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# Marjorie Perloff

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## *The Linear Fallacy*

Don't imagine that a thing will "go" in verse just because it's too dull to go in prose.

—Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918)

IT is a truth almost universally acknowledged, in an age that has made free verse the established norm rather than the daring exception, that a series of words, phrases, or clauses divided into line lengths and arranged on the page with a fixed left margin must constitute a poem. Having more or less thrown to the winds the elements of traditional versification, we rely increasingly on the line to assure us that a given text is indeed poetry and not prose. If, as Robert Frost put it, "free verse is like playing tennis without the net," then the line has become our net. "The very look of the received [free verse] poem on the page," writes John Hollander, "jingles and tinkles today the way neat, accentual-syllabic rhyming once did."<sup>1</sup>

A recent symposium on the line published in the Winter 1980 issue of *Epoch* confirms these speculations.<sup>2</sup> Some thirty poets were asked by the editors, Rory Holsher and Robert Schultz, such questions as: "At this time, when prosodic freedom seems to be at a maximum, and the prose poem is an available form, what are the considerations which make you choose to write in lines?" and "Is the line a unit of inspiration for you?" (p. 170). Here are some sample responses:

Margaret Atwood: The line is a visual indication of an aural unit and serves to mark the cadence of a poem. (p. 172)

<sup>1</sup> *Vision and Resonance, Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> *Epoch*, 29 (1980), 163–221. All subsequent references to this symposium are run on in the text.

Philip Booth: Whatever a poem's "prosodic freedom," its prosody partially depends, by definition, on the fact that the poem is composed of lines. . . . A line is the poet's springboard. . . . a measure of measure. . . . it moves the poem as it involves both recurrence and duration. (pp. 173-74)

Seamus Heaney: A line is a visual and aural measure . . . a marker of time, a punctuating device, a pacer. In writing free verse, the line is a feeler of sorts. (p. 191)

George McWhirter: A line is a controller, concentrator of a poem's voice and focus. . . . It is the major-domo of the poem. (p. 205)

The editors comment: "Given the various line-centered interests surveyed here, perhaps it is not surprising that no contributor expresses full enthusiasm for the prose poem" (p. 163). For, as D. J. Enright remarks: "More often than not 'lineless' poetry, or prose poetry, is deficient or at any rate indeterminate in *rhythm*. Lineation is an indication of—in part a creation of—the rhythm, which itself is a prime factor in arriving at the tone, the emotional flavour and force, and consequently the *meaning* of the poetry" (p. 186). A similar emphasis on lineation as a determinant of tone is found in an influential essay by Stanley Plumly, published in *American Poetry Review* in 1978.<sup>3</sup> "At its flexible best," says Plumly, "[free verse] calls less and less attention to the language and more to the body of the action. Ideally . . . its language should be transparent. . . . As a genre of under a hundred lines, free verse has come to mean the dramatic lyric, an intensified, implicative action. What makes that action convincing or authentic is the tone of the master's voice. Tone is what we are left with once the language assumes transparency" (p. 23).

The implications of such generalizing statements about language, tone, and rhythm deserve to be investigated. For if language really does become "transparent" and if the verse form is so unobtrusive that the eye moves easily down the page from line to line, concentrating on "the body of the action"—on what Plumly calls the poet's "authenticating voice"—why bother to write verse, whether "free" or not, in the first place? Plumly's own answer involves a good bit of hedging. "To paraphrase Coleridge," he begins, "[poetry] may be simply the best action in its best order—an action less dependent on line breaks than on the

<sup>3</sup> "Chapter and Verse," *American Poetry Review*, 7, No. 1 (January/February 1978), 21-32.

sentence, yet an action more determined by stanzas than by the paragraph. Yes, an action committed to the rhythm of the story *as it is received*, as it is perceived" (p. 24). For in free verse, Plumly notes, "the line breaks are more eye than ear oriented. The unit of the sentence, as in good, scannable prose, is the ear of the free verse poem" (p. 25). Indeed, "the intersection of the flexibility of the free verse rhythm with the strategy of storytelling has produced a kind of prose lyric: a form corrupt enough to speak flat out in sentences yet pure enough to sustain the intensity, if not the integrity, of the line" (p. 27). Given such flexibility, the poet is now free to concentrate on the creation of a personal tone. For, "more than any other measure, tone is the essential means, and end, of the free verse poem. It is its one and abiding convention . . ." (p. 27).

