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Lineation

in simple, shining lines, in pages stretched
DEREK WALCOTT, 'Nearing Forty'

Christopher Ricks once offered this rule-of-thumb : that whereas prose must go to the end of the line, in poetry it's an option—that is, poetry uses one additional form of punctuation, the line-break, a moment of spatial

organisation different from every mark and other space. It's a bald way to tell poetry from prose—a distinction less obvious than it seems : some prose is metrical or rhymed, some poetry blank free verse—but holds good as hairy ones fail, covering *prose-poems*, those always exercising the option, with stichic, stanzaic, and free verse. It is thus important to indicate *lineation* (division into lines) in poetry you quote : in *indented* quotations all layout should be reproduced ; in *embedded* quotations (usually set off by inverted commas within prose) line-breaks are represented by a crotcheted forward slash [/], stanza-breaks (blank lines) by a double-slash [//]. There is no agreed way of indicating eisthesis in transcription, and simple rhyme-display can be ignored, but consequential layout may be indicated by a brief note following the slash, as '[/ tab]', '[/ centred line]', etc.

In regular metres and forms there are clear constraints on how line-breaks can be used, though division of a line into halves is always possible with medial line-breaks (as when speakers change mid-line in verse-drama). Equally, the freedom of free verse has much to do with using line-breaks at will, but there are at every line-break questions of what words frame it and whether the line is end-stopped (line-break reinforced by a punctuation-mark) or enjambed (line-break as punctuation in its own right). Both affect a line-break's value, and (as with lunulae) meaning is determined by context ; in enjambment across

stanza-breaks (the frequency of which depends on the stanza) stakes will be as higher as stanza-breaks are heavier. These lines are from Heaney's 'The Strand at Lough Beg', dedicated to his cousin Colum McCartney, murdered in the Northern Irish 'Troubles' while driving :

> What blazed ahead of you ? A faked road block ?
> The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
> Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun ?

> What BLAZED | aHEAD | of YOU ? | a FAKED | ROAD BLOCK ?
> The RED | LAMP SWUNG, | the SUD- | den BRAKES | and STAL- | ling
> ENgine, | VOIces, HEADS HOOD- | ed and | the COLD-| NOSED GUN ?

"stalling" creates an unstressed hyperbeat ; "Engine, voices," both invert the iambic metre : so after "the sudden brakes" the impetus of rising rhythm is lost until "the cold-nosed gun". But metre does not work alone, for the line-break—"and stalling [/] Engine,"—makes the falling rhythm cough or stutter, miming the treacherous car-engine ; the effect is reinforced by commas after "Engine" and "voices", making it as impossible for rhythm to take off as it was for McCartney to drive safely away. What Heaney achieves cannot be described without reference to the lineation separating "stalling" from "Engine".

As with other punctuation, a good way to see how lineation matters is to do without. Here is the first paragraph of Tennyson's dramatic monologue 'Tithonus' (N1006) set as prose[1] :

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall, the vapours weep their burthen to the ground, man comes and tills the field and lies beneath, and after many a summer dies the swan. Me only cruel immortality consumes : I wither slowly in thine arms, here at the quiet limit of the world, a white-haired shadow roaming like a dream the ever-silent spaces of the East, far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

Some blank-verse lines signal their metrical integrity, but display lineation and all is clearer :

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
> The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
> Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
> And after many a summer dies the swan.
> Me only cruel immortality 5

[1] Tithonus loved and was beloved of Aurora, Goddess of Dawn. Granted immortal life, he forgot to ask for eternal youth : hopelessly infirm, he now wishes only to die.

Consumes : I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. 10

Each of ll. 1–4 is self-contained, end-stopped, and a parallel clause. The full-stop after "swan", coinciding with a line-break and completing a sentence and blank quatrain, is followed, in strong contrast, by the first enjambed line—but syntax requires only one word from l. 6. One's ear has adjusted to end-stopped lines, so "immortality [/] Consumes :" effectively mimics Tithonus's unending life, forcing readers to carry on when they expected to be able to stop, and stressing "Consumes" in its endless present tense. End-stopping returns for two lines, then enjambment again, delicately creating in "dream [/] The ever-silent spaces" an odd half-silence as the reading voice wants to stop but is forced to continue (never silent). The value of this second enjambment is more ghostly (or dream-like) because syntax requires all of both lines, and there is no equivalent to the early pause enforced in l. 6 by the semi-colon. The last line metrically echoes the first, a comma after the second foot producing a distinctly broken rhythm to end the paragraph audibly as it ends syntactically.

The medial pauses created by the semi-colon in l. 6 and commas in ll. 1 + 10 are called *caesurae* (from Latin, *caedo*, to cut). Some people argue that all lines have a natural caesura whether or not enforced by punctuation ; I think this true only of lines longer than a tetrameter. Up to eight beats, the line can be (though need not be) whole ; unpunctuated pentameters tend to split 4–6 or 6–4, and unpunctuated longer lines almost always split somewhere in the middle, like a tree-branch grown too long. Common metre (*a8b6c8b6*) probably originated as a heptametric couplet (*a14a14*) that became a single-rhymed quatrain when the last three feet of each line broke off at an 8–6 caesura to become *b*-rhyme trimeters ; short metre (*a6b6c8b6*) similarly derives from poulter's measure (*a12a14*). In unpunctuated lines caesurae naturally occur roughly in the middle, but poets can force them back- or forwards with punctuation, as Tennyson did with his semi-colon after "Consumes", producing a 2–8 split. Arguably, Heaney's "Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?" has two caesurae, commas creating a 2–2–6 split, but many critics use caesura only of a single distinctive break, and would call what Heaney's commas create 'pauses' (or equivalent). *In extremis*, multiple caesurae can all but destroy a line's identity,

and in verse-drama pose a real problem for actors : try observing the punctuation and respecting the metrical integrity while saying Lear's "Neuer, neuer, neuer, neuer, neuer." or Ferdinand's "Couer her face : Mine eyes dazell : ſhe di'd yong." (in *The Dutcheſſe of Malfy*).

In any regular form caesurae can be delicately manipulated. One principal effect, much used in blank verse, is obtained by having caesurae in the same place in successive lines, giving a sequence such as 6–4 / 6–4 / 6–4. If there is punctuation at caesurae and lines are enjambed, the two post-cæsural feet of each line + the three pre-caesural feet of the next create lines of the right length (– 4/6 – 4/6 – 4/6). Eyes see printed lines, but ears begin to hear caesura-to-caesura lines in counterpoint, sense reading against layout to create a feeling of never reaching a finish, the end of each line in mid-clause and the end of each *clause* (p. 264) in mid-line. Such *rocking lineation* is a common engine of Shakespeare's blank-verse speeches, and the closed couplet with which he often ends a way of braking its momentum.

