

CHICAGO REVIEW

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Source: *Chicago Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter, 1979), pp. 30-36

Published by: Chicago Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25303862>

Accessed: 01-06-2020 00:07 UTC

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Denise Levertov

On the Function of the Line

Not only hapless adolescents, but many gifted and justly esteemed poets writing in contemporary non-metrical forms, have only the vaguest concept, and the most haphazard use, of the line. Yet there is at our disposal no tool of the poetic craft more important, none that yields more subtle and precise effects, than the line-break if it is properly understood.

If I say that its function in the development of modern poetry in English is evolutionary I do not mean to imply that I consider modern, non-metrical poetry “better” or “superior” to the great poetry of the past, which I love and honor. That would obviously be absurd. But I do feel that there are few poets today whose sensibility naturally expresses itself in the traditional forms,* and that those who do so are somewhat anachronistic. The closed, contained quality of such forms has less relation to the relativistic sense of life which unavoidably prevails in the late 20th century than modes that are more exploratory, more open-ended. A sonnet may end with a question; but its essential, underlying structure arrives at *conclusion*. ‘Open forms’ do not necessarily terminate inconclusively, but their degree of conclusion is—structurally, and thereby expressively—less pronounced, and partakes of the open quality of the whole. They do not, typically, imply a dogmatic certitude; whereas, under a surface, perhaps, of individual doubts, the structure of the sonnet or the heroic couplet bears witness to the certitudes of these forms’ respective epochs of origin. The forms more apt to express the sensibility of our age are the exploratory, open ones.

In what way is contemporary, non-metrical poetry exploratory? What I mean by that word is that such poetry, more than most

*(except for satire or pronounced story)

poetry of the past, incorporates and reveals the *process* of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking, rather than focusing more exclusively on its *results*; and in so doing it explores (or can explore) human experience in a way that is not wholly new but is (or can be) valuable in its subtle difference of approach: valuable both as human testimony and as aesthetic experience. And the crucial precision tool for creating this exploratory mode is the line-break. The most obvious function of the line-break is rhythmic: it can record the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions but which are not noted by grammatical punctuation. Regular punctuation is a part of regular sentence structure, that is, of the expression of completed thoughts; and this expression is typical of prose, even though prose is not at all times bound by its logic. But in poems one has the opportunity not only, as in expressive prose, to depart from the syntactic norm, but to make manifest, by an intrinsic structural means, the interplay or counterpoint of process and completion—in other words, to present the dynamics of perception *along with* its arrival at full expression. The line-break is a form of punctuation *additional* to the punctuation that forms part of the logic of completed thoughts. Line-breaks—together with intelligent use of indentation and other devices of scoring—represent a peculiarly *poetic*, a-logical, parallel (not competitive) punctuation.

What is the nature of the a-logical pauses the line-break records? If readers will think of their own speech, or their silent inner monologue, when describing thoughts, feelings, perceptions, scenes or events, they will, I think, recognize that they frequently hesitate—albeit very briefly—as if with an unspoken question,—a ‘what?’ or a ‘who?’ or a ‘how?’—before nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, none of which require to be preceded by a comma or other regular punctuation in the course of syntactic logic. To incorporate these pauses in the rhythmic structure of the poem can do several things: for example, it allows the reader to share more intimately the experience that is being articulated; and by introducing an a-logical counter-rhythm into the logical rhythm of syntax it causes, as they interact, an effect closer to song than to statement, closer to dance than to walking. Thus the emotional experience of empathy or identification plus the sonic complexity of the language structure synthesize in an intense aesthetic order that is different from that which is received from a poetry in which metric forms are combined with logical syntax alone. (Of course, the management of the line in *metrical* forms may also permit the recording of such a-logical pauses; Gerard Manley Hopkins provides an abundance of evidence for that. But Hopkins, in this as in other matters, seems to be “the exception

that proves the rule''; and the alliance of metric forms and the similarly 'closed' or 'complete' character of logical syntax seems natural and appropriate, inversions notwithstanding. Inversions of normal prose word-order were, after all, a stylistic convention, adopted from choice, not technical ineptitude, for centuries; although if utilized after a certain date they strike one as admissions of lack of skill, and indeed are the first signs of the waning of a tradition's viability.) It is not that the dance of a-logical thinking/feeling in process *cannot* be registered in metric forms, but rather that to do so seems to go against the natural grain of such forms, to be a forcing of an intractable medium into inappropriate use—whereas the potential for such use is implicit in the constantly evolving nature of open forms.

