THE LITERARY ANATOMY
Teaching the Poetic Line

on the line

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Part I: A Brief History of the Line

When you begin to think about poetry, I would venture to bet that you begin to think about the line. Setting aside the prose poem for the moment, it is the poetic line that divides poetry from prose. Phrased most simply: Poetry has line breaks, all other forms of writing do not. Poetry is most obviously poetry on the page because of the right-hand margin—our ability to see a column of text that is determined not by the width of the page, but by the demands of the art form. In some ways it's hard to talk about line breaks, because we're talking about an absence. The line break is space, a blank where a prose line would continue. I'd rather begin by speaking in terms of what's present: the line itself and its long lineage.

Old English Poetry
500 A.D. through 1100 A.D.

Some people speculate that the earliest Old English poems were rowing songs, designed to keep rowers pulling their paddles in time. In Old English poetry (also called Anglo Saxon, since "Old English" is a foreign language for speakers of Modern English), the line is composed of two sides, with an alliteration and two strong stresses on either side of a caesura (a pause). Of the four stresses (or beats) in the line, three of the four alliterate. If you like knowing the technical names for things, each half of the line is called a hemistich. Here is a line from "Caedmon's Hymn," which was written sometime between 658 and 680.

weork Wuldor-Faeder | swa he wundra gehwaes

the work of the Glory-Father, | *when he of wonders everyone*

You'll have to take my word for it that there are two strong stresses on either side of the caesura, but you can see the alliterations for yourself—all those "h" sounds. Caedmon is the first English poet on record.

Though very little "modern" English poetry obeys this strict structure, you can hear the remnants of it in many works. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was particularly fascinated by Anglo Saxon poetics and consciously imitated the alliterative, stressed line. Take, for example: "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame." Hopkins complicates the basic structure of the Anglo Saxon line, multiplying the number of beats and consonantal repetitions. You can hear the strong pause in the middle and the "f" sound that moves across the entire line:

> As king**f**ishers catch **f**ire, dragon**f**lies draw **f**lame

And, while the left hemistich alliterates the "k" sound—

> As **k**ingfishers **c**atch fire, dragonflies draw flame

the right hemistich alliterates the "d" sound—

> As kingfishers catch fire, **d**ragonflies **d**raw flame.

More recent experiments in the Anglo Saxon line have been carried out by such poets as W. H. Auden and Robert Hass. A wonderful example can be found in Sharon Olds's poem "Ecstasy." In it, the hemistiches, alliteration, and four-beat line read like Caedmon (I have underlined and divided the line for emphasis):

> clou<u>d</u>y and <u>**d**ark</u>, | as we <u>**d**id</u> not <u>stop</u>

It is clear from these few examples that Anglo Saxon prosody retains a powerful hold on us. Contemporary American poetry has centuries-deep roots, and no poet is ever cut off from the poetic tools that may at first glance appear to have vanished. It's interesting to consider whether a renewed emphasis on stress rather than an emphasis on rhyme or syllabics might help poetry be more accessible to a broader spectrum of English speakers. After all, most words will tend to have the same number of stresses no matter how they're pronounced (i.e., "abDOmen" and "ABdomen" have the same number of stresses).

Middle English Poetry
1066 to the late 1400s

In 1066, the Norman Invasion occurred. Despite the rather un-francophone name, the Normans were indeed French and introduced French language (and literature) to the Island where our linguistic ancestors were busy speaking Old English and rowing boats. French gradually became the language of the aristocracy and the courts, and alliterative-rhythmic English poetry gained a new device: rhyme. That's right, rhyme was an import, primarily from France.

Chaucer, the most famous and influential of the Middle English poets, was a diplomat and a politician, and was presumably well-versed in the French language. Here are four lines from "The Knight's Tale"—one of the *Canterbury Tales* told in couplets. These lines describe Theseus's sack of Thebes:

> And by assuat he wan the citee after
> And rente adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter;
> And to the ladyes he restored agayn
> The bones of hir freends that were slayn.

Which I'll translate to:

> And by assault he won the city after
> And tore down every wall and beam and rafter
> And to the ladies he restored again
> The bones of their friends that had been slain.