A good example comes in *The Prelude*, of which (in full form) there are two texts : *1805*, the first complete version, and *1850*, published posthumously. This is I.412–27 in *1805*, Wordsworth remembering a childhood evening when he 'borrowed' a boat, rowed onto Ullswater (in the English Lake District), and became frightened by a mountain which from a new perspective suddenly loomed over him (the verse-paragraph ends with l. 427) :

With trembling hands I turned
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.
There, in her mooring-place, I left my bark 415
And through the meadows homeward went with grave
And serious thoughts ; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts 420
There was a darkness—call it solitude
Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live 425
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

In most good verse there is a swirling relationship between clauses,

grammatical units, and lines, poetic units ; variations produced by clauses shorter or longer than a line are instrumental in preventing dullness. Wordsworth wrote great blank verse in this manner, and the first part of this, to "modes of being." (1. 420), is a fair sample : read it aloud, punching through enjambed line-breaks and pausing appropriately at punctuation-marks, and you will hear (and see) patternings of clause against line. But after the full-stop in l. 420 Wordsworth begins to do something more muscular with rocking lineation. A medial full-stop creates the heaviest possible caesura, demanding a substantial pause by splitting l. 420 7–3 ; l. 421, split 5–5, also has a heavy caesura forced by a dash. The first counterpoint-line has only eight beats, –3/5– ("In my thoughts [/] There was a darkness—"), but its isolating caesurae are heavy, metrical brevity appropriate to its meaning, and l. 422 is again split 5–5 by a dash, creating a full-length counterpoint-line, –5/5– ("—call it solitude [/] Or blank desertion—"), as a dash'd-off parenthesis. Line 423 is also split 5–5, creating a second full-length counterpoint-line ("—no familiar shapes [/] Of hourly objects,"). As all three counterpoint-lines begin and end in mid-iamb they become <u>trochaic</u> pentameters :

> IN my | THOUGHTS / there | WAS a | DARKness—
> CALL it | SOLi- | TUDE / or | BLANK de- | SERtion—
> NO fa- | MILiar | SHAPES / of | HOURly | OBjects,

To hear this falling rhythm emerge from blank verse creates aural interference, a metrical disturbance analogous to the mental disturbance the lines report. Admirable craftsmanship continues as the energy of rocking lineation is harnessed : the caesura in l. 423 is weaker than its predecessors, forced only by a comma ; another comma end-stops the line, and in l. 424, also end-stopped with a comma, the caesura moves back a beat to split the line 4–6. The welter of short clauses bleeds off momentum, as an eddy detracts from a current ; there is steady backward movement of caesurae, successive lines from 420 splitting 7.3 / 5–5 / 5–5 / 5,5 / 4,6 : the weight of the caesura lessening from full-stop to dash to comma as it retreats. In the last three lines, 425–7, Wordsworth reaps the profit of his labour, producing a huge clause enjambed through two line-breaks : in reading aloud the length of breath required is unexpected, and one wants to stop after "forms", "live", and "men", and even then must go beyond "mind" to gasp out "By day" and gratefully, finally, reach a comma and draw breath. Effectively 22 beats without pause (natural pauses coincide with and are negated by enjambment), this long clause interrupts the movement of the caesura

as the "huge and mighty forms" interrupt the tenor of Wordsworth's days, but l. 427 splits 2–8, completing the retreat (1–9 is very rare) and bringing the verse-paragraph to an aurally satisfying close.

What such structuring achieves can be judged by comparison with *1850* (N783), with which Wordsworth had been fiddling for forty-five years :

> With trembling oars I turned, 385
> And through the silent water stole my way
> Back to the covert of the willow tree ;
> There in her mooring place I left my bark,—
> And through the meadows homewards went, in grave
> And serious mood ; but after I had seen 390
> That spectacle, for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being ; o'er my thoughts
> There hung a darkness, call it solitude
> Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes 395
> Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colors of green fields ;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams. 400

Stops and a commash are added, lessening ambiguities and eliminating difficulties of reading aloud ; rocking lineation is eliminated and phrasing made more conventional, allowing clichés distorted in *1805* ("a trouble to" rather than "the trouble of", for example). Lines 393–400 in *1850* might be thought syntactically clearer than ll. 420–7 in *1805*, but to my mind (and ears) the stopping in *1850* is generally much less coherent than in *1805*, and *1850* infinitely poorer as poetry : Wordsworth would have done better to leave well alone.

Heaney, Tennyson, and Wordsworth variously suggest what can be done with heroic lines, the spine of canonical verse from Chaucer to Arnold (*c.*1380–1900) ; with other kinds of line come different problems and opportunities. One obvious possibility is rather than having lines simply follow one another, to set them *antiphonally* against one another : the basic models are classical dialogue-poems, call-and-response structures in the Christian liturgy, and hymns with *versicle* + chorus. Sacred lyrics like Herbert's are frequently antiphonal, and eisthetic display of rhyme and stanza-construction in secular lyrics readily

creates a similarly 'doubled' voice, as in Christina Rossetti's early observation 'On Albina' :

> The roses lingered in her cheeks,
>   When fair Albina fainted ;
> Oh! gentle Reader, could it be
>   That fair Albina painted ?

The cross-pairings of sense (ll. 1–2 ; 3–4), eisthesis (ll. 1 + 3, 2 + 4), and rhyme (ll. 2 + 4) give even a slight verse in common metre sturdily memorable construction, and equivalent effects are normative in lyric stanzas.

Marvell pointed one way of developing antiphony in 'An Horatian Ode' by choosing a 4–4–3–3 (rather than 4–3–4–3) form (N486; text from 1681, Bodleian MS Eng.Poet.d.49) :

> He nothing common did, or mean,
> Upon that memorable Scene ;
>   But with his keener eye
>   The axes edge did trye.
> Nor call'd the Gods with vulgar spight
> To vindicate his helplesse right ;
>   But bow'd his comely head
>   Downe, as upon a bed.

Charles I's gracious and fearless behaviour at his execution in 1649 (which Marvell witnessed) was widely bruited, and Marvell honoured it despite his political opposition to Charles : the antiphonal trimetric couplets, reinforced by their parallel "But" beginnings and the intervening "Nor", grant Charles a cutting brevity of his own. Morality and politics momently fuse, and the commentary on a dead King and subsequently Cromwell as successive ruler make possible the final double-edged judgement of the poem :

> Besides the force it° has to fright *Cromwell's sword*
> The spirits of the shady night ;
>   The same Arts that did gaine
>   A Pow'r must it maintaine.

Elegy and proverbial warning, the ending on a trimetric couplet is predictable but acquires from its identity as a *semi-colon*, antiphonal apposition to 'shady spirits' (like Charles's ?), and compaction a caustic force longer lines would lose : live by the sword, die by the sword.

The antiphonal voice can expand to become the major or only voice

of a poem, and in doing so is typically embodied in short lines that refuse the fullness of heroic sound, pitching themselves as a counter-voice to a heroic normality present only by implication. Emerson's 'Ode' (N943) of 1847 ends with an interesting example :

> The Cossack eats Poland,
> Like stolen fruit ;
> Her last noble is ruined,
> Her last poet mute :
> Straight, into double band
> The victors divide ;
> Half for freedom strike and stand;—
> The astonished Muse finds thousands at her side.

Alienated observation of Russian imperial counter-insurgency (after the Polish uprising of 1831–2) fills the short lines, but the celebratory greeting of renewed uprising (in 1846) is heroic (with an initial hyper-beat), and with it scorn evaporates. The same implicit contrast underlies Vendler's acute observation that "Heaney, writing *North* [1975], found himself looking to the 'thin' music of poetry written in the Irish language for a positive alternative body to the broad (and colonizing) placidities of the English pentameter"[2]—and the famous 'Bog People' poems from *North*, including 'Bog Queen', 'The Grauballe Man', and 'Punishment' (p. 167) are in short two- and three-stress lines quite distinct from the tetrameters and heroics of earlier work like 'Digging' (N1899) and 'Death of a Naturalist'.