Or, we might say more accurately, one of its *two* abiding conventions, the "free verse line" being, of course, a convention itself. To lineate a text—any text—is, as the Structuralists have been telling us for the last decade or so, to bring into play a set of expectations and conventions that determine how that verbal sequence is to be read. Jonathan Culler's well-known exhibit is the following newspaper item about a car accident:

Hier sur la Nationale sept  
 Une automobile  
 Roulant à cent à l'heure s'est jetée  
 Sur un platane  
 Ses quatres occupants ont été  
 Tués.

To present this "piece of banal journalistic prose" as a "lyric poem" is, Culler argues, to transform "*fait divers*" into "a minor but exemplary tragedy":

'Hier', for example, takes on a completely different force: referring now to the set of possible yesterdays, it suggests a common, almost random event. One is likely to give new weight to the wilfulness of 's'est jetée' (literally, 'threw itself') and to the passivity of 'its occupants', defined in relation to their automobile. The lack of detail or explanation connotes a certain absurdity, and the neutral reportorial style will no doubt be read as restraint and resignation. We might even note an element of suspense after 's'est jetée' and discover bathos in the possible pun on 'platane' ('plat' = flat) and in the finality of the isolated 'tués'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 161–62.

Note that, ingenious as this argument is, Culler assumes that the lineated text is, by definition, an exceptional one and that hence we bring the expectations he describes to it. But as he himself argues in the chapters on narrative, such expectations are historically and culturally conditioned, and we must therefore ask ourselves what happens when what John Hollander calls "the look of the received free verse poem" becomes the norm, not only in collections of poetry but in tv commercials, advertising slogans, and greeting cards. Does the mere act of lineating one's phrases and sentences continue to produce the proper *frisson* in the reader? Or does one begin to wonder whether interesting verse, even when it is "free verse," does not depend upon properties other than lineation if it is to arrest one's attention?

"Don't think," declared Ezra Pound, "any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths."<sup>5</sup> What Pound implies is that lines have no "intensity" per se; they must be structured both aurally and visually if they are to constitute anything other than chopped up prose. He takes *verse* in the time-honored sense of the Latin *versus*: the OED defines verse as "a line or row, specifically a line of writing (so named from turning to begin another turn)." And further, "A succession of words arranged, according to natural or recognized rules of prosody and forming a complete metrical line." The one word that requires qualification here is "metrical": Northrop Frye writes: "Literature includes a great deal which is written in some form of regular recurrence, whether meter, accent, vowel quality, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, or any combination of these, and which we may call verse."<sup>6</sup> In their recent *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov make the same point: ". . . the *parallelism* that is a constituent element of verse requires that a relationship among elements of the speech chain reappear at a larger point along this chain; this notion thus presupposes those of identity, temporal succession, and phonic form."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> See "Verse and Prose," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke, and O. B. Hardison, Jr., Enlarged Edition (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 885. The entire article (pp. 885-90) is essential reading on the subject; cf. Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington, Ind.: Midland Books, 1967), pp. 20-24, 55-108.

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, trans. Catherine Porter (1972; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 185-86.

Parallelism, “some form of regular recurrence” in time among the elements of the speech chain, whether metrical as in Milton and Pope, or quantitative as in Pound’s experiments with classical metres, or accentual as in Williams’ shorter poems, or primarily syntactic as in Whitman and Lawrence—it is this “turning back” that distinguishes *verse* (which is not to say *poetry*) from *prose*. But what happens when, as in much of the ’70’s poetry Stanley Plumly speaks of, there is no form of recurrence at all? Here is a passage from C. K. Williams’ sequence “With Ignorance”:

There’s a park near here  
 where everyone who’s out of work in our neighborhood comes to  
 line up in the morning.  
 The converted schoolbus shuttling hands to the cannery fields  
 in Jersey were just rattling away when I got there  
 and the small-time contractors, hiring our cheap walls, cheap  
 ditches, cheap everything,  
 were loading laborers onto the sacks of plaster and concrete  
 in the backs of their pickups.  
 A few housewives drove by looking for someone to babysit  
 or clean cellars for them,  
 then the gates of the local bar unlaced and whoever was left  
 drifted in out of the wall of heat  
 already rolling in with the first fists of smoke from  
 the city’s incinerators.<sup>8</sup>

Plumly says of this: “Here is a poetry that proves that meter and metaphor are not necessarily symbiotic, that the music must be in the source before it can be in the sound of the line. . . . the empathy is in the very length of the line, the inevitability of the line, beyond the ability of the music” (p. 31).