But the most particular, precise, and exciting function of the line-break, and the least understood, is its effect on the *melos* of the poem. It is in this, and not only in *rhythmic* effects, that its greatest potential lies, both in the exploration of areas of human consciousness and in creating new aesthetic experiences. *How* do the line-breaks affect the melodic element of a poem? So simply that it seems amazing that this aspect of their function is disregarded—yet not only student poetry workshops but any magazine or anthology of contemporary poetry provides evidence of a general lack of understanding of this factor; and even when individual poets manifest an intuitive sense of how to break their lines it seems rarely to be accompanied by any theoretical comprehension of what they've done right. Yet it is not hard to demonstrate to students that—given that the deployment of the poem on the page is regarded as a score, that is, as the visual instructions for auditory effects—the way the lines are broken affects not only rhythm but *pitch patterns*.

Rhythm can be sounded on a monotone, a single pitch; melody is the result of pitch-patterns combined with rhythmic patterns. The way in which line-breaks, observed, respectfully, as a part of a score (and regarded as, say, roughly a ½ comma in duration), determine the pitch-pattern of a sentence, can clearly be seen if a poem, or a few lines of it, is written out in a variety of ways (changing the line-breaks but nothing else) and read aloud. Take, for instance, these lines of my own (picked at random):

Crippled with desire, he questioned it.
Evening upon the heights, juice of the pomegranate:
who could connect it with sunlight?*

Read them aloud. Now try reading the same words aloud from this score:

*"Four Embroideries: (III), Red Snow," *Relearning the Alphabet*, p. 37

Crippled with desire, he
questioned it. Evening
upon the heights,
juice of the pomegranate:
who
could connect it with sunlight?

Or

Crippled
with desire, he questioned
it. Evening
upon the heights, juice
of the pomegranate:
who could
connect it with sunlight?

Etc.

The intonation, the ups and downs of the voice, involuntarily change as the rhythm (altered by the place where the tiny pause or musical 'rest' takes place) changes. These changes could be recorded in graph form by some instrument, as heartbeats or brain waves are graphed. The point is not whether the lines, as I wrote them, are divided in the best possible way; as to that, readers must judge for themselves. I am simply pointing out that, read naturally but with respect for the line-break's fractional pause, a pitch pattern change *does occur* with each variation of lineation. A beautiful example of expressive lineation is William Carlos Williams' well known poem about the old woman eating plums—*

They taste good to her.
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her.

First the statement is made; then the word *good* is (without the clumsy overemphasis a change of typeface would give) brought to the center of our (and her) attention for an instant; then the word *taste* is given similar momentary prominence, with 'good' sounding on a new note, reaffirmed—so that we have first the general recognition of well-being, then the intensification of that sensation, then its

*"To a poor old woman," *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 99.

voluptuous location in the sense of taste. And all this is presented through indicated pitches, that is, by melody, not by rhythm alone.

I have always been thrilled by the way in which the musicality of a poem could arise from what I called 'fidelity to experience', but it took me some time to realize what the mechanics of such precision were as they related to this matter of pitch-pattern. The point is that, just as vowels and consonants affect the music of poetry not by mere euphony but by expressive, significant interrelationship, so the nuances of meaning apprehended in variations of pitch create *significant, expressive melody*, not just a pretty 'tune' in the close tone-range of speech.

One of the ways in which many poets reveal their lack of awareness about the function of the line-break is the way in which they will begin a line with the word 'it,' for instance, even when it is clear from the context that they don't want the extra emphasis—relating to both rhythm and pitch—this gives it. Thus, if one writes,

He did not know
it, but at this very moment
his house was burning

the word 'it' is given undue importance. Another example is given in my second variant of the lines from "Red Snow." The 'it' in the third line is given a prominence entirely without significance—obtrusive and absurd. When a poet places a word meaninglessly from the sonic point of view it seems clear that he or she doesn't understand the effect of doing so—or is confusedly tied to the idea of 'enjambement'. Enjambement is useful in preventing the monotony of too many end-stopped lines in a metrical poem, but the desired variety can be attained by various other means in contemporary open forms; and to take away from the contemporary line its fractional pause (which, as I've said, represents, or rather manifests, a comparable minuscule but affective hesitation in the thinking/feeling process) is to rob a precision tool of its principal use. Often the poet unsure of any principle according to which to end a line will write as if the real break comes after the first word of the next line, e.g.