At the other extreme, antiphonal structure can be reduced to the bob-line, commonly comic, but capable of many moods in *echo verse* (where the last syllable/s of a line 'reply' to themselves with a shifted meaning, as 'wholly/*Holy*'). The best-known echo-verse is Herbert's 'Heaven', where God (or Church) do the replying, but such sacred use is uncommon (Herbert was imitating his brother Herbert of Cherbury's 'Echo in a Church' and 'Echo to a Rock') ; more suggestive are Webster's *Dutcheſſe of Malfy* 5.3, where the echo warns from the duchess's grave, and the famous terminal bobs ("nevermore!") of Poe's 'The Raven' (N977), which come close to echo through the density of rhymes. Bobs are capable of melancholy in their own right, as in Betjeman's 'I. M. Walter Ramsden', beginning :

[2] Vendler, *The Breaking of Style*, 3.

Dr. Ramsden cannot read *The Times* obituary to-day
  He's dead.
Let monographs on silk worms by other people be
  Thrown away
  Unread
For he who best could understand and criticize them, he
  Lies clay
  In bed.

The extreme heterometric contrast and tolling rhymes of the double-bobs offset the comedic manner initially generated by the pathos (and bathos) of "He's dead". More subtly, and far more terrifyingly, Snodgrass used rhyming trimetric bobs to clip the pronouncements of Magda Goebbels giving poison to her six children in the ruinous heart of Hitler's Berlin :

Open wide, now, little bird ;
I who sang you your first word
Soothe away every sound you've heard
    Except your Leader's voice.
Close your eyes, now ; take your death.
Once we slapped you to take breath.
Vengeance is mine, the Lord God saith
    And cancels each last choice.

Much is carried by the triple rhymes, but the counter-pronouncements of the trimeters ("Except", "cancels"), confirmed by their own terminating alliteration and rhymes ("Leader's voice", "last choice"), convey the method in the madness with appalling brevity.[3]

The logical opposite of a bob, an extended line, doesn't seem to have a name, but can be called a *pronged* line. *Prongs* are commonest as terminal alexandrines, as in the Spenserian stanza, the trimetric sestets (*ababcc12*) of Jonson's 'Ode to Himself' (N336), and the complex stanzas of Berryman's 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' (N1546 ; usually *a10b10c6b8d10d10b6a12*) and Holmes's 'The Chambered Nautilus' (N974 ; *a10a6b6b10b10c6c12*). This last looks like rhyme royal (heroic *ababbcc*) with couplets substituted for cross-rhyme (*aabbbcc*) + triple bob + prong (*aa6b6bbc6c12*)—suggesting inspiration by Wordsworth, who borrowed pronged rhyme royal (*ababbcc12*) from the prologue to Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' for 'Resolution and

[3] Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, 197 ; Snodgrass, *The Fuehrer Bunker*, 185.

Independence' (N394, 790), and created pronged tetrametric octets (*ababccdd12*) for 'Ode to Duty' as well as heterometrically pronged sestets (tetrametric *ababc10c12*) for 'Beggars'. Medial prongs are rarer, but occur in some couplet verse, providing (like inset triplets) an emphatic variation ; here is Dryden getting excited by 'Lucretius, The Fourth Book. *Concerning the Nature of Love*' (text from *Sylvæ*, 1685, omitting two swash braces and turn-downs) :

> Which never wou'd thoſe wretched Lovers do,
> But that the common heats of Love they know ;
> The pleaſure therefore muſt be ſhar'd in common too. (p. 92)
>
> Hence Families ſuch different figures take,
> And represent their Anceſtors in face, and Hair, and make.
> Becauſe of the ſame Seed, the voice, and hair,
> And ſhape, and face, and other members are,
> And the ſame antique mould the likeneſs does prepare. (p. 93)

The first and third prongs ("The pleaſure [. . .]" + "And the ſame [. . .]") are alexandrines, but "And repreſent [. . .]" is a whopping fourteener made odder by the 'quadruplet' it technically prevents but cannot make invisible (Hair/hair/are/prepare). In the last prong there is a touch of versifying convenience, but the first (its medial caesura creating even halves with "muſt" as the grammatical *copula*) more than carries the satirical weight of its bulking tautology ("ſhar'd in common too"), and the fourteener may embody differing 'lines of descent'. Medial prongs are prescribed in short metre (trimetric, *abc8b*), used for hymns like Hatch's 'Breathe on me, Breath of God', and found in complex stanza-forms like that of Donne's 'The Indifferent' (heroic, *a8b12b14ac8c8cdd*), where identifying ll. 2–3 as a poulter's measure (*b12b14*) pronged into a miniature version of itself (*a8 . . . a10*) is helpful in considering tone. Where measure is established, however temporarily, prongs can manifest in free verse, as in Herd's 'Ophelia's Confession' :

> It was far too pretty, but I had to improvise
> and I was a poet, far more than him,
> who threw out every word he ever thought
> as if that might have kept his sorry life afloat.[4]

[4] *Dead Redhead* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2001).

The Shakespearian heroics intimated in the title are approximated in the first two lines and achieved in the third, but promptly subverted by the alexandrine, a failed effort to swim embodied in its subjunctive mood, brief extension "afloat", and definite termination.

Long lines are used in their own right, but have never been favoured in the Petrarchan manner. In post-medieval English, after the demise of the fourteener and poulter's measure (rare after *c.*1600), they almost always have to be read against the heroic lines they conspicuously aren't (pp. 36–7) : adoption of a long line is not necessarily anti-heroic, but is usually (co)un(ter)-heroic, searching for a quality heroics wouldn't allow. Blake's fourteeners (as in *The Book of Thel*) accommodate his prophetic voice and style, and Kipling's in some of the *Barrack-Room Ballads* (including 'Danny Deever', 'Mandalay', 'The Men that Fought at Minden', and 'Cholera Camp') allow regionally class-specific speech to attain moral pungency.[5] Clough's verse-novel octameters are chattily intimate ; Poe's paeonic tetrameters (in 'The Raven') and Browning's trochaic sesquiheptameters (in 'A Toccata of Galuppi's') are tumblingly musical. As these examples suggest, the nineteenth century saw the long line return from exile : add a few long-line poems by Tennyson ('Locksley Hall' etc.) and many by Swinburne and Dowson, and it is clear there was growing dissatisfaction with heroics—probably related to their imperial inflation by Victorian pride and jingoism. Stages of reaction can be seen : in Dowson's 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae' (N1211)—a Horatian tag meaning roughly 'I'm not as I was in good Cynara's day'—a bobbed alexandrine sestet is enough to convey wearied decadence :

> All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
> Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay ;
> Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet ;
> But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
>   When I awoke and found the dawn was grey :
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

For Swinburne, however, reaction was fiercer, and his 'Hymn to Proserpine [/] (After the Proclamation in Rome of the Christian faith)' is in anapæstic hexameters with free catalexis and iambic substitution : hardly the Anglican way of addressing Christ :

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[5] Those surprised by praise of Kipling might consult his *Complete Barrack-Room Ballads* (London: Methuen, 1973).

> Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean ; the world has grown grey
> from thy breath ;
> We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death.
> Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day ;
> But love grows bitter with treason, and laurel outlives not May.
> Sleep, shall we sleep after all ? for the world is not sweet in the end ;
> For the old faiths loosen and fall, the new years ruin and rend.