But what constitutes the “inevitability of the line” in this passage? C. K. Williams uses, here and elsewhere, alternating long (15 syllables on average) and short (6 syllables) lines; there is a certain amount of word repetition (e.g., “cheap walls, cheap/ ditches, cheap everything”), alliteration (“first fists,” “loading laborers”), and assonance (“city’s incinerators”), but no more than in, say, E. M. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, and surely much less than in any novel by Virginia Woolf. Indeed, I would argue that this poem, which may well contain, as Plumly believes, a moving personal account of the pathos of unemployment, undergoes no significant change when it is written as conventional prose:

<sup>8</sup> *With Ignorance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977); rpt. in Plumly essay, p. 31.

There's a park near here where everyone who's out of work in our neighborhood comes to line up in the morning. The converted schoolbus shuttling hands to the cannery fields in Jersey were just rattling away when I got there and the small-time contractors, hiring our cheap walls, cheap ditches, cheap everything, were loading laborers onto the sacks of plaster and concrete in the backs of their pickups. A few housewives drove by looking for someone to babysit or clean cellars for them. Then the gates of the local bar unlaced and whoever was left drifted in out of the wall of heat already rolling in with the first fists of smoke from the city's incinerators.

Note that I have had to change only one punctuation mark (the comma after "them" in line 11 becomes a period) to transpose C. K. Williams' "free verse" poem into a perfectly coherent paragraph, rather reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson's vignettes of dreary urban life and quite unlike the city poems of, say, Eliot or William Carlos Williams or Robert Lowell. Why, then, does this text present itself as being something different in kind from the autobiographical memoir? Why does it ask to be read as poetry?

An interesting answer is provided by one of the few dissenting voices in the *Epoch* symposium, the young poet-critic Don Byrd, who writes:

The line as it is practiced in most contemporary poetry says no more than "This is a poem." It often corresponds with syntactical units . . . and is therefore meaningless as a measure of rhythm. It is sometimes disguised and apparently unconscious iambic pentameter. Iambics do—after all—"flow," and to keep words flowing seems a prime value in contemporary poetry.

I am not sure that I understand why the movement of a river is more interesting than, say, the movement of a leaf blowing down the street. (p. 179)

A fair enough question, which is taken up by another young poet, Christopher Bursk:

The concern for the line seems to arise as much out of guilt as out of pleasure. If modern poets have mostly abandoned conventional forms, they are left open to the charge of not being disciplined . . . out of guilt they have adopted a new brainchild, the line. In a country that values technique and technical gadgets, it is little wonder that poets have turned to concern with the line. (p. 175)

What Don Byrd and Christopher Bursk imply is that the line qua line, used without any particular concern for the forms of recurrence intrinsic to verse, and the relation of those forms to structures of meaning, has become no more than a surface device meant to arrest our attention as readers, a signal that the words on the page before us do in fact constitute a *poem*. Lineation, many contemporary poets and their critics seem to be saying, spells elevation. And unfortunately, such naïve faith in what Bursk rightly calls a technical gadget has produced a tolerance among us for various kinds of imprecise and sloppy writing that, were it not for their linear frame, would hardly make it past the copy editor of *Newsweek*, not to mention *The New Yorker*.