We can also glean from his work that Middle English prosody began to count syllables and to arrange the stressed and unstressed syllables into patterns. Chaucer used a number of different stanza structures, many far more complex than the couplet, but all of them employed an end-rhyme. In addition, the exposure to European poetry changed the very subject matter of English poetry, introducing *fabliaux* and romance. The transition from Old to Middle English saw a dramatic shift in the form and focus of English poetry.

Modern English Poetry
approximately 1500 through 1900

As you can see from the dates above, Modern English poetry is not the same as Modernism. It began in the Renaissance, and the poetic structures and devices that emerged at the beginning of the period dominated English literature more or less until the advent of the Edwardian/Georgian movements (the bucolic forerunners of Modernism).

It is difficult to draw a clear line between Medieval and Renaissance poetry, in that the change is more gradual and one of growing continental and classical influence. The metric structures that we begin to see in the Medieval period are codified in the Renaissance. One significant arrival is the sonnet, which enters English when Sir Thomas Wyatt translates Petrarch's sonnets in the same poetic structure as Petrarch used. Renaissance poets were particularly interested in the possibility of transposing Greek and Latin poetic structures into English poetry. Milton was so steeped in Latin literature that he sometimes used Latin syntax in his English verse and he eschewed rhyme in his longer works on the principle that the Romans did not use it. William Shakespeare is an exception to this trend. In *The Tempest*, for instance, we can still hear remnants of Anglo Saxon prosody: "Full fathom five thy father lies." This is from a rhymed poem, with metrical structure, but it retains the strong stress, pause, and alliteration of an earlier era.

Skipping ahead. In the nineteenth century, two Yanks in the poetic court (Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman) began to break these rules, using irregular rhymes and rhythms. So radical was Whitman's loose poetic line, that a fellow poet said Whitman was "as unacquainted with art as a Hog is with mathematics." As funny as his criticism is, it's also telling. The metrical line has a relationship to mathematics. The regularized poetic line is like a verbal equation—with it, a reader can determine if the equation is true (conforming) or false (straying). Whitman violated this rule of recognition, making a poetry that couldn't be evaluated for its mathematical accomplishment.

In some ways, Dickinson looks less radical by comparison. Her poetry does not have the sprawl of Whitman's, but her short lines and off-rhymes have the similar effect of disrupting the metrical expectations of the reader. Dickinson did not publish during her lifetime partially because she would not alter her work to meet the prevailing demands of regularity. In fact, her brother and his wife altered much of Dickinson's work after her death in order to publish it, and there are still debates about just how Dickinson intended her work to appear.

It's not entirely surprising that the late 1800s saw a departure from codified understandings of poetry. The second half of the 1800s witnessed the increasing acceptance of Darwin's theories and the stirrings of Marx and Freud. Their ideas collectively challenged the ordering of the world, and many artists felt a need to reorder their work and disrupt their lineation in accordance.

Modernist Poetry & Onwards
1900 through the present

Modernism is a pretty big concept and, in reality, there were many different modernisms in many different arts. For our purposes, it's useful to focus on the emergence of the free verse line. Again, we have the French to thank. What began as *vers libéré* (liberated verse) in 1886 with the publication in *La Vogue* of un-metered poems by Rimbaud and Whitman, became *vers libre*, and ultimately free verse. A very clear-cut (dare I say, "clean") example of free verse can be found in this section from William Carlos Williams's "Spring and All" (1923):

> I: clean
>   clean
>   clean: yes . . New York

Notice that the lines vary widely by syllable count and do not rhyme. And, the second line is only one word. That would have been almost impossible prior to Modernism (emphasis on the *almost*). There is, however, a structure—a visual alignment of the lines. Consider, for instance, how much weaker the impact of the poem would have been if Williams had simply written it across a single line: "I: clean, clean, clean: yes. . New York." All art is formal, even free verse.

