Some Given Forms

A POEM REQUIRES A DESIGN—a sense of orderliness. Part of our pleasure in the poem is that it is a well-made thing—it gives pleasure through the authority and sweetness of the language *used in the way that it is used.* Even if the poem is a description of unalleviated chaos, it is a gathering of words and phrases and patterns that have been considered, weighed, and selected. Perhaps the poem was conceived in raw genius. It was also drawn through the measured strings of the man-made harp of song.

In the chosen design, all of the things talked about in the previous chapters are important—rhyme, meter, length of line, and the sounds of the various letters. Other things matter too, including the overall length of the poem, its tone (elevated or casual, for example), the extent to which imagery* is used, the subject itself. Be-

*An upcoming chapter focuses on imagery.

cause there are so many elements in the design of each poem, a pattern may be repeated but will not, in fact, cause one poem to be more than roughly like another. No two poems are alike, not anywhere in the world, at any time, nor will they ever be.

The following are brief descriptions of some of the patterns used in metrical verse.

Length, Breadth, and Rhyme

Rhyming patterns include everything from simple rhyming *couplets* (line 1 rhymes with line 2, line 3 rhymes with line 4, and so forth) to the *terza rima* and the *Spenserian stanza.*

Here are a few rhyming patterns:*

Couplet	*aa bb cc dd,* etc.
Tercet, or Triplet	*aaa bbb ccc ddd,* etc.
Quatrain	*abab cdcd,* etc.
Terza Rima	*aba bcb cdc ded,* etc.
Spenserian Stanza	*abab bcbc c*†

The *sonnet* is a poem of fourteen lines; traditionally it uses the iambic pentamenter line, although poets have

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*There are many additional forms and patterns; the interested reader will have no difficulty discovering them.

†In the Spenserian stanza, the first eight lines are always iambic pentameter; the final line is always an alexandrine (the six-foot line).

Of course, in most patterns of rhyme the poet may choose line length. For example, the poet might choose pentameter couplets, or quatrains in tetrameter, or make up a "new" design—note the rhyming pattern of *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.*

written sonnets in tetrameter, or in some other way varied the pure form.

The *Italian sonnet* uses the following rhyming scheme:

abba abba cdd cee
(other variations of *cde* are permissible)

The first eight lines (the *octave*) set out a statement or premise; the following six lines (the *sestet*) respond to it.

The *English* or *Shakespearean sonnet* is slightly less tight. Its rhyme scheme is as follows:

abab cdcd efef gg

The English sonnet divides into three quatrains and a final couplet.

Poems written in iambic pentameter without end rhyme are called *blank verse.* The list of poems written in blank verse is practically endless; it includes *Hamlet, Doctor Faustus, Paradise Lost, Hyperion, The Prelude, Tinturn Abbey, The Second Coming, Death of a Hired Man,* and many, many others.

The Stanza

Stanza is the term by which we designate a group of lines in a poem that is separated by an extra amount of space from other groups of lines, or other stanzas. The word comes from the Latin (*stans,* present participle of *stare,* to stand) and through the Italian (*stanza,* a room

or habitation). While it is clear that the term is used to indicate the divisions of the poem, there is no further *exact* definition. There are no absolutely right or wrong ways to divide a poem into stanzas, except, of course, when one is following a pattern that includes a particular strict formation of stanzas and stanza breaks.

It may be useful, when considering the stanza, to recall the paragraph in prose, which indicates a conclusion of one thought and the beginning of another, a *sensible* division. I don't mean that the poet should necessarily use the stanza in this way, or this way only, but that the poet might think of the sensible paragraph as a kind of norm (as the iambic pentameter line is a norm in terms of line-length expressiveness) from which to feel out the particular divisions that are best for a particular poem. Such divisions might be natural pauses in the action which is going on in the poem, or they might well be based on something else.

It can be said with certainty that a stanza break will inevitably result in either a felt hesitation or a felt acceleration. Ending a stanza at the end of a sentence strengthens the natural pause that follows any line and any completed sentence. Running a sentence through a final line of one stanza and on into the first line of the next stanza hastens the tempo, sometimes extraordinarily. Additionally, it can create a feeling of creative power (power of subject, power of poet) over mere neatness.