My first exhibit of what I call the linear fallacy is a book by Karen Snow called *Wonders*, which won the Walt Whitman Award for 1978. On the blurb, Louis Simpson, one of the contest judges, writes: "*Wonders* is autobiographical poetry with a difference: This poet has the ability to evoke characters and tell a story. The episodes she relates are absurd, grotesque, and thoroughly believable. The writing is vivid; the lines are shaped to the matter in hand." Here is a passage from the fourth poem, "Snow," in which the poet describes her adolescent crush on her sexy and sophisticated Cousin Maybelle who was "Ripe sixteen" when she married:

That summer you were fourteen and I was twelve,  
 you pendulumed back and forth in that swing,  
 back and forth before me, like a hypnotist:  
 your lacquered lashes swooping up and down,  
 up and down over those chicory-blue eyes, like  
 bird wings    your amber mane galloping  
 that cologne swarming    that pout like a  
 pink ladyslipper    those breasts brimming  
 in that thin blouse like two dollops of ice cream  
 in a glass bowl    those consonant knees  
 those assonant toes    that sassy butt  
 flash!    that pout opening: "Apples peaches  
 pumpkin pie    Screw a hundred boys before  
 I die!"<sup>9</sup>

Lineation here seems to be no more than a convenient way of packaging the material. Line breaks come after roughly thirty-five or forty ems so as to create a fairly symmetrical visual format; the spaces within the lines, moreover, seem designed to guarantee that we process this text as

<sup>9</sup> *Wonders* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 19.



poetry rather than as prose. Thus line units do not correspond with syntactic ones: the series of parallel noun phrases beginning with "your lacquered lashes swooping" do not determine lineation, the aim being, evidently, to create what Stanley Plumly calls "the intersection of the flexibility of the free verse rhythm with the strategy of storytelling."

But what lies beyond the gimmick of chopping up phrases like "that pout like a pink lady's slipper"? Snow's metaphors here are consistently embarrassing: to swing is to "pendulum back and forth"; "lashes" that are predictably "lacquered" predictably swoop "down" (although I cannot quite imagine how lashes swoop up); in the vernacular of Harlequin Romances, the wild cousin's hair is an "amber mane galloping," her "pout" "a/ pink lady's slipper." The equation of "breasts brimming" in a "thin blouse" to "two dollops of ice cream/ in a glass bowl" implies, foolishly enough, that the former melt, not under the touch, mind you, but just from penduluming back and forth on a back-yard swing. And the see-through blouse/ glass bowl metaphor, if taken seriously, suggests that we have to eat our way through the glass before we get to the ice cream.

I have cited these lines not in order to attack *Wonders*, which hardly seems worth the trouble, but to raise a more important question: how could two sophisticated readers like Louis Simpson and Maxine Kumin (who writes on the blurb that she could not put *Wonders* down) mistake Karen Snow's sophomoric jottings for poetry? Is it perhaps that the rival entries contained similar imagery ("chicory-blue eyes, like/ bird wings"; "those consonant knees/ those assonant toes") without the compensating narrative interest of *Wonders*, a saga of one woman's family trauma, troubled childhood, stormy adolescence, ill-fated marriage, and problematic motherhood? But if the presence of such a story-line alone can make the judges sit up and take notice, surely something is wrong. We would not, I submit, tolerate such writing in, say, a collection of short stories. Think, for that matter, what John Updike might have done with "Cousin Maybelle." Or Maureen Duffy. Or Grace Paley. Or Toni Morrison. To make such comparisons is to wonder if Don Byrd isn't right when he says that "poetry is well on its way to ranking with tating, restoring antiques, and pitching horseshoes as a harmless pastime. It is also fashionable" (p. 180).

The too-willing suspension of disbelief we afford to verbal compositions that are set off in lines creates problems even for poets much more accomplished than Karen Snow. Robert Pinsky's *An Explanation of*

*America* (1979) has been widely praised for the delicacy of its tone, the diversity of its materials, the classical order of the predominantly blank-verse lines controlling its dreamlike images of past and present-day America. Certainly, the reader is immediately and directly engaged by the poet's intense and complicated feelings for his young daughter and for the perplexing country in which he dwells. But precisely because Pinsky does set himself a very high standard, incorporating, for example, a translation of one of Horace's Epistles into the text, I am puzzled by passages like the following:

