, politically and socially as well as aesthetically, we might sometimes need to look back in order to go forward. Verse also arrives (as it did to a large extent for Eliot's audiences, but did not for Shakespeare's) as a foreign imposition on Ethelbert's kingdom. A passage of 'translation' between the two leaders, Ethelbert and Augustine, allows Oswald firstly to seem to mock the high-handed prolixity of this imported language (as when Polonius, having announced that "brevity is the soul of wit" (2.2.90), is firmly instructed to provide "more matter, with less art" (2.2.96)):

> ETHELBERT. Why have you come here? What do you want to talk about? Speak plainly.
>
> OSBERT. What is the reason for your presence here?
> What are the teachings you have brought to us?
> Feel free to speak directly, we are folk
> Who understand unhampered language best. (25)

Verse here threatens not only a sense of regional insularity, but also the "plain" prose style in which it is expressed: to fill up the metre, the language of the outsider seems to demand a verbose *indirectness* which is potentially politically suspect. As the language of Rome, it carries with it the threat of elitism and imperialism. Seventeen years before the Brexit referendum, Osbert's strained speech implies that European influence "hampers" the island community with a stuffy formality which the locals' bathetic responses comically puncture. Poetry seems, in Eliot's phrasing, to have become irrevocably out of touch with the "ordinary everyday [English] world" (146).

Later in the scene, however, Oswald reverses the process in defence of poetry, showing the spiritual insight and articulacy – Eliot's "fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling" (145) – which his characters are forced to sacrifice in the paraphrase from verse into prose:

> AUGUSTINE. We do not say that your beliefs are evil,
> But that they are a sieve through which the spirit
> Leaks away slowly to be lost in darkness.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> OSBERT. He commiserates with our beliefs, King. He says they are not wicked, but utterly useless and that we are lost. (27)

The development of Oswald's writing across these three pieces shows an acknowledgement that verse can indeed connote both unity – the "worldview of continuing reciprocal engagement and mutual responsibility" which formalist critic George T. Wright viewed as inherent to Shakespeare's use of shared iambic pentameter (259) – and the risk of a Polonius-like pomposity which must be carefully handled. Wright also emphasised the somatic power of iambic verse, asserting that "if the actors will keep the meter, our nervous systems can register the continuing metrical pattern" (92), a point taken up by Carroll in his earnest defence of the verse form Oswald flirts with undermining in the translation scene. For the director, the "simultaneous and communal experience" of performance in the Globe space "does really benefit from good attention to the verse, because like all the best theatre, what you want is the sense that we're all starting to breathe together, and if that breathing is regular and not choppy, then you actually do get that feeling of an organism in the Globe, far more than in most other theatres."

Carroll ascribed a quality of stillness in the audience directly to the use of the "hypnotic" rhythms of verse, but also noted that Oswald gradually "became more disciplined about poetry for its own sake" as the verse dramatist learnt "how to make sure that purple passages didn't just tread water dramatically." In so doing, he followed two strictures laid down in Eliot's assessment of his own experimental stage verse, arrived at once the earlier writer had declared it "deplorable" for an audience to be "attracted by verse … if that means that they are prepared to enjoy the play and the language of the play as two separate things" (133): that poetry must not merely "giv[e] people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they

are witnessing a play", but "must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form" (132), and that "in a play, from time to time, something should happen" (144).

Mark Rylance, according to Carroll, argued during rehearsals for Oswald's second Globe play, *The Golden Ass*, for the need at that theatre "for a *ludus* as they called it in Rome – if you didn't wrap up what you were doing in something fun, you would immediately alienate half the audience that you could otherwise reach." We might call this poetry justifying itself comically, and indeed Oswald's three plays for this particular space became "increasingly irreverent": from *Augustine's Oak,* which started with "simply an episode of history, and therefore the template you have is of the [Shakespearean] chronicle play, so any sort of naughtiness really stands out", Oswald's writing evolved towards the Plautus-inspired *The Storm,* a mode in which "the whole point is to be naughty all the time" (Carroll).

The director identified *The Golden Ass* in particular as inhabiting a kind of golden mean, as "the one where the audience felt the most truly Oswaldian combination of really intensely intoxicating poetry, and really intensely silly, hilarious comedy" (Carroll). Indeed, its opening couplet harnesses verse and antiquity to an explicitly comic mode: "Now let me tell you an old joke I know / That happened far away and long ago" (11). In being 'truly Oswaldian' it also, perhaps, strikes a middle ground between Shakespearean and Eliotic models of how verse and prose can or should operate.