Given the medial and terminal rhymes and very evenly central caesurae, this could be called cross-rhymed trimetric quatrains laid out as couplets, but the long lines acquire an identity of their own that takes them beyond the comic trip of anapæsts to a bitter fluency, rhyming and verbal richness thrown against the colourless Christianity they condemn. More reasonable, but similarly overgoing the galumph of fourteeners to find in them a space for defiance, is the rebuke of Kipling's generic 'Tommy' (or British soldier ; N1181) :

> We aren't no thin red 'eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too,
> But single men in barricks, most remarkable like you ;
> An' if sometimes our conduck isn't all your fancy paints,
> Why, single men in barricks don't grow into plaster saints ;

As these examples show, neoclassical long lines (mostly duple hex- to octameters, triple tetra- to hexameters, and quadruple tri- or tetrameters) have qualities, and poets still resort to them on occasion ; mostly comic.[6] The sustained Modernist reaction against heroics—"(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)", as Pound has it in *Canto* LXXXI—took in the end a decisively different form, most closely anticipated not by any published Victorian poets just mentioned, but in Britain by Hopkins (1844–89), unpublished until 1920, and in America by Whitman (1819–92), furiously condemned from 1855. Coming to grips with them requires going back to a medieval Northern European conception of the poetic line, and forward to a new conceptual poetics of the line, neither based on neoclassical feet in any number.

Milton wasn't joking when he complained of the "troublesome and modern bondage of Rhyming" (N421). Rhyme is now sufficient in many minds to define poetry, and manages to lock down the neoclassical foot-based line as a primary unit defined by spatial display + aural position—but no classical poetry rhymes, and 'Petrarchan' rhyming

[6] Eliot's 'Macavity the Mystery Cat', for example, is in deutero-paeonic (uxuu) tetrameters and sesquitrimeters (14 or 16 beats).

exploded from Sicily across Europe precisely because it was enchantingly new. In the older cultures across which Humanism with its new and neoclassical burdens flooded, neither rhyme nor classical prosody were necessarily normative ; Germanic cultures had traditions related to earlier Greek models than those the Romans adopted, refined, and passed on. Old English (*c.* 500–1066) used *alliterating hemistiches*, half-lines bound by repeated sounds and rhythmic patterns ; *Beowulf* (N2) begins :

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geārdagum,
þēodcyninga þrym gefrūnon, [þ = unvoiced 'th']
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.[7] [ð = voiced 'th']

This manner of composition originated in *oral formulaism*, a bardic technique in which a stock of hemistiches covering typical places, times, and actions is learned and freely drawn on in live performance ; ask the bard for the same tale two days in a row and you'd get the same narrative, but not in exactly the same (hemi + hemi) stich combinations. A similar practice explains *stock epithets* in Homeric epic (strong-thewed Achilles, the wine-dark sea, etc.), prefabricated units occurring many times in a narrative. Conventions of alliterative and rhythmic linkage are complex, but in adapted form clearly underlie the *Middle-English* (1066–1500) line of Langland's *Piers the Ploughman* (N71), where medial points usually indicate hemistiches (p. 114) ; similarly, *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knyght* begins :

Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondeȝ and askez, [ȝ = 'gh' or 'y']
þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erþe :[8]

Though medial points are not used, hemistichic construction is always audible, and in the fourth line becomes explicit with the comma ; each stanza, however, ends with a rhyming tail (or *wheel*)—"Where were and wrake and wonder [/] Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne, [/] and oft boþe blysse and blunder [/] Ful skete hatz skyfted synne."[9]—and this

[7] In Heaney's translation, "So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by [/] and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. [/] We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns." : *Beowulf* (London: Faber, 1999).

[8] In Tolkien's translation, "When the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy, [/] and the fortress fell in flame to firebrands and ashes, [/] the traitor who the contrivance of treason there fashioned [/] was tried for his treachery, the most true upon earth—" : *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).

[9] "where strange things, strife and sadness, [/] at whiles in the land did fare, [/] and each other grief and gladness [/] oft fast have followed there." : ibid.

proto-metrical rhyming line (derived from Petrarchan lyric) came, via the *London School* of Chaucer and Gower, to dominate, while the long alliterative line was remembered only via Langland. *Sir Gawayne* and the other poems attributed to the anonymous *Gawain-poet* ('Patience', 'Pearl' [N75], and 'Cleanness' or 'Purity') survived in a single MS (BM Cotton Nero A.x), were unpublished until 1839 and 1864 respectively, and now tend to be labelled as the centrepiece of a short-lived late-fourteenth-century (or *Ricardian*) *alliterative revival*.

Early English Alliterative Poems (1864) was the first publication of the Early English Texts Society, based in Oxford—where Hopkins read classics at Balliol 1863–6. His interests in Anglo-Saxon (learned at Oxford) and Welsh (learned at St Beuno's in 1874) are often remarked, but the extraordinary verse that began to erupt from him with 'The Wreck of the *Deutschland*' in 1876 points in mixing alliteration and rhyme to the 'Gawain poet' :

> I did say yes
> O at lightning and lashed rod ;
> Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
> Thy terror, O Christ, O God ;
> Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night :
> The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
> Hard down with a horror of height :
> And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.
>
> (stanza 2, ll. 9–16)

Faced with conservative rejection, Hopkins concocted the elaborate theory of *sprung rhythm* to explain his verse in neoclassical feet, but what he had created was a free adaptation of the Middle-English line : there can be as many un/stressed beats as Hopkins wanted, but alliteration is *de rigueur* and hemistichic structure usually audible, within a single line ("Hard down [·] with a horror of height") or across two ("I did say yes [/] O at lightning and lashed rod"). The pattern plays out throughout his brief career : when additional beats distend lines almost beyond recognition, as in 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection' (N1171), superscript slashes appear to mark the hemistichic division :

> Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-
> built thoroughfare : heaven-roysterers, in gay gangs, | they throng ; they glitter in marches.

Conversely, the pared-down style promotes hemistiches to full lines, adding rhyme :

> Márgarét, áre you grieving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving ?
>
> (N1168, 'Spring and Fall', ll. 1–2)

> Both thought and thew now bolder
> Are told by Nature : Tower ;
>
> ('Morning, Midday, and Evening Sacrifice', ll. 9–10)

One <u>can</u> set about trying to scan such lines as Hopkins earnestly advised and notated, but it is better to forget feet, accept with Auden that in free verse "you need an infallible ear to determine where the lines should end" (Nlxxix), and stop asking if Hopkins could count, concentrating instead on how he could hear. The music of such verse, lacking neoclassical prosodic structures, is fairly subjective, and more responsive to regional accent and personal tone than is usual with metrical lines—but whatever the qualities of one's own voice, to read lines aloud with a consistent approach to where stresses fall (and where rapidity demotes or promotes their frequency) is, in a while, to hear the beat of their music.

Once Hopkins reached a wider public after 1920 his influence became (and still is) enormous. Close imitation is rare, because it tends rapidly to *pastiche*, mocking a style as *parody* mocks a work, but the short Hopkins line, stripped of alliterative ornamentation, is often heard and has amalgamated with the short (two- or three-stress) line of Gaelic poetry. That line was known to Hopkins and independently to Yeats, widely publicised in his work from the 1890s ; Heaney's antiphonal anti-heroics in *North*, looking mostly to Yeats, have enough alliteration and hyphenation to suggest Hopkins's presence also : "It blows her nipples [/] to amber beads, [/] it shakes the frail rigging [/] of her ribs. [/. . .] Under which at first [/] she was a barked sapling [/] that is dug up [/] oak-bone, brain-firkin : [/. . .] her blindfold a soiled bandage" ('Punishment', N1900). The "thin" sound Vendler remarked (p. 160) is clearly audible in the two-stress lines, but hemistichic antiphony, pared to the bone, remains the basic articulation. Hopkins's long line is less easily stripped down but has also flourished, as in Eliot : consider the opening of 'The Dry Salvages' :

> I do not know much about gods ; but I think that the river
> Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed, and intractable,
> Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier ;
> Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce ;
> Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.