On television, I used to see, each week,  
Americans descending in machines  
With wasted bravery and blood; to spread  
Pain and vast fires amid a foreign place,  
Among the strangers to whom we were new—  
Americans: a spook or golem, there.  
I think it made our country older, forever.  
I don't mean better or not better, but merely  
As though a person should come to a certain place  
And have his hair turn gray, that very night.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly here the iambs do flow, as Don Byrd puts it. In a line like "With wasted bravery and blood; to spread," for instance, the prominence of the iambic pentameter, the alliteration, assonance, and consonance is nicely offset by the strong caesura that precedes the final foot and the enjambment of the line; again, the repeated feminine endings—older, forever, better, merely, person—give the passage a tone of quiet, thoughtful discrimination, probably on the model of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Still, the demands of lineation seem to have a negative effect of which the poet himself is quite unconscious. Indeed, Pinsky says in the *Epoch* symposium: "Prose is hard for me to write, verse relatively easy . . . because the extra articulation of the formal principle helps my sentences stand up and walk or run to where they mean to go" (p. 212).

But can the articulation of a formal principle help sentences, which might otherwise collapse, to stand up and run? Or must they, after all, have their own momentum? It is curious that Pinsky, whose own critical prose is, despite his disclaimer, both precise and elegant, allows his iambic pentameter to slide into habits that bring to mind the very Poetic Diction that Wordsworth deplored. Thus the voice that tells us casually, "On television, I used to see each week," refers, in the very next line, to the

<sup>10</sup> *An Explanation of America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 49.

bomb raids over Vietnam as “Americans descending in machines.” Why is “machines” a better word than “planes” or “bombers” or “B52’s”? Or again, why does Pinsky describe these “machines” as “spread[ing]/ Pain and vast fires amid a foreign place”? Surely this is the sort of coy evasion no one, least of all Pinsky himself, would use in prose; the poet’s words are little more than vague gestures that allude to ethical stereotypes. Accordingly, when the speaker concludes: “I think it made our country older, forever,” he is playing on our stock response, assuming that we do, in any case, agree with him about the horrors of the Vietnam War. Indeed, the poet’s daughter, were she to respond to her father’s story, might ask him a few hard questions.

How would we process Pinsky’s lines on warfare if we read them as a portion of a prose discourse, let us say a history book, or a journalistic account of the conflict in Southeast Asia, or a personal memoir by a survivor, or (as is the case here) the meditation of a sensitive writer who finds his consciousness changed as a result of the war and wants to convey that change to his little girl? I think we would demand more than the moralizing contained in lines like “I think/ That I may always feel as if I lived/ In a time when the country aged itself.” We would expect a more precise account of the “strangers to whom we were new,” of the “pain and vast fires” spread by our military “amid a foreign place.” Indeed, we would want to know why the “bravery and blood” of our men was, in fact, “wasted,” and how that “waste” compares to the bloodshed of the other wars to which the poet has alluded earlier. But in accepting the contractual agreement that “This is a poem,” we tend to take on faith assertions about “foreign places” and comparisons of “our country” suddenly aging as a result of the war, to a man’s hair turning gray overnight. The formula *lineation spells elevation* is again operative.

In what Stanley Plumly characterizes as the “prose lyric,” “transparency” all too often becomes mere vacancy. For if tone is “the one and abiding convention of the poem,” if the emphasis is to be, not on “the best words in the best order” as Coleridge thought, but on “the best order of action,” it turns out that prose can probably do a better job than verse, can provide finer nuances and greater subtleties of psychological analysis. And so we must ask ourselves: when *is* lineation the right and inevitable form of verbal discourse? To put it another way, why couldn’t the text in question be written in any other way? What necessary deformation of language, what foregrounding of semantic units does this particular exemplar of “art by line” achieve?