This shift towards more overt comedy may have seemed necessary, when even a largely sympathetic audience member, the *Guardian's* Lyn Gardner, seemed committed to hearing what she wanted to hear in Oswald's previous production. Criticising *Augustine's Oak* for reinforcing the idea that "verse drama is old-fashioned, its backward-looking historical narratives set in some distant olde worlde England where everyone rants in rhyming couplets", Gardner seemed to overlook the fact that there is only one such couplet in the text of the entire play. Verse in *The Golden Ass* is not a reverential, separate space, but a medium in which, as Eliot advocated, "everything can be said that has to

be said" (134) and thus capable of communicating a unified world of the sacred and profane where "slips, exceptions, and monstrosities, / That can explain the rest, they form the key / To the whole code" (13).

At least, this is what the protagonist Lucius sees: the comic and tragic side by side, the large in the small, and in terms which recall Wright's description of Shakespeare's shared metre representing in microcosm "that condition of being bound together in a common action that the play as a whole affirms […] an aesthetic and an ethic of mutual dependence and obligation" (138, 258). James Woodfield has noted how in Fry's work, too, each of the characters, in a characteristically comic pattern, move "from isolation to integration with society" and further, "towards a recognition of the interrelatedness of all life" (149-51). For Oswald's protagonist here, a woman stirring a pot thus becomes the subject of a rhapsody of interwovenness, "Everything following the revolving motion / Of her firm hand, she stands and stirs forever / The planets and my atoms in their polka" (25).

The woman, Photis, has a more down-to-earth view of her life which might conventionally be called prosaic – "I've got to sweep the master's dandruff up off the street, I've got to boil my lady's giblets for the blithering cats" (29) – were it not that elsewhere in the script she herself speaks verse. But this relaxing of formal boundaries does not render any less effective the more conventional shift in another scene wherein Lucius's totalising, Faustian poetic dreams – "I want a girl more lovely than the moon / I want more gold than any man has seen, / And lastly, this: I want to know all things" – are immediately brought down to a commercialised reality: "Do you want a flake with that?" (17).

Overall, verse in this second script seems a form with "so wide a range" (Eliot 134) as to be capable of serving the needs of a range of registers, from courtroom testimony to erotic reverie. Lucius's transformation into an ass might be expected to be the point at which prose is assumed, but does not in fact lead to any loss of eloquence in the speech to which we, the audience, attend, even though his onstage auditors no longer perceive his utterances as human language: "Now

I am dying in a donkey's skin! / And who will know there was a man within?" (79).

Prose is, nonetheless, still present, and not always where we might expect it: even the goddess Isis, when she appears to save Lucius, is a prose speaker. There is a sense, therefore, that all human life is here: each transition between verse and prose (and the frequency of these suggests the fear of an Eliotic "jolt" is largely absent) offers Oswald more in the way of comic variety than in claims to status, truth, or beauty. Carroll's comment that, for Oswald, "prose is a bit more about mental display of intelligence and brilliance, whereas verse tends to be more spontaneous and working it out as you go and speaking from the heart" suggests a view of prose and verse particularly in this second piece which has more to do with momentary strategy than any external schema. The play's reception also indicates the greater success of this more malleable approach: Oswald's "gloriously bawdy romp […] was a huge hit with critics and audiences alike" which reportedly was even mooted for a transfer to London's National Theatre, an unusual feat indeed for a modern verse play (Gardner).

One might therefore expect Oswald's third Globe commission, *The Storm,* to continue with this more malleable approach – but in fact, this production which, as Cantoni notes, exposes and mocks "almost all theatrical conventions" (45), as part of this strategy also manifests a renewed self-consciousness around its form. Oswald's Plautine comedy is one in which the prose-verse divide conveys a serious social message: "free characters can choose to employ verse, according to the tone and subject of the conversation, while slaves are expected to stick to prose" (Cantoni 46). We might compare this convention to its appearance in Shakespeare's own Plautus-derived *The Comedy of Errors,* wherein the masters, Antipholus, use verse and their servants, the Dromios, are prose speakers.

The relative sparsity of verse in this text was explained by Tim Carroll as a concession to a certain frivolousness of genre: *The Storm* "by its nature was much of an after-dinner mint and [so] had a lot less of the intense poetry." The enslaved Sceparnio is at one point

briefly versified after a significant blow to the head: the paradoxical liberation of moving into the constraints of iambic pentameter makes him feel the delirious freedom of "a leaf in love with falling" (Oswald 2005: 86). Despite these desirable associations, however, in this more comic mode the weight of spiritual solemnity associated with verse can once again be understood as something of a burden: "Oh good, I'm back to prose again" (91) says Sceparnio, apparently relieved to return to his normal speech medium and, implicitly, his subservient position (though in a final dizzying twist, he is freed five lines later). This strand of Oswald's humour, which foregrounds a self-ironising distaste for verse, suggests that verse drama cannot be written today without some degree of potentially destabilising self-reflection.