Any change from an established pattern indicates that the poet wants the reader to feel something different at that point. One of the assets of a pattern is this ability to "manipulate" the reader by breaking it.

Besides being a guide to the way the poet wants the reader to feel and understand the poem, each stanza is a part of the design of the poem—a part of its formal order. The stanza is therefore a pleasurable as well as a useful thing.

A poem may also be divided into different sections, numbered or not, and such divisions within a single poem do not need to follow any formal pattern. Rather they may travel wherever the particular requirements of the poem lead the poet. It is difficult in the usual single-bodied poem to break away from those two ordinary entities attached to any ongoing narrative—I mean time and place—even though such breaking-away to something else might sharpen and deepen the context of the poem. With the use of separate sections, however, the poet may change the landscape, the narrative, the tone of the writing, line length—in fact, anything and everything. This is not to say that the poem does not require its focus and sequential unfolding, but rather that the poet is free to present material with a sort of wheeling complexity—as James Wright does in *Before a Cashier's Window in a Department Store*—unencumbered by the formality and implicit margins of the more formal poem.

Syllabic Verse

After all the talk about meter and stresses, here is something quite different. In syllabic verse, a pattern is set up, and rigorously followed, in which the number of syllables in each of the lines of the first stanza is exactly repeated in the following stanzas. Whether the words on the various lines are words of single syllables or words

Before a Cashier's Window in a Department Store

JAMES WRIGHT

1
The beautiful cashier's white face has risen
once more
Behind a young manager's shoulder.
They whisper together, and stare
Straight into my face.
I feel like grabbing a stray child
Or a skinny old woman
And driving into a cellar, crouching
Under a stone bridge, praying myself sick,
Till the troops pass.

2
Why should he care? He goes.
I slump deeper.
In my frayed coat, I am pinned down
By debt. He nods,
Commending my flesh to the pity of the
daws of God.

3
Am I dead? And, if not, why not?
For she sails there, alone, looming in the
heaven of the beautiful.
She knows
The bulldozers will scrape me up
After dark, behind
The officers' club.

Beneath her terrible blaze, my skeleton
Glitters out. I am the dark. I am the dark
Bone I was born to be.

4

Tu Fu woke shuddering on a battlefield
Once, in the dead of night, and made out
The mangled women, sorting
The haggard slant-eyes.
The moon was up.

5

I am hungry. In two more days
It will be spring. So this
Is what it feels like.

of multiple syllables does not matter. Neither does it matter where the stresses fall in the individual lines. What matters is that the syllable *count* of each line, in each stanza, be exactly repeated; thus is the pattern set.

Because of the strictness of syllable-count, and the inevitable variety of stress-pattern, syllabic verse creates a music that is highly regular and at the same time filled with engaging counterpoint. Here is an example, from Marianne Moore's poem *The Fish*.

The Fish
wade
through black jade.
    Of the crow-blue mussell-shells, one keeps
    adjusting the ash-heaps:
        opening and shutting itself like

an
injured fan.
    The barnacles which encrust the side
    of the wave, cannot hide
        there for the submerged shafts of the

sun,
split like spun
    glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness
        into the crevices—

In other words, in each stanza: line 1 has one syllable, line 2 has three syllables, line 3 has nine syllables, line 4 has six syllables, and line 5 has eight syllables, and there is no change in this pattern.

Again, a syllabic pattern is established by the exact repetition of the syllable-count. In *The Fish,* Moore has chosen to indent some of the lines, but not all of the lines. She has employed the title of the poem as a part of the opening sentence, and she has chosen to enjamb some lines and to end-stop others and to include rhyme. The syllabic regularity makes it syllabic verse, the rest is simply more design—a design which, by its variety, by the slippery entering of the title into text, and by loosening lines from the torpor of the usual frozen left margin, gives to the poem a quickened dose of motion, which is pleasurable.

One final note. Marianne Moore's poem *The Steeple-Jack,* also in syllabic verse, has, at its center, one wonderfully effective variant stanza. Invention hovers always a little above the rules.

Free Verse

The free verse poem is by no means exempted from the necessity of having a design, though one must go about it in rather different ways, since there is no external pattern to be followed. This subject will take up a fair amount of time in the following chapter, and will involve such matters as repetition of line, repetition of syntax, patterns of stress, a sense of inevitability, setting up a felt pattern of expectation and meeting that expectation, a repetition of enjambment, and so on.