As children in their night
gowns go upstairs . . .

where *if one observes the score* an awkward and inexpressive "rest" occurs between two words that the poet, reading aloud, links naturally as "nightgowns". X.J. Kennedy's definition of a *run-on* is that "it does not end in punctuation and therefore is read with only a

slight pause after it”, whereas “if it ends in a full pause—usually indicated by some mark of punctuation—we call it *end-stopped*”. (My italics on “slight pause”.) Poets who write non-metrical poems but treat the line-break as non-existent are not even respecting the traditional ‘slight pause’ of the end-stopped line. The fact is, they are confused about what the line is at all, and consequently some of our best and most influential poets have increasingly turned to the prose paragraph for what I feel are the wrong reasons—i.e. less from a sense of the peculiar virtues of the prose-poem than from a despair of making sense of the line.

One of the important virtues of comprehending the function of the line-break, that is, of the line itself, is that such comprehension by no means causes poets to write like one another. It is a *tool*, not a style. As a tool its use can be incorporated into any style. Students in a workshop who grasp the idea of *accurate scoring* do not begin to all sound alike. Instead, each one’s individual voice sounds more clearly, because each one has gained a degree of control over how they want a poem to sound. Sometimes a student scores a poem one way on paper, but reads it aloud differently. My concern—and that of his or her fellow-students once they have understood the problem—is to determine which way the author wants the poem to sound. Someone will read it back to him or her *as written* and someone else will point out the ways in which the text, the score, was ignored in the reading. ‘Here you ran on’,—‘Here you paused, but it’s in the middle of a line and there’s no indication for a ‘rest’ there.’ Then the student poet can decide, or feel out, whether he or she wrote it down wrong but read it right, or vice versa. That decision is a very personal one and has quite as much to do with the individual sensibility of the writer and the unique character of the experience embodied in the words of the poem, as with universally recognizable rationality—though that may play a part, too. The outcome, in any case, is rather to define and clarify individual voices than to homogenize them; because *reasons* for halts and checks, emphases and expressive pitch changes, will be as various as the persons writing. Comprehension of the function of the line-break gives to each unique creator the power to be more precise, and thereby more, not less, individuated. The voice thus revealed will be, not necessarily the recognizable “outer” one heard in poets who have taken Olson’s “breath” theory all too literally, but rather the inner voice, the voice of each one’s solitude made audible and singing to the multitude of other solitudes.

Excess of subjectivity (and hence incommunicability) in the making of structural decisions in open forms is a problem only when the writer has an inadequate form sense. When the written score

precisely notates perceptions, a whole—an inscape or gestalt—begins to emerge; and the gifted writer is not so submerged in the parts that the sum goes unseen. The sum is objective—relatively, at least; it has presence, character, and—as it develops—needs. The parts of the poem are instinctively adjusted in some degree to serve the needs of the whole. And as this adjustment takes place, excess subjectivity is avoided. Details of a private, as distinct from personal, nature may be deleted, for example, in the interests of a fuller, clearer, more communicable whole. (By private I mean those which have associations for the writer that are inaccessible to readers without a special explanation from the writer which does not form part of the poem; whereas the personal, though it may incorporate the private, has an energy derived from associations that are shareable with the reader and *are* so shared within the poem itself.)

Another way to approach the problem of subjective / objective is to say that while traditional modes provide certain standards for objective comparison and evaluation of poems as effective structures, (technically, at any rate) open forms, used with comprehension of their technical opportunities, *build unique contexts* which likewise provide for such evaluation. In other words, though the “rightness” of its lines can’t be judged by a preconceived method of scansion, each such poem, if well written, presents a composed whole in which false lines (or other lapses) can be heard by any attentive ear—not as failing to conform to an external rule, but as failures to contribute to the grace or strength implicit in a system peculiar to that poem, and stemming from the inscape of which it is the verbal manifestation.

The *melos* of metrical poetry was not easy of attainment, but there were guidelines and models, even if in the last resort nothing could substitute for the gifted “ear”. The *melos* of open forms is even harder to study if we look for models; its secret lies not in models but in that “fidelity to experience” of which I have written elsewhere; and, in turn, that fidelity demands a delicate and precise comprehension of the technical means at our disposal. A general recognition of the primary importance of the line and of the way in which rhythm relates to melody would be useful to the state of the art of poetry in the way general acceptance of the bar-line and other musical notations were useful to the art of music. A fully adequate latitude in the matter of interpretation of a musical score was retained (as anyone listening to different pianists playing the same sonata, for instance, can hear) but at the same time the composer acquired a finer degree of control. Only if writers agree about the nature and function of this tool can readers fully cooperate, so that the poem shall have the fullest degree of autonomous life.