The attitude of Jaques to the lovelorn Orlando in *As You Like It* – "Nay then, God b' wi' you, an you talk in blank verse" (4.1.24) – reminds us, however, that such self-awareness is not a new development, and a sense that blank verse might in some situations be undesirable does not ultimately diminish Oswald's poetic advocacy in his final work for this verse-centred space. One particularly resonant passage returns to the association sketched in *Augustine's Oak* between godlessness, fragmentation and isolation, and the deeper connection possible through faith:

> DAEMONES. I was an almost-atheist, a barrel
> Of emptiness, a cracked and leaking ocean.
> Now I am wine in a gold cup reflecting
> The kindness of the sky and of the sea. (77)

As in Eliot's plays, verse here carries the promise of a deeper, spiritual unity which can be understood and developed in interpersonal communication. It seems to bring with it the imperative felt towards the end of Oswald's first Globe script by the young King Edwin, a prince tipped for greatness, who opens a versified conversation about Christianity with his wife by stating "So we must try to speak to one another" (Oswald 1999: 93). Though occasionally mocked for its pomposity, verse for Oswald's characters here seems again to present the conduit to greater human connection in a fallen world.

This integration and interrelation – "Everything following the revolving motion […] The planets and my atoms in their polka" (Oswald 2002: 25) – underpins Wright's description of Shakespeare's verse, and Eliot's account of his own practice. Eliot had aimed in his own words for his verse plays to "appeal to "as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible'" (Morra 117), of the kind he associated with Shakespeare's own Globe, describing the broad "Elizabethan audience […] to whose ears both prose and verse came naturally" (Eliot 133) as a lost, organic community of the kind he wanted to address and create, having "identified verse drama as uniquely capable of both expressing and manifesting an essential communal identity" (Morra 117).

Unfortunately, *The Storm* did not meet with as positive a critical reception as *The Golden Ass:* in purely commercial terms, therefore, it did not inspire the sense of broad integration invoked, in and through verse, as desirable not only by Shakespeare (in Wright's account) and Eliot, but by Oswaldian figures such as Edwin and Lucius. Oswald therefore ruefully noted the unlikelihood of making such an impact in his own career, given his experiences with contemporary theatre programmers as a post-Shakespeare, post-Eliot verse dramatist: "Perhaps naively […] I thought that, after the success of *The Golden Ass*, theatres would be more interested in what I am doing. I was wrong" (Gardner).

It is, nonetheless, worth tentatively noting that the play of Oswald's Globe trilogy which paying audiences and its director alike seem to have seen as his most successful production was the one for which it is hardest to prescribe any set external meaning behind the use of verse, and that in which the verse form itself is the most integrated and the least self-conscious. Rather than pursuing a path of anxious self-reflection, in *The Golden Ass* a mingled tapestry of prose and verse writing passes without self-analytical comment in a portrayal of a truly mingled world.

Did the Globe itself, however, agree with reviewer Terri Paddock's assessment that Oswald's playwriting constituted not a viable contemporary experiment, but "traditional Elizabethan verse", or with Sidnell's suggestion that dramatic verse in the shadow of Eliot carried an unshakeable "odour of sanctity" (151), despite the playwright-in-resi-

dence's attempts to reject some elements of both the Shakespearean and the Eliotic models? Oswald's career has yet to recapture the heights of his public profile at the Globe – no verse play of his has received a professional production in Britain in the current decade.

As for the Globe, though verse productions by Harrison and Maxwell have appeared at the venue under Dominic Dromgoole's directorship, and under Emma Rice's tenure, *Boudica* by Tristan Bernays, the three Oswald productions seem to me to have been the theatre's most sustained and committed engagement to dramatic verse as a contemporary literary practice. The venue's current artistic director, Michelle Terry, has promised to "reclaim and rediscover not only Shakespeare, but the work of his contemporaries, alongside new work from our current writers" (Brown). It remains to be seen if she will revisit Globe founder Mark Rylance's commitment, in 1998, to make "experiment[s] with new verse writing" a central piece of the theatre's strategy (Fallow 91).

If she does, however, Oswald's experiences in the course of producing his trilogy of new verse plays at Shakespeare's Globe suggests that any verse dramatist approaching the space will have lessons to learn not only from the venue's namesake – who, at the time, "dominated the place" and every "script discussion" in which Oswald was involved (Fallow 93) – but also from an earlier generation of commercially-successful verse dramatists in England, among them T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry, and from Oswald himself, who summarised his nine years developing contemporary verse drama for the Globe as "a mostly pretty desperate and grinding apprenticeship which apprenticed me to write plays that no other theatre wants to stage" (Fallow 94).

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1 All subsequent quotations from Tim Carroll are taken from this unpublished interview, which I conducted via telephone on 18 Jun. 2018.