

English-speaking world shifted values. Historians pinpoint World War I as the time of irreconcilable fragmentation of society. This break-up of values and coherence erupted in all the arts. Musical composers began to introduce dissonance and cacophony in their work; painters multiplied their perspectives; dancers broke out of the classical repertoire into spontaneous, sometimes contorted movements. The powerful camera and the art of photography and movies had strong impact on writers. At the same time, belief in a poetics broke open. Comparing meter with free verse, poet Robert Hass says:

The difference is, in some ways, huge; the metrical poem begins with an assumption of human life which takes place in a pattern of orderly recurrence with which the poet must come to terms, the free verse poem with an assumption of openness or chaos in which an order must be discovered.

This is the basic fact of free verse: each poem is shaped from within. In all ages, poets always had this goal. Coleridge sought an "organic" form that treats thought poetry should come into being "as naturally as leaves on a tree"; Milton wanted a "simple, sensuous, and impassioned poetry. These approaches, however, only varied existing meters. Poets of the twentieth century made more decisive changes.

Without meter and rhyme scheme, what makes a poem a poem? When chloroform was invented, a famous doctor of the time remarked in dismay, "Anyone can be a surgeon now." When open forms began to strike a strong responsive chord in poets, many lamented like the good doctor. But the techniques of modern poetry, although different, are rigorous. A good poem remains difficult to achieve.

The Free Verse Craft of the Line

We know that the main difference between poetry and prose is that poetry is a line art and prose is a sentence art. Sentences run to the

edge of the margin. Although lines of poems make sentences, the line lengths and breaks in poetry are crucial. (Prose poems are an exception to this. We'll read them later in the Open Forms chapter.) In both free verse and metered verse, lines are as important to the poem as rungs are to a ladder. Each line moves the poem along at a certain speed. A line is a unit of time; a line break is a punctuation, a slight halt in the flow. Where there is no comma or period, the line break indicates a slight pause, the equivalent of a half comma. The last work on a line always gets attention; that's where your eye stops before it returns to the beginning of the next line. You also attend to the first word in a line. Sometimes poets accentuate that first word more by capitalizing it. Whether short or long, free or metered, line length manages the flow of the poem and controls what words get the most attention. In free verse, therefore, lines often are irregular in length or are placed in arrangements on the page according to where the poet wants emphasis to fall. If the energy of one or a series of lines flags, the poem falls off in interest. What the line is *not*, necessarily, is a unit of sense. In all poetry, lines often **enjamb** (run on) to the next, as in these iambic tetrameter lines by W. D. Snodgrass:

The green catalpa tree has turned
All white; the cherry blooms once more.

The second line is **end-stopped**: the sense of the line terminates with a period. Pauses and emphases are expressive of the poem's content.

Typed as conventional prose, an e. e. cummings poem reads:

Buffalo Bill's defunct, who used to ride a water-smooth, silver
stallion and break one, two, three, four, five pigeons just like
that. Jesus, he was a handsome man. And what I want to know
is, how do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mister Death?

These are lively words. But look at the increase of effect when they're arranged in lines:

speaker's voice. A few lines end with *the* or in the middle of an infinitive ("to / rise"). These give a dangling or suspended quality to the line, as though we hear an odd pause in the speaker's voice. The third end-stopped line ("...the blows that did not reach me") marks the end of the story of the sister. The next five lines summarize what the younger sister now realizes. Throughout the poem, the lines seem close to the pace of breathing. They slightly expand and contract in length, slowing and speeding the pace as you read. Note the internal rhymes (now/how/down) and other intensifying, unifying sound patterns (pressure/muscles/scraping/skin) throughout the poem.

In e. e. cummings's poem, the line use establishes an individual speech rhythm: We hear a voice speaking and we listen to it. In Olds's poem, the fierce lines seem almost deployed, fired down onto the page. "The Elder Sister" is a **continuous form**: it proceeds without stanza breaks. This uninterrupted form intensifies the urgent all-at-onceness of the enjambed lines.

A break for a stanza is a break in timing, a big pause. William Carlos Williams chose continuous lines for the rhythm of "The Great Figure." He wanted lines to go at the speed of the truck:

THE GREAT FIGURE

(William Carlos Williams, 1883–1963)

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls

and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

Williams's line becomes the movement of the action in the poem.

Lines can rush like a fuse burning, drop down like a rock in water, drift about musically, or curve as though the writer were hemming a circular skirt. The line is *expressive* of the content. In free verse, rhythm is individualized. A subtle poem, laid out to reveal the motions of the mind in the process of perception, will not strike you with its movement. You must judge each poem's way of using the line.

Although we're looking at functions of lines separately, remember that usually several forces are working together. cummings's Buffalo Bill poem, for example, uses a speech rhythm, but also at work is the passionate rush of fear and wonder at death.

The next poem's short lines are restless like the wind; they also seem to reflect the quick movement of the poet's perception. *Scirocco* is a seasonal, harsh wind.