Verse That Is Free

Design

The name itself—free verse—implies that this kind of poetry rose out of a desire for release from the restraints of meter, the measured line, and strict rhyming patterns. Other terms are used to indicate this kind of verse also—the "fluid" poem, the "organic" poem. Each of the terms tries, but not very successfully, to say just what this kind of poetry is. The second and third terms are closer to the truth than "free verse"; still, "free verse" is the term most widely used.

Free verse is not, of course, free. It is free from formal metrical design, but it certainly isn't free from some kind of design. Is poetry language that is spontaneous, impulsive? Yes, it is. Is it also language that is composed, considered, appropriate, and effective, though you read the poem a hundred times? Yes, it is. And this is as true of free verse as it is of metrical verse.

No one, however, can say just exactly what the free-verse design is. Partly because it is so different from one

poem to another. Partly because we are so close to the beginnings of it. Metrical verse has been written for centuries, and, before that, poetry depended on strict application of alliteration or some pattern of light and heavy stresses. Poets began to write free verse near the beginning of this century. Free verse is still in its developmental stages, then. The rules are not yet set in stone, or even in clay. Discussing free verse is like talking about an iceberg, a shining object that is mostly underwater.

The free-verse poem sets up, in terms of sound and line, a premise or an expectation, and then, before the poem finishes, it makes a good response to this premise. This is the poem's design. What it sets up in the beginning it sings back to, all the way, attaining a *felt* integrity.

The initial premise is made up of everything the old metrical premise is composed of—sound, line length, and rhythm patterns, but in this case they are not strict, they are not metrical. They do, however, make emphatic use of stresses, as speech does. Is speech not musical too? It is, indeed, and many of the old devices, such as refrain and repetition, are therefore still effective. Alliteration and assonance are as important as ever.

This much is certainly true: the free-verse poem, when finished, must "feel" like a poem—it must be an intended and an effective presentation. It need not scan, but it may scan a little if the poet is so inclined. It need not rhyme in a definite pattern, but it may rhyme a little, if the poet decides to rhyme a little. It need not follow particular stanza formations, though of course it *may* have stanzas. It need not follow any of the old rules,

necessarily. Neither does it have to avoid all of them, *necessarily*.

Tone and Content

Perhaps free verse was a product of the times. Perhaps it resulted from a desire on the part of writers at the beginning of this century to alter the *tone* of the poem. Perhaps it had something to do with the increasing idea of a democratic and therefore classless society in America. Perhaps the proliferation of privately owned books had something to do with a changed attitude toward literature in general, and the poem in particular. As small towns and farming settlements grew into the west, with their distance from and independence from tradition, the idea of author-as-lecturer, as a member of an educated, special class, was scarcely applicable. Now the poet was being called down from the lectern and invited, as it were, into the privacy of each reader's home. The poet was expected to be more friendly—less "teacherly." Content began to change. The slight glaze of gentility, and the ever-present question of the suitability of the subject matter faded into the background. The emerging voice, it seemed, was determined to write about anything and everything. With such expectations—of intimacy, of "common" experience—the old metrical line, formal and composed, must have seemed off-putting. A new tone, reflecting this growing relationship between writer and reader, was called for.

In order for the tone of the poem to change, the line had to change. Now a line was needed that would

sound and feel not like formal speech but like conversation. What was needed was a line which, when read, would feel as spontaneous, as true to the moment, as talk in the street, or talk between friends in one's own house.

This line naturally would have to affiliate itself more with the iambs and dactyls of natural speech patterns —the forward-reaching feeling of speech—than with the measures of meter. That, I think, is the long and the short of it. Speech entered the poem. The poem was no longer a lecture, it was time spent with a friend. Its music was the music of conversation.