> The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
> By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable,
> Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
> Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
> By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.

One isn't quite supposed to look for something as 'crude' as alliteration in high Modernists, but it is repeatedly explicit here, from the delicacies of 'strong/sullen' and 'untamed/intractable' to the overt 'conveyor of commerce', 'builder of bridges', double 'un-'s, and massed terminal 'w's. Medial cæsurae are forced in every line but one, and the play of rocking lineation around the double march of hemistiches structurally sets the tempo of Eliot's Mississippi music. The same line appears in his dramatic verse, in short-form for choruses and some monologues, and in a relatively spare long-form for dialogue : this is from Act 3 of *The Confidential Clerk* :

LUCASTA. I'm sorry to come back. It's an anti-climax.
But there seems to be nobody to answer the door.
I've just let someone in. It's the Mrs Guzzard
Whom you are expecting. She looks rather formidable.
SIR CLAUDE. It's Parkman's day off. But where's the parlourmaid?
LUCASTA. I thought I heard someone singing in the pantry.
LADY ELIZABETH. Oh, I forgot. It's Gertrude's quiet hour.
I've been giving her lessons in recollection.
But she shouldn't be singing.
LUCASTA. Well, what shall I do?

(*Complete Poems*, 504)

Such loosely stressed, lightly echoing, and far from unstructured lines ("Whom you are expecting. She looks rather formidable.") are in the mainstream of free verse, and perhaps the form most free-versifiers first grope towards. But Auden's warning about the need for an "infallible ear" was well taken, and deafer attempts at free hemistiches, in short- or long-line layouts, often provoke public scorn at 'pretentious, craftless' (late or post-)Modernist verse.

Whitman's poetics were more original, but correspondingly lack the structure Hopkins took from alliterating hemistiches. From a famously self-centred and expressive beginning in 'Song of Myself' ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself, [/] And what I assume you shall assume", N1060) to the foundation of a distinctly American poetics in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' ("Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan? [/] River and sunset and scallop-

edg'd waves of flood-tide ?", N1066) and throughout the *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman simultaneously inscribed himself and a perception of the New World free from most neoclassical constraints. Critical attempts to describe what he did are (to say the least) conflicting, but many American and some British poets have been explicit about debts to and respect for Whitman's music : Creeley, for example, introduced a selection with a moving tribute to Whitman having taught him that it "is, paradoxically, the personal which makes the common",[10] and among Whitman's great virtues is that no word or expression can be prosodically excluded. His sensuality and ambivalent sexuality dismayed or offended early readers, but are necessarily generous and inclusive, seeking sensation in experience and requiring an active concrete world as a screen for projected response. In his poetic music all modernity, however decadent, rebarbative to traditionalists, truly machine-ugly, or plain functional can find a place without displacing the ictūs of iambs and incurring an ironised frame by failing to meet inherited and long-hollowed heroic expectations.

The most interesting descriptions of Whitman's lines follow W. C. Williams in characterising them (and the poems, work, life) spatially, as *areas* within which expression occurs and is notated. Notions of sequence, left-to-right or top-to-bottom, are challenged and poems become sets of co-ordinates rather than narrative progressions : such dissolution–resolution and precipitation of personality on the page is one great thread of twentieth-century poetry, from American *Confessionalist* and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E work to European late Modernism and beyond. Implicitly rejecting the (real and supposed) embodiment of narrowness, rigidity, and hidebound sequentiality in neoclassical lines, area poetics rejects a British inheritance (though not all European ones), and resonates with other trans-Atlantic discriminations. In English, for example, to be 'sincere' (probably from Latin *sine* + *cera*, 'without wax') one must reveal homogeneous density (be gold all through), be profoundly (deeply) consistent—all vertical metaphors ; only in the US does one 'go the extra mile', horizontally, and only in American terms can Hunter Thompson's gonzo warning about Nixon, that 'deep, deep down, he's shallow', be more than paradox. As geography and politics intertwine there is a sense of areas informing a republican and democratising poetics, conscientiously welcoming all people and phenomena, but for that reason also readily bereft and anxious about

[10] *Whitman Selected by Robert Creeley* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [Poet to Poet]), 7.

technique ; like Hopkins with 'sprung rhythm', Williams tried to theorise himself neoclassically but his *variable foot* has similarly confusing and unnecessary results (feet in mouth, not metre). The whole point was freedom from artificial constraint, and only familiarity with a wide range of poets can make audible and visible the conventions of sound and typography that accreted as the linear freedom of free verse was tested in practice (though pre-set typewriter tabs and Microsoft proprietary bundles remain a useful guide to what has been done, if not what it means). Much easier to see, and more generally helpful, are the clear counter-currents to Whitman's looseness that can be identified, often the provision of a nominated 'rule' or 'aim' by way of compensation for all that freedom.

Imagists of the 1910s–1920s, for example, such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and briefly the energetic Pound, believed lines should be a clear image and poems written by stacking such lines together ; this is from H.D.'s 'Wine Bowl' (N1313) :

> I will cut round the rim of the crater,
> some simple,
> familiar thing,
> vine-leaves
> or the sea-swallow's wing ;
> I will work at each separate part
> till my mind is worn out
> and my heart :

The variable intervals and degrees of rhyme, and freedoms of line-length, work well for eye and ear—always a good sign—but however possible it is to write poetry like this, making Imagism a rule is like arguing a car is best driven, always, in one gear. Poets soon made freer with their resources, but the austere clarity of Imagist lines influenced early Stevens :[11]

> An old man sits
> In the shadow of a pine tree
> In China.
> He sees larkspur,
> Blue and white,
> At the edge of the shadow,
> Move in the wind. ('Six Significant Landscapes', I)

> The jar was gray and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee. ('Anecdote of the Jar', N1260)

[11] *Collected Poems* (1954; London: Faber, 1955).

These are from *Harmonium* (1923), and the short clear line dropped out of Stevens's later work. For W. C. Williams, however, trained and working as a physician and deeply concerned with specifics ("no ideas but in things", he said in *Paterson*), the short line was a necessity in early work like 'The Red Wheelbarrow' (N1274) and the progressively indented tercet of 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower' (N1276)—sometimes called the *triadic* or *step-down line*, but more like three short lines than one long one. Snodgrass, in his excellent *De/Compositions: 101 good poems gone wrong*, instructively relineates one of Williams's best-loved pieces, 'Poem' (N1275), beginning (original on the left) :

As the cat	As the cat climbed
climbed over	over the top
the top of	of [. . .][12]

Williams's lines—however seemingly fragmentary—are shown to be in balance with themselves and one another, making for a memorability and impact the 'decomposed' version entirely lacks. Setting himself against Eliot's dominance and insisting on 'The Poem as a Field of Action',[13] Williams was an influential figure for Zukovsky, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, and Lowell—himself the influential teacher of Sexton and Plath, who came terribly to a form of the short line in her *Ariel* poems during the year before her suicide :

White
Godiva, I unpeel——
Dead hands, dead stringencies. ('Ariel', N1842)

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me ('Lady Lazarus', N1843)

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.[14] ('Words')

Though lines can flex or lengthen at will, the persistently spare meas-

[12] *De/Compositions*, 208–9.
[13] In Gioia, Mason, and Schoerke, *American Poetics*.
[14] *Collected Poems* (London and Boston: Faber, 1981), 239, 244, 270.

ure embodies diminution and isolation ; in the disturbing 'Cut' it catches at a mental pathology that found increasingly bloodless expression in imagery as Plath's capacity to suicide ripened. In poems that endure and command readers, as these do, persistently short lines can carry an expressive burden regardless of content, but as a versifying habit, weakly derived from Hopkins or Williams, may testify only to voices too small for the world they find themselves in.