SCIROCCO

(Jorie Graham, 1951–)

In Rome, at 26
Piazza di Spagna,
at the foot of a long
flight of
stairs, are rooms
let to Keats

in 1820,
where he died. Now
you can visit them,
the tiny terrace,
the bedroom. The scraps
of paper

And it wasn't the girl who was black, but him. The mother was real, though.
 I really had thought she was going to embrace them both and I had dreams about her for years afterwards: that I'd be being born again
 and she'd be lifting me with that same wounded sorrow or she would suddenly appear out of nowhere,
 blotting out everything but a single, blazing wing of holiness. Who knows the rest? I can still remember how it felt the old way.
 How I make my little thrust, how she crushes us against her, how I turn and snarl
 at the cold circle of faces around us because something's torn in me,
 some ancient cloak of terror we keep on ourselves because we'll do anything,
 anything, not to know how silently we knell in the mouth of death
 and not to obliterate the forgivenesses and the lies we offer one another and call innocence.
 This is innocence. I touch her, we kiss.
 And this. I'm here or not here. I can't tell. I stab her. I stab her again. I still can't.

A metrical line is easy to grasp. We hear the harmony of the repeating pattern of syllables and line length. Without metrical standards, you learn to pay attention to the poet's sense of how rhythm works in each poem—whether it captures speech rhythms, underscores meaning, mirrors the motion of the mind as it perceives, or captures an actual physical motion.

In crafting a poem in free verse, the writer is not “free” just because the conventions of meter and rhyme scheme are abandoned. Free verse challenges the poet to make imaginative and expressive use of the line. The free verse line is like the sensitive needle on the seismograph, tracing the movement and tremors of the earth.

Remember that the way a line is crafted constantly interacts with other elements. Line use is inseparable in its effect from elements such as sound patterns, imagery, repetition. All of these elements merge with the voice of the poem.

Voice

We convince by our presence.

—Walt Whitman

Someone's voice is mysterious. You answer a call from someone you haven't talked to in years and recognize her just from the way she says your name. If you're familiar with a writer's work, you can recognize the author's voice in even a few unsigned lines. If you know Mozart well, you'll spot even unfamiliar works as his. These recognitions have to do with characteristic sounds and tones. When a parent says, “Don't speak to me in that tone of voice,” you know what is meant. You also know the difference in the way you sound speaking to someone and the more fragmented way you think, muse, and imagine to yourself. A poem's tone of voice is similarly revealing. The forceful, direct tone in “The Elder Sister” tells you that the poem's message is unequivocal. The voice leaves nothing ambiguous. It is an outside, direct-address voice. In contrast, the voice in “Scirocco” moves back and forth from an outer voice addressing “you” to an inner, contemplative voice thinking to itself. This poem requires more participation from the reader. The voice in “Blades” is casual at first. The speaker says “about eight,” “another kid,” and “hanging around.” He could be telling you this over coffee. His storyteller mode (this happened, then this, then this) continues until the break. The last section shifts: He realizes the story did not happen that way at all. Reality and fantasy change places in memory. In the last seven lines, Williams speeds up the rhythm, drops the casual words and writes about “holiness,” “death,” “forgiveness.” The language shift indicates an opening of the speaker's perception into larger questions: What is the truth of memory,



In Your Notebook:

You can experience the power of line breaks by rewriting prose paragraphs as free verse. Try different line arrangements with this paragraph from Arlene Blum's book about mountain climbers in the Himalayas, *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*. After you find the line arrangement that best emphasizes the motion and drama of the paragraph, edit the words for further intensification.

I was just beginning to cross the mounts of avalanche debris when I saw, but didn't hear, a great cloud of snow and ice coming down from the right side of the Sickle. It looked as though the three members ahead of me were directly in its path. I turned around and ran, occasionally looking back at its progress. I got so winded running full speed with my pack that I had to slow to a fast walk. When I felt I was out of the way, I looked around for the others. All I saw was a great cloud of snow engulfing the area where they'd been. I knelt down, breathing fast and hard. I didn't know what to do. Should I probe for them? What if another avalanche came down? Should I run back to Camp II for help? What if I forgot the place where I'd last seen them? . . . What should I do?

Then rewrite this passage from Wright Morris's novel *Ceremony at Lone Tree* as free verse. Try two versions, one with longer lines and one with shorter.

Come to the window. The one at the rear of the Lone Tree Hotel. The view is to the west. There is no obstruction but the sky. Although there is no one outside to look in, the yellow blind is drawn low at the window, and between it and the pane a fly is trapped. He has stopped buzzing. Only the crawling shadow can be seen. Before the whistle of the train is heard the loose pane rattles like a simmering pot, then stops, as if pressed by a hand, as the train goes past. The blind sucks inward and the dangling cord drags in the dust on the sill.

how do we protect ourselves, what is innocence? The last line of the poem contains six clipped, contradictory sentences. In dramatic complement to their meaning, the truncated, blurted last sentences also contradict the leisurely syntax of the long lines.

Free Verse, the Tradition and Beyond

After free verse took hold, poetry changed irrevocably. Free verse evolved into a complex craft and tradition in itself, with criteria as rigorous as metrical verse. By now the art of poetry exists in such an open field that the term *free verse* seems to belong to a period long ago.

What makes a poem good applies to any poetry. What's good seems new; it is not predictable. The language is precise and fresh. The ideas or emotions develop. The craft holds our interest as the development takes place. There are compelling reasons for the poem to exist.

Open forms and metrics are not an either/or choice. Poets in any age use whatever tool is available to forge the poems they want to write. Someone right now, given the right subject, can use trochees or anapests to make a memorable contemporary poem. In someone else's hand, a metered poem will seem dated, dressed up in a bustle and high-buttoned shoes. The forms and techniques of traditional poetry are alive. They're here, along with later craft developments, available for the right use.

Poems

SNOW

(Louis MacNeice, 1907-1963)

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

