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What is Form?

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Iambic pentameter. There now, I've said it. Please form an orderly queue to flee from this chapter. What other two words in the poetry world excite such intimidation, boredom, cantankerousness and, yes, passion? (Though 'reluctantly rejecting' or 'talentless guff' may come close.) 'Iambic pentameter' gives off the musty scent of the academy, with perhaps a topnote of formaldehyde – it's Greek, for God's sake, though apparently not in the way 'ouzo meze parakalo' is Greek. And it functions as shorthand for a host of terrors: metre, stress, stanza, and above all, form. Form consists of all the structural conventions within which most poetry in English has been written inside and outside the last hundred years. It is to the aspiring practitioner of literature as theory is to its critic. It is also the undisputed hero of this essay, even if it is an abstraction.

Whether you are a new writer approaching this issue for the first time, a resolute anti-formalist, or someone in their seventh year of fruitless struggle with the trochee, you are haunted by form. If you haven't got to grips with it, says that over-familiar inner voice, then you're not serious about this whole poetry business. If your inner voice happens to be Baudelaire, he's even blunter: 'I pity the poets who are guided solely by instinct; they seem to me incomplete' (Auden 1987: 53).

If you go to writers' groups, you'll find that form bores proliferate with their coronets of sonnets or praise of the amphibrachic foot. You'll also find their opposites are just as bonkers about their anti-academic performance schtick, their aleatoric principles for generating text, or their Old Believers-type devotion to the ampersand. The temptation to shrug it off, to keep shrugging it off, seems entirely natural; to concentrate instead on the intricate, careful work of giving each poem its own combination of music and structure, according to one's own principles of rhythm and discipline. To keep verse, as the vernacular has it, free.

This essay tries to present both what form is, and the arguments for its use, in as clear a way as possible, in order to encourage you to engage with it if you haven't, and to reconsider it if you have. Because they are just that, arguments for form, it cannot claim to be impartial, and I suspect it won't entirely avoid the perils of the form bore. But I will attempt to confront the phantom, and to articulate the principles which might be behind that inner voice.

My own practice as a writer is to use form and various types of free verse (and indeed anything else that seems to work), depending on the demands of the given poem. My

conviction, after the usual years of obscure struggle, is that the two types of writing are not in implacable opposition, but rather shade into each other in ways that demand closer study. My final assessment is, first, that all poetry is more or less consciously in a form; and, secondly, that consciously formal writing is, in certain cases, simply able to do more than what we think of as free verse. It does more in terms of the numbers of levels it functions on – particularly in terms of the types of allusion it can make – and it frequently does this more succinctly. Of course the same can also be argued about free verse in particular instances, but I will try to prove that this generally occurs because of principles we only discover through the study of form; that we can only say something meaningful about how such poems work using the language of form.

Writing poetry is very much about engaging the senses, especially the ear, and perhaps the most basic thing we can say about form is that it too is firmly based in auditory perception. Just as you hear musical patterns in words as the vowels and consonants combine in assonances and consonances, so too you can hear the stresses in ordinary conversation form rhythmic patterns. Just as you can arrange the sounds into interesting shapes, so too you can arrange the beats. Indeed, just as in music, the melodiousness or otherwise of poetry is largely dependent on our manipulation of its rhythms.

And just as in music, you can have an instinct for these things, in which case metre can seem too obvious to worry about, or even just a tool of the trade, a mode of notation. Or you must work to hear rhythms, and work harder still to note them down. Neither position is 'correct', neither is permanent (poets can both lose and refine their sense of rhythm), and neither is proper justification for any argument for or against form.

So the first thing every writer has to learn to do is listen, both to themselves and to other writers. 'Listening' means reading yourself and other poets with pen in hand, trying to hear if there are specific recurrent rhythmic patterns in their verse (and whether there should be in yours), and, if so, finding a simple way of marking these down.

Books about metre will supply you not only with bewildering explanations of the straightforward phenomenon of stress, but will also provide rather too many ways of indicating it. Philip Hobsbaum, for example, rather relishes telling us there are four different levels of stress according to the Trager-Smith notation (Hobsbaum 1996: 7) – about as helpful to the rookie ear as being told there are four tones in spoken Chinese. The succession of marks suggested by Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge are so complex you may feel they are sending you subliminal messages in some kind of manga cartoon shorthand (Carper and Attridge 2003: 19–41). So let's not add to the confusion: whatever you go for, keep it simple.

What I go for is ˘ above an unstressed syllable, and ´ above a stressed syllable, and | to divide one group of these off from the next. (If it helps, you could vocalise ˘ as a light 'duh' noise, and ´ as a heavier 'dum'. | doesn't need a sound.) The word 'syllable', for instance, would be sýllăblĕ (dum duh duh). This is what most poets do who aren't nutters (and a few who are). Every word can be analysed for stressed or unstressed syllables ('stréssed' is always stressed, whereas the 'ĕr' in 'either' isn't). The stress patterns of most words are fixed by usage; others can be stressed or unstressed according to context: the 'or' in 'stressed or unstressed' isn't stressed; but it's possible to say 'OR, we could just let him go', and place a lot of emphasis on that first syllable. It's a matter of listening carefully.

What people are doing when they use words like 'iamb' and 'trochee' is straightforward: they're noticing the recurrent shapes that stresses fall into, and they're giving them names. Helpfully in Greek. 'Noticing', not 'imposing': all English is stress-based, and an iamb is a

unit for indicating this. We call these units 'feet', which at least indicates their purpose is to get us somewhere.

This act of noticing is what Wordsworth was on about when he said: 'The only strict antithesis to Prose is Metre; nor is this, in truth, a *strict* antithesis; because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose, that it would be scarcely possible to avoid them, even were it desirable' (Wordsworth 1994: 439–40). Notice how Wordsworth is quite strict about being strict, because what he's talking about isn't, strictly speaking, a stricture. It's a description.

Iambs describe what we do when we say 'cŏurgéttes': we go duh dum. Trochees depict us saying 'frýĭng' (dum duh). There are lots of other combinations (anapaests go ˘˘´ (duh duh dum), or 'ĭn á pán'; dactyls go ˘˘ (dum duh duh), or 'gárlĭckў'), but the crucial thing to spot is that they do this whether we notice them or not. If we rejigged those examples, and ran them together with a divider between each foot, they'd go

> gárlĭckў | cŏurgéttes, | frýĭng | ĭn â pán.

I know, it's not a great line, but it shows how natural patterns of stress can be gently adjusted into form. Having read it, being an obsessive, I'm strongly inclined to rearrange it as two lines with two stresses in each.

> gárlĭckў cŏurgéttes,
> frýĭng ĭn ă pán.

Now I've taken those dividers out you can see and hear the two phrases are rhythmically parallel. The line break helps to make that clear. So iambs, trochees, anapaests and dactyls are descriptors. Their only job is to help us hear rhythms clearly, and their interaction with the poetic line is the thing that sets rhythms – even workaday normal rhythms like these – into patterns. And rhythmic patterns are the rudiments of form. (By the way, that 'in' in the second line is one of those instances where usage could make the stress slightly stronger: 'frýĭng ín ă pán'. What do you think?)

The simplest way to attune the ear to metric feet is to find and create examples of them. Next time you find yourself admiring what someone has said, whether in conversation or in a newspaper, or a book, a film, or a TV programme, write it down. Analyse it