The uncertainty of Imagism, leaving what constituted a 'clear image' to the discretion of poets, limited the effect of their manifesto, and poets have variously promulgated other, stricter principles of free-verse lineation—grammatical, phrasal, stichic, antiphonal, quasi-stanzaic, and relating to breath-length or visual identity within the *mise-en-page*. All must be inferred and judged in context, any may be discarded in any particular poem : what matters is how those a poet chooses to observe are combined and the effect of reliance on them (itself usually a function of the voice the poet achieves). Though always open to parody and condemnation by the overly traditional, free lineation within an area has real capacities, splendidly exemplified by Hollander in the friendliest of pastiches :

And to be able to wander, free
(in a wide field, as it were)
verse can amble about
on a kind of nature walk
the lines following no
usual path, for
then the poem might seem
to have wandered into
another kind of meter's backyard
but
sometimes
seeming
to map out the syntax,
sometimes
seeming to do almost the
opposite,
this kind of meandering verse can
even
oddly
come upon a flower
of familiar rhythm

a sight for sore
ears, or encounter
a bit later
on,
once again a patch of
trochees growing somewhere
(like an old song)
and
take one by the
stem
and
break
it
off

(*Rhyme's Reason*, 29–30)

The fun cannot disguise the genuine pleasures of exemplifying meaning in lineation and layout, nor the expressive power such nimble technique can harness ; yet Hollander's very success is a warning, for unless conventions are self-referentially instantiated in content there may be no way of recognising them. Drawing on Frost's famous remark that he'd "as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down", one might say that in netless tennis net-cords and errors must be as apparent to spectators (readers) as players (poets with themselves) : and back one comes to Auden's "infallible ears", a scarce commodity.

Much has been made since the 1980s of the *New Formalism*, a supposed reversion to metrical and rhyming verse, but the label is overstated ; formalism never went away. Both in the US and UK (late) Modernist poetry has included and paralleled entirely formal poetry, as any general anthology confirms : cummings, Auden, Eliot, Betjeman, Moore, Lowell, Roethke, Bishop, Merrill, Larkin, Hecht, Harrison, Hill, Walcott, Heaney, Porter, and a hundred more rhyme and/or lineate for received form some if not all of the time, and while the continuation of tradition is welcome, it needs no special remark unless one has deluded beliefs about its demise. A considerable (if flexible) formalism of alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme is also present in the long lines of Dylan's verses and the sometimes even longer lines of Afro-American *rap*, Trinidadian calypso, and other (quasi-)improvisatory popular forms engaged in running social and political commentary ; the same might be said of Berryman's *Dream Songs* (N1548) and the highly varied lyrics

of the *New York* poets Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch, and Schuyler.[15] These and other poetic forms using collaged quotations or *found* text, relying on juxtaposition and casting the poet as *de facto* editor and/or versifier, may oddly approach a sort of printed (or in performance genuinely oral) formulaism, drawing from a stock of pre-assembled 'hemistiches' a running record of lived experience ; the poets who have commanded audiences and/or readerships by doing so have marked bardic qualities.

The great modern critic of the line has been Helen Vendler, notably in *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (1995). Hopkins and Heaney have several times passed in review here, but Graham remains, and (having approached Hopkins as prosodist and Heaney as grammarian) it is she upon whom Vendler brought most fully to bear her understanding :

> Lineation (like prosody and grammar) is a feature of style that often goes unnoticed. It, too, has existential meaning—and as Graham passes from short antiphonal lines to numbered long lines to square 'areas' of long-lined long sentences, her sense of the poet's task, which changes from volume to volume, is carried precisely (if not solely) by these stylistic changes.[16]

The course Vendler charts—through Graham's short-lined *Erosion* (1983), numbered long- (lined or paused, p. 86) *The End of Beauty* (1987), and long- (lined + sentenced) *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) and *Materialism* (1993)—can be conveniently followed in *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974–1994* : and the voyage has continued.[17] Graham maintained long (lines and sentences) in *The Errancy* (1997), and 'Thinking' deserves mention as a perfect, very accessible example of post-Modernist self-reflexivity combined with straightforward natural observation—a crow taking flight + Graham's awareness of herself as observing (hence transforming) and interpreting (hence transforming) crow and flight. Long sentences twist round first and second takes, third thoughts, and jumping associations, but give way when focus tightens :

> The wire he's on wobbly and his grip not firm.
> Lifting each forked clawgrip again and again.
> Every bit of wind toying with his hive of black balance.

[15] Berryman, New York: FSG, 1969/London: Faber, 1990; others, Ford, *The New York Poets*.
[16] *Breaking of Style*, 6.
[17] All Hopewell: Ecco Press, as dated ; Carcanet also publish *Unified Field*.

> Every now and then a passing car underneath causing a quick
>   rearrangement.
> The phonelines from six houses, and the powerlines from three
> grouped-up above me—some first rung of sky—him not comfortable,
> nature silted-in [. . .] (p. 40)

and the long sentences resume to reach for the bird's flight and poem's crystallisation. A similar antiphony of line-groups plays through the sequence of 'Guardian Angel' poems,[18] including the wonderful 'The Guardian Angel of the Private Life', beginning "All this was written on the next day's list." and ending, some 80 lines and not enough full-stops later :

> that nothing distract, that nothing but the possible be let
>   to filter through—
> the possible and then the finely filamented hope, the filigree,
> without the distractions of wonder—
> oh tiny golden spore just filtering in to touch the good idea,
> which taking form begins to twist,
> coursing for bottom-footing, palpating for edge-hold, limit,
> now finally about to
> rise, about to go into the other room—and yet
> not having done so, not yet—the
> intake—before the credo, before the plan—
> right at the homesickness—before this list you hold
> in your exhausted hand. Oh put it down. (p. 22)

The volume's blurb suggests it is a place where "angels are overheard muttering warnings", but the poems are immanent with the distractable and refracted human mind, and it is a very cinematic angel who can (relatively, at least) snap "Oh put it down"—the thought ? the list ? or something altogether else necessarily interrupting the poem ? Alice Fulton has proposed a taxonomy 'Of Formal, Free, and Fractal Verse',[19] using Mandelbrot's mathematical concept of *self-similarity*, a pattern structurally repeated at multiple scales : artificial examples include, say, a portrait in pixel-miniatures of the portrait in pixel-micro-miniatures . . . and so on, but the more interesting natural examples include coastlines and water-courses. Applied to Graham's constantly recursive considerations—(of the many roads that might not have been taken, or

[18] 'The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia', '[. . .] of Self-Knowledge', '[. . .] of the Private Life', '[. . .] of Not Feeling', '[. . .] of Point-of-View', and '[. . .] of the Swarm'.