Here is a short free verse poem by George Oppen:

Near your eyes—  
 Love at the pelvis  
 Reaches the generic, gratuitous  
                                   (Your eyes like snail-tracks)

Parallel emotions,  
 We slide in separate hard grooves  
 Bowstrings to bent loins  
                                   Self moving  
 Moon, mid-air.<sup>11</sup>

This is, I believe a composition that is genuinely linear, that cannot do without lines. For Oppen's lineation serves to enact the process of the poet's thoughts and emotions in the act of making love. To begin with, the fragmentary prepositional and noun phrases that make up most of the nine lines are suspended both phonically and visually, and yet forms of recurrence, muted as they are, play a central role. Stress count, for example, brings items together that syllable count would distinguish. Thus "Near your eyes" (3 syllables) and "Love at the pelvis" (5 syllables) have corresponding stress patterns:

— ◡ —  
 — ◡ — ◡ —

and even the long third line (10 syllables) has only three primary stresses:

— ◡    ◡ ◡ — ◡    ◡ — ◡ ◡

"the generic" repeating the rhythm of "at the pelvis." Again, the first line of the second stanza, "Parallel emotions," echoes the first line of the poem, repeating the amphimacer (— ◡ —) and adding its mirror image in the form of the amphibrach (◡ — ◡). In the last three lines, the recurrence of what we might call "envelope" groups, (— ◡ ◡ — — and — ◡ —) balanced by the falling rhythm of the enclosed line (— — ◡) provides a sense of arrest and coalescence, a coalescence emphasized by the marked alliteration of *b*'s and *m*'s, the consonance of "strings"/"loins", and the assonance of "bent"/"Self", the two words forming a column. The final words "moving" and "moon" nearly rhyme; "mid-air" breaks up this chiming ever so slightly.

What does all this have to do with the poem's meaning? Just every-

<sup>11</sup> *Discrete Series* (1934), in George Oppen, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 11.

thing. For even as the relationship among elements along the speech chain is repeated, but not quite, in the course of the poem, so the semantic elements involve both recurrence and suspension. "Near your eyes," to begin with, would seem to go with "love," but "love at the pelvis" is hardly a very pretty image, despite the near-rhyme of "love" and "pelvis." What seems to be a suspended noun phrase, "Love at the pelvis," now turns out to lead to a complete sentence unit, but a sentence whose meaning is indeterminate. Love "Reaches the generic," the root, that which makes the person addressed, what she is. But why is the "generic" "gratuitous"? The two words, joined as they are by alliteration of *g* and *r*, are a puzzling pair. Is the generic gratuitous because freely given? Obtained without charge? For no apparent cause? Or given without receiving any return value? We cannot tell. We know only that the poet somehow hangs back, perceiving his beloved's eyes quite unromantically as "snail-tracks"—which is to say that her eyes follow his movements very slowly. But "snail-tracks" also looks ahead to the "separate hard grooves" of line 7, the "parallel" and hence never meeting "emotions" of the two lovers.

Is theirs then a failed love act? Well, yes and no. "Bowstrings to bent loins" suggests close and loving conjunction: the playing upon each other's instrument. In this context, "Self moving" may refer to the moment of orgasm, but the word "Self" also suggests separation, possibly isolation. The final line, "Moon, mid-air" does not dispel the mystery. The reference may be to the ejaculation of seed. But also, perhaps more humbly, to a mere shift in position of one or the other lover. Does the woman thrust her legs into midair? Is she the moon? Or is the moon literally shining?

Here is a poem that cannot be rewritten as a prose paragraph, for in prose Oppen's phrases would make absolutely no sense. Each line, indeed each word has suspended meanings, its referents left open. We cannot say quite how the poet feels about making love because he doesn't seem to know himself. His feelings are too complex to summarize or to present discursively; he cannot say, like Pinsky, "I think I may always feel as if I lived/ In a time when the country aged itself." Making love, the poem implies, is at once an act of conjunction and separation. Love "Reaches the generic"—"Bowstrings to bent loins"—yet somehow the lovers' emotions remain parallel, a "sliding" in "separate hard grooves" like the "snail-tracks" of the woman's eyes. Just so, on the sound level, there is rhythmic recurrence—a coming together—that is consistently

offset by the “separate hard grooves” of the unequal line lengths, the variation of syllable count, the move away from the left margin. Oppen’s verse is “free,” which is to say that its forms of recurrence are not regular measures; lineation moves the poem forward as our eye moves down the page, but there are no sequential sentences, no complete subject-verb-object units that follow one another logically, because the experience conveyed in the poem must remain peculiarly *open*.