Walt Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*

Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* was first published in 1855, wrote almost all of his work in long, unscannable, usually end-stopped lines,* and he is frequently cited as the first American poet to write in free verse. It is like calling a mountain a hill. It isn't wrong. But it tells us nothing useful or interesting. Whitman's work—colossal, unique—is fairly categorized as free verse now that free verse has been invented. But to study Whitman's poetry is to learn about Whitman's poetry. Such is genius. In the sense that he broke with tradition, and was a celebrant of things American, and a talker, and an iconoclast, he serves as the vanguard to all that comes after. But the effect of his own work—with its

**O Captain! My Captain!* however, is written in meter, and is a fairly miserable poem.

From *Leaves of Grass*

WALT WHITMAN

I think I could turn, and live with animals,
they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their
condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep
for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their
duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented
with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the
whole earth.

extremely long lines; its repetitions, catalogs; its plentitude of adjectives, which would probably be death in anyone else's work—is the result of an extremely personal style. Additionally, his tone—rhetorical, oratorical—misses exactly what free verse, in its attitude and tone, was setting out to do.

William Carlos Williams and *The Red Wheelbarrow*

If there is any single poem that might serve as a "text" for a discussion of free verse, it must be William Carlos Williams's poem *The Red Wheelbarrow*. This eight-line poem has passed through endless scrutiny, and still it refuses to give up all its secrets. But it does tell us a great deal.

To begin with, it lies upon the page in a careful visual pattern—four two-line stanzas. In each case the second line of the stanza is a single word. And there is no punctuation.

What does this design mean? What does it mean that there is no punctuation? Perhaps the lack of punctuation is trying to say that this is a new kind of poem, to be read in a new way—taking clues from the very graphic layout itself—from the line breaks primarily, rather than the old formalities of comma or dash.

What does its apparent simplicity mean? Perhaps that for this writer a poem is not a matter of some serious predetermined subject, but of concentrated focus and attention upon an "ordinary" simple subject—a mere scene—then, through the elevation of art, the scene is

The Red Wheelbarrow

William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

lifted into the realm of something quite extraordinary and memorable.

What does it mean that this short poem is full of objects rather than ideas or thoughts? Williams said, "no ideas but in things." The idea springs from the object, then. The poem is not a discussion, not a lecture, but an *instance*—an instance of attention, of noticing something in the world.

What does it mean that the poem is so brief—only eight lines? Perhaps that such intense focus can't hold for any great length, or must break and move on to another object—another scene, another group of *things*. Perhaps Williams is implying that the imagination comes alive in the world of things—of objects. Perhaps he is saying that the poem, to become radiant, needs images, and images always involve things.

In terms of the sound of the poem, it is quickly apparent that the poem makes brilliant use of dark, heavy mutes. They appear in one important place after another, just as they did in Frost's poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Forget for a moment where the heavy stresses would come in speech and allow a heavy stress to fall upon those syllables constructed of or containing a mute and only upon those syllables. Then, speak the poem, stressing those points—and you are speaking in the natural pattern of speech. That is, the use of mutes and speech-stress work exactly as one force. And the sentence, fortified by these two sources of energy, becomes astonishingly forceful, unarguable, unforgettable.

Enjambment—as I have said before—gives the writer an ability to restrain or to spur on the pace of

the poem. Like everything else about writing poems, the device of enjambment has about it a great flexibility; it can be employed in many ways, and it can work upon the reader to varying degrees. A line may be a grammatical whole, a sentence, or at least a logical unit. Or a phrase of logic may be broken entirely. Or a logical phrase may be broken at an apparently sensible point, letting the reader feel satisfaction at the end of the line; then, the following line may deliver some continuing information which redevelops the previous line. Sometimes this information is merely continuing, sometimes it is surprising. Two of the stanzas in this poem develop in this way, with the phrases "a red wheel" and "glazed with rain" redeveloping into "a red wheel / barrow" and "glazed with rain / water." It is fun. It is a world forming as we read. It is a poem that happens before our eyes.

Enjambment *can* be serious, disruptive, almost painful. In *The Red Wheelbarrow* it is none of these. Still, it is the main machinery of the poem, and sets the tone of the poem. The varying states of satisfaction and curiosity at the ends of the lines are deft and engaging. They keep us alert. Through them, the poem is unwrapped little by little, like paper pulled back from something sweet: a small, perfectly focused picture which—amazing!—has been created entirely from words and which—amazing!—we see so clearly at the end of the poem and which—amazing!—*we see ourselves seeing so clearly*. It is, above all, a poem that celebrates not only a momentary enchantment plucked out of the vast world but the deftness and power of the imagination and its dazzling material: language.