[19] In Gioia, Mason, and Schoerke, *American Poetics*.

might still not be taken, and (with the road that is in every moment of the body, and so the mind (and poem) being taken) are being not taken)—one might say the fractal spirallings of these poems are in full engagement with the indispensably rich and oppressive multiplicity of the modern world to a modern mind : as Plath's shrunken lines came to betoken a dried life she could not endure.

In *Swarm* (2000), however, Graham abandoned long (lines + sentences), and the blurb's helpful gloss on the title explains why : 'To "swarm" is to leave an originating organism—a hive, a home country, a stable sense of one's body, a stable hierarchy of values—in an attempt, by coming apart, to found a new form that will hold'. This is the beginning of 'Probity', whom (or which) one may (not) take to be a person like 'Daphne', 'Eve', and the speaker of 'Eurydice on History' :

Moves us   no end

like a wall   no end

you see a thing or two

doing the   rounds

you see

as far as it goes

the "universal"

lord how narrow

and its fist open

shopkeepers   chosen wombs

I have shown up sweet lord

have put my hand out

have looked for a long while

have run a hand along

looked for a symbol at the door

a long while

devices   prejudices

have felt for the wounds

have tired eyes   (pp. 93–4)

Nineteen lines, separated from those that follow by a centred asterisk, constitute a verse-paragraph within which internally antiphonal hemistichic lines come and go with short lines that may follow or be antiphonally set. Double-spaced, they occupy more than a page and (especially in the fine Ecco Press editions Graham favours) white expanses left on wide pages by short lines and heavy leading catch at a weary endurance (other than but not unlike Beckett's) ; in the sixteen poems called 'Underneath [+ a parenthetical qualifier]'[20] the voice becomes a speech of female poverty and suffering, breeding and dying, as those however 'underneath' do in our world. As one of several selections '*from* The Reformation Notebook' puts it :

[20] In order, 'Underneath (9)', '[. . .] (Upland)', '[. . .] (Sibylline)', '[. . .] (Always)', '[. . .] (Calypso)', '[. . .] (7)', '[. . .] (1)', '[. . .] (2)', '[. . .] (3)', '[. . .] (8)', '[. . .] (Libation)', '[. . .] (Eurydice)', '[. . .] (with Chorus)', '[. . .] (11)', '[. . .] (Spezzato)', and '[. . .] (13)'.

Locations are omitted.

Uncertain readings are inserted silently.

Abbreviations silently expanded.

*

A “he” referring to God may be capitalized

or not.

*

(is crying now)   show me

*

is crying now   (what’s wrong)   (p. 3)

From lines that are almost found text, sentences ten thousand editors have written and will write (but tweaked—the second is a gem), Graham turns to simple hemistiches made resonant by lunulae and space, complex by an intervening asterisk, and troubling by *anaphora* (lines beginning identically) and repeated call and response across the cæsurae (↓↓ + ⇉) set <u>against</u> the chiasmic lunulae (X). So doing she registers mismatched hearing and audibility among callers and respondents, agents and patients, first and third world—a lineation as sacredly broken as Hopkins’s, and as politically nuanced as Heaney’s. Most recently, in *Never* (2002) the style/s of *The Errancy* have returned, with spatial austerity in relative abeyance, and where Graham will next take her lineal quest and sensibility is one of the great evolving stories of twenty-first century poetry.

Finally there is the *prose-poem*, fitting itself to the full page-measure or a designated lesser measure within which determined lines are lost to the flow of prose. Consciously ‘poetic’ prose, at least as old as Tyndale’s biblical translations, was boosted by Romantic and Aesthetic attitudes, and prose paragraphs by Wordsworth, Beddoes, de Quincey, and Wilde may be called prose-poems ; the real story begins with hyperstrict eighteenth-century French neoclassicism, promulgating elaborate rules distinguishing poetry and prose that incited the wilful paradoxicality announced in the label ‘prose-poem’. Descending to the nineteenth century baggaged with oil-and-water incompatibilities and anti-neoclassical rebellion, the prose-poem came to Baudelaire (*Le Spleen de*

Paris, 1869), Rimbaud (*Illuminations*, 1872–6), and the Symbolists Mallarmé, Gide, and Valéry as a ready-made 'objective correlative' of self-conscious alienation from received understandings, delighting in indeterminacy and the sense of truth that comes from flouting convention. In their wake it remained a respected part of French poetry, and leaped from them, and the Cubist Cendrars, to W. C. Williams, from whom an American tradition descends to Bly, Ashbery, Bernstein, and others. The multiply hybrid work of Stein (N1248) is also influential, and in her clearly shows a Baudelairean connection with those who (however successful) feel themselves irredeemably out-of-joint with the dominant world, and determine to live as their unconventional selves at any cost.

A remark by Clive Scott about Rimbaud, identifying in his prose-poetry intertwinings of "the lyric process of undergoing oneself and the more properly novelistic business of mapping out a behaviour",[21] suggests the range of applications the form can have, and its hallmark paradoxicality has been a specific attraction to an age of fierce contradiction. The lines of Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) (N1708), for example, though often described (on Ginsberg's cue) as dilations of Whitman's line, can be read as paragraphs of a prose-poem :

> I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
> dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
> angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
> who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
> who bared their brains to Heaven under the El [. . .]
> Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind,
> who chained themselves to subways [. . .]

Many more lines begin "who", itemising how "the best minds of my generation" suffered and failed. A typography of deliberative lineation

[21] Quoted in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia*, 978a.

half-remains, but right-justification is specific to prose and (as the title *Howl* suggests) emotions are too chaotic for a regular metre or stanza ; had Ginsberg tried for a closed form the power of his poem would be less. It isn't an option poets could take very often, but it is an option—though there is a warning in the wilful opposition that came to be for Ginsberg more routine pose than response to reality.

The British situation is different. Eliot (the seminal Modernist) drew on Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Valéry as much as or more than Williams, but published only one prose-poem, 'Hysteria', in *Prufrock and other Observations* (1917),[22] perhaps recognising that his (desire for) social and theological conservatism sat badly with the form's baggage. Auden, a more openly alienated figure, felt the form's attractions more substantially, and (arguably) used it four times : for parts 1–2 of *The Orators: An English Study* (1931) ; for 'Caliban to the Audience', the final section of *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's* The Tempest (1942–4) ; in the quasi-dramatic *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1944–6) ; and for *Dichtung und Wahrheit (An Unwritten Poem)* (1959).[23] In all but *Age of Anxiety* prose passages are extended, and tend to be read simply as prose juxtaposed with poetry, not prose-poems, while in *Age of Anxiety* shorter passages pass as amplified stage-directions ; Auden's recourse to prose-poetry and its resonance for his self-understanding are generally ignored, and mainstream British prose-poetry is rare.

It has, however, had two great champions in the counter-culture, Ivor Cutler and Viv Stanshall. Cutler is an illustrator and composer as well as a poet, whose bizarre, funny, and lugubrious observations, sometimes called poems, sometimes stories, have appeared in volumes like *Glasgow dreamer* and *Life in a Scotch Sitting Room, vol. 2* ; he records his work, and is best known through broadcasts on BBC Radios 1 and 3 by John Peel and Andy Kershaw. Stanshall was once famous through the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, late 1960s musical counterparts of the Monty Pythons, and was a genuine eccentric, self-damagingly himself at all costs ; post-Modernism might label him a 'performance artist', making his life his work, but his primary mode was social parody and amid various post-Bonzo projects was a stunning sequence of prose-poems in soap-operatic form, again broadcast by Peel in 1975–9, 1988, and 1991–5 (when Stanshall died). They were collected on two albums, *Sir Henry at Rawlinson End* (1978, filmed 1980), and *Sir Henry at*

[22] Two others, 'Introspection' and 'The Engine', were published in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1996).