Part II: Four Ways to Break a Line

I like to think that we have access to everything that's come before us, and that we can compose our lines using the compositional techniques of the vast literary continuum. One of the difficulties of having access to so many possibilities is knowing *which* possibility to choose. To assist my students, I ask them to focus on one decision: where to break their lines. Here are a few of the line-break options that I present in the classroom:

> **The Line Break as a Pause:** When I teach children, I frequently begin by saying that the line is the breath of the poem, and then we all read a poem together taking deep breaths between each line. Obviously, that's a bit of an over-simplification, but I think it's a useful way to start thinking about the line. I think of poems as being words choreographed for the breath, and the line break is a critical element of that score. The line break indicates a momentary pause—another piece of punctuation, a little bit lighter than a comma, although often compounded by other kinds of pauses, like the end of a sentence. So, if we break a line in the middle of a sentence, the pause will be briefer than if we end a line at the end of a sentence.

The Line Break as Cliff-Hanger: Line breaks can create incredible suspense, even if only for a moment. Sometimes it's as simple as leaving a sentence unfinished. Eavan Boland begins her poem "The Pomegranate" with the line: "The only legend I have ever loved is"—creating an incredible desire on the part of the reader to know what legend it is she loves. Rita Dove uses a similar technique in her poem "Dusting." She writes: "Every day a wilderness—no." No *what*? Both of these examples cut the sentence off in midair. But it's possible to have a full sentence that leaves the reader on the edge of her seat, desperate to find out what happens.

The Line Break as Surprise: Tony Hoagland is a master of the surprise line break. Look at all the shifts in meaning in this section from his very funny poem "What Narcissism Means to Me":

> There's Socialism and Communism and Capitalism,
> said Neal,
> and there's Feminism and Hedonism,
> and there's Catholicism and Bipedalism and Consumerism,
> but I think Narcissism is the system
> that means the most to me.

The first line suggests a serious intellectual discussion—a discourse on the major political structures of the twentieth century. The second line evokes a slightly more intimate setting; we are, after all, on a first-name basis with a man named Neal. The third and fourth lines are amusing in that they thwart our expectations—what affinities do Feminism and Bipedalism share? And, do they really belong in the same category as the initial triumvirate of Socialism, Communism, and Capitalism? The surprise of Narcissism in the fifth line is joyfully funny. T. S. Eliot probably has the most famous surprise line break in English poetry. Notice what happens between the second and third lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table....

The expectation that Eliot creates is not based on content alone. He puts rhymes at the ends of the first two lines, but not the third. The first two lines both have four stresses and the final line three, giving it a shorter feel. Also, he ends the first two lines with long vowels that draw the speaker's breath out. The third stanza ends on a consonant, creating an

abrupt silence after the expectation of the vowel that remains floating in the air. Eliot turns the expectation of a gentle lilting invitation into something stumbling and drugged.

The Line Break as Reviser of Meaning: In Heather McHugh's poem "The Oven Loves the TV Set," she uses the line break to revise meaning across the break:

> all day the company we kept
>
> kept on incorporating

When we first hear "the company we kept," we think that "company" refers to the people we were spending time with. But when we get to the next line (in this case, the next stanza), we discover that "company" means a business—that the company is being incorporated. The line break strengthens the paradox of the language, allowing the company to signify people on one line and a business on the next. In Constantine Cavafy's poem "Days of 1909, '10, and '11" (trans. Edmund Keeley) about a young prostitute, the speaker laments the boy's beauty:

> more exquisite, more perfect—lost though he was:
> that is we don't have a statue or painting of him

The "lost" of the first line makes us think that the speaker is referring to the boy's metaphysical and/or moral state. The second line revises it to mean, "without a record of." Both meanings inhere, despite the suggestion that only the second one is true. Another wonderful example is Joe Bolton's "Sonnet II," in which the surprise is quite literally incorporated by the body of the speaker:

> I was surprised to find how light I felt
> With most the back of my head missing.

Here, there is certainly a strong surprise, but there is also a retention of the pleasantness of the first line that would be much harder in prose. Without the line break, there is no separation, and the lightness of the first line doesn't have it's own suspension, kept slightly aloof from the mortal wound that offers lightness.

This may all seem quite technical, but this is simply making explicit the things that readers sense intuitively. The study of poetry is the process of making things explicit. You break a line because it just feels right—that's a good start—it's still how I write. But, you can't always get the poem to the place you want by intuition, and that's when it helps to have different ways to think about the construction and revision of poems. Poetry is about getting pleasure from language, first and foremost. We're only looking at ways to create that pleasure, not making rules that will force us to write or read poems we don't enjoy.