For Oppen, in other words, the line seems to be the only form that can trace the graph of consciousness, a consciousness that moves forward, not like a flowing stream, but in little spurts and odd jumps. This is not to say, of course, that the abbreviated line of “Near your eyes” would be appropriate for a poet of different sensibility—say, James Merrill or Elizabeth Bishop. It all depends on what Emerson called “the meter-making argument”; the conventions of the free-verse lyric can never be taken on faith. Indeed, just as lineation per se does not insure elevation so, conversely, the nonlineation of prose may function as poetry. To assert, as does Philip Booth in the *Epoch* symposium, that “The prose poem is, to my ear, a contradiction in terms: no matter how interesting its substance” (p. 173) is again to misunderstand the very nature of prosody. This is not the place to review the body of theory from Aristotle to Sidney to Wordsworth to Shelley to Northrop Frye that differentiates poetry from verse. Suffice it to say here that when prose foregrounds marked patterns of recurrence (whether phonic, syntactic, or verbal), calling attention to itself as language art, as in the case of Gertrude Stein or Samuel Beckett or John Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, we have poetry, and often much better poetry than in the so-called free verse of a C. K. Williams or a Karen Snow.

Consider the following passage, printed as prose, from Beckett’s *How It Is*:

my head where is my head it rests on the table my hand trembles on the table she sees I am not sleeping the wind blows tempestuous the little clouds drive before it the table glides from light to darkness to light.<sup>12</sup>

One looks in vain in books on twentieth-century poetry for references to Beckett; he is rarely thought of as a poet because his short verbal compositions—*Ping* or *Imagination Dead Imagine* or *Fizzles* or *The Lost Ones*—are not divided into lines. Yet certainly, as in the passage just cited, the rhythms of recurrence in his work are marked; in Todorov’s terms,

<sup>12</sup> *How It Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 10.

“a relationship among elements of the speech chain reappears at a later point along this chain.” The opening phrase, for example, can be scanned as traditional verse:

my head	where is my head	it rests	on the table
~ —	— ~ ~ —	~ —	~ ~ — ~
(iamb)	(choriamb)	(iamb)	(pyrrhic trochee)

And phrasal repetition acts throughout to measure and convey the insistent groping of the narrator in his search for Pim:

my head where is my head  
 my head . . . my hand  
 it rests on the table  
 my hand trembles on the table  
                                   the table glides  
 from light to darkness    darkness to light

Again, the assonance of “my head where is my head it rests” or “sees—sleeping” or “I— “drive—glides—light” acts as a defamiliarizing device, removing Beckett’s text from the seeming prose frame. Read aloud, such “versicles,” as Hugh Kenner calls them, are indistinguishable from their linear counterparts.

The point is, of course, that alternate modes of writing poetry—“free verse,” the prose poem, or, more recently, visual poetry and sound-text—were created by artists who felt that traditional accentual-syllabic meters were alien to their experience, that experience was itself fluid, shifting, nondefinable. “Perfected bygone moments,” wrote D. H. Lawrence, “perfect moments in the glimmering futurity, these are the treasured gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats.”<sup>13</sup> But for himself, Lawrence knew he needed something else, a form that would be appropriate for “the poetry of the immediate present,” in which “there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished,” but rather “inconclusiveness, immediacy, the quality of life itself, without dénouement or close” (pp. 182–83).

Meditative poetry, Lawrence suggests, is by definition not suited to free verse; dealing as it does with “the past and the future,” which are “the two great bournes of human emotion,” it needs “finished beauty” and “measured symmetry” (p. 185). “To break the lovely form of

<sup>13</sup> “Poetry of the Present” (Introduction to the American Edition of *New Poems* 1918), in *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 118.

metrical verse, and to dish up the fragments as a new substance, called *vers libre*," is, in the case of the autobiographical meditative poem, merely foolish. For "free verse has its own *nature*," a nature not suited to every poetic sensibility, just as the prose poem, which is the perfect form for a poet like Rimbaud, could not be congenial for a creator of collage structures like Pound. One cannot, in other words, simply choose one's poetic form (whether verse or prose) as one might choose to wear a certain dress to a party. Or at least, if one does choose thus arbitrarily, following the dictates of fashion which currently declare that the House of Poetry is a linear—but not a metrical—structure, one should not be surprised to be evicted, sooner or later, for crashing the party.