[23] 'The Orators' in *The English Auden*, all others in *Collected Poems*.

Ndidi's Kraal (1983) ; some scripts were published. Though cited as influences by Stephen Fry and other comics of his generation, these too go largely unrecognised as prose-poetry, probably because they are so funny, rude (Sir Henry's aged servant 'Scrotum, the wrinkled retainer' being a choice example), and unashamedly populist in mocking post-imperial dufferishness and magazine-fiction clichés—but Stanshall's life and death are comparable to Baudelaire's, and for a man profoundly English yet alienated from the mainstream of his culture the comedic-satiric prose-poem was a perfect form.[24]

There is one other major example, Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971 ; N1833, 2050), 30 prose poems focused on and through the eighth-century Mercian King Offa, each of one to four paragraphs justified right with all lines after the first indented (a *hanging indent*). In the original volume (Deutsch, 1971), lacking page-numbers, poems numbered I–XXX are followed by a 'List of Hymns' providing titles (many repeated), and a four-page 'Acknowledgements' including notes that in their tricksy admixture of helpful fact and off-beam remarks recall Eliot's notorious notes to *The Waste Land*. In the Penguin *Collected Poems* and Houghton *New and Collected Poems* titles appear on the general prefatory contents-pages, and Penguin print the notes separately in a terminal collection of 'Notes and Acknowledgements' ; Houghton wholly omit the notes (though other volumes' 'acknowledgements' appear)—an omission I assume Hill authorised, as in granting permissions for *Mercian Hymns* he requires lineation and right-justification to be exactly reproduced, and would not suffer sub-editorial curtailment without protest. The lines of *Mercian Hymns* look like prose, with many words hyphenated around line-breaks, but Hill insists lineation matters, so larger structures must matter also ; yet he has in one edition stripped his poem/s of an addendum in less than poetic (but not unartistic) prose offering an interesting connection, and in two allowed conventional arrangements to suppress what was at first creative oddity. One consequence is the loss of a humour dryly open in the notes :

> IV : 'I was invested in mother-earth'. To the best of my recollection, the expression 'to invest in mother-earth' was the felicitous (and correct) definition of 'yird' given by Mr Michael Hordern in the programme *Call My Bluff* televised on BBC 2 on Thursday January 29th 1970. [. . .]

[24] *Life in a Scotch Sitting Room, vol. 2* (first recorded 1978 ; Revola, 2002 ; first pub. 1984 ; London: Mandarin, 1998) ; *Glasgow dreamer* (London: Mandarin, 1990) ; *Rawlinson End* (Charisma Records, 1978) ; *Ndidi's Kraal* (Charisma, 1983) ; *Sir Henry at Rawlinson End and other spots* (n.p.: Eel Pie, 1980 ; 🖱)

> XVIII : 'for consolation and philosophy' : the allusion is to the title of Boethius' great meditation, though it is doubtless an excess of scruple to point this out. [. . .]
>
> XXV : [. . .] 'quick forge' : see W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, V, Chorus, 23. The phrase requires acknowledgement but the source has no bearing on the poem.
>
> 'wire' : I seem not to have been strictly accurate. (pp. [43–5])

Readers wandering (through unnumbered pages) from notes to poems and back are more likely to hear the rich humour(s) of Hill's diction (as Cope did in the wonderful parody 'Duffa Rex'[25]) ; to which most seem sadly deaf. A different humour attends a spatial moment in hymn VII, when one boy loses another's toy plane through floorboards :

> Ceolred let it spin through a hole
> in the classroom floorboards, softly, into the
> rat droppings and coins.

Interword spacing is increased to maintain justification, but "rat" would easily fit into the line above and there is no hyphen to compound "rat droppings", as there could (or should) be—so the point, I imagine, is that wide interword-spaces visually represent gaps ; "rat droppings and coins" are literally below "the classroom floorboards". It's hardly hysterical, but prose-poems are playful, and Hill's general decision to use the form allows him to use unusual words in a language full of vocal and conversational humours ; one might also hear notes of disaffection with an Englishness he supposedly embraces. The critical point, however, may be precisely that prose-poetry in English lacks a history—which matters because the *Hymns* are about English history. Hill in effect found a form which for (British) readers had only internal baggage, and used it to examine a swathe of history from eighth to twentieth centuries : any form with external baggage would snag on some bits of history, tangling with subjects ; the prose-poem allowed him to attend to all periods without unintentionally privileging or complicating any ("the source has no bearing on the poem"). In using it, however, Hill has greatly increased its baggage : he hasn't returned to the form and while there have been occasional borrowings—Harsent in 'Bedtime Story' and Gravender in 'The Book of James' have imitated his style, and Harsent used his layout for 'The Curator' and 'The Old Curiosity Shop'[26]—whether more sustained uses will follow Hill's remains

[25] *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* (London: Faber, 1996), 51.

[26] Gravender, *Tabla Book of New Verse 2004* ; Harsent, *News from the Front* and *A Bird's Idea of Flight* (London: Faber, 1998).

moot ; as the future of lines and line-breaks, however defined or conceived, does not.

Exemplary Poems

1. ‘Ode on Melancholy’ (p. 68)

Keats’s lines rest securely within the heroic tradition, stanza-enjambment is avoided, and the driving syntax is that of sentences (not periods), so despite the dialectic argument ; eisthetic display of rhyme, quatrain + tercets stanza-structure ; and structural counterpoint of *semi-cola* with tercets, lines are persistently stichic rather than truly antiphonal. But within the strict observance of form a game of enjambment is played out, and can be notated using a Wingding arrow (→|) to indicate enjambed line-breaks, the normal slash (/) to indicate end-stopped line-breaks, and showing medial punctuation only :

, , , →| , , / →| , / / , →| , →| / / /   →| / / / / / / / , / , /   — / , →| ; / / , →| / →| / / /

The virtual disappearance of enjambment from the second stanza marks the catalogue of alternatives in the tercets, ll. 15–20 beginning ‘Then / Or / Or / Or / Emprison / And’, but Keats plays off it on either side, driving coiling imperatives in the first stanza and reflective assertions in the last with enjambments throughout. He carefully gives impulsion to the itemising middle stanza with an initial enjambment, and ends all stanzas with three end-stopped lines, in the first a *cde* and in the last a *dce* tercet (ll. 7–10 + 27–30) sounding the full heroic measure those stanzas otherwise avoid, and in the middle a *cde* tercet whose last two lines are broken with commas to vary the monotony with which itemising pentameters threaten the music. Read aloud, observing line-breaks and punctuation with tonal and temporal care, and you can plainly hear the metre Keats rides, sense the form within which he rides it, and feel the punctuation with which he curbs it : synthesise all three (as helpful display does) and you have the measure of his lines, the course/s taken.

2. ‘Sestina’ (pp. 69–70)

The intense demands of the (tetrametric) sestina foreclose on lineation as much as diction and syntax, and Bishop’s anapæstic drummings in its grip were considered under ‘Form’. With 39 end-words (+ 3 medial ones) prepositioned on the page, the play of enjambment becomes a primary resource, less against lines than stanzas. Mapping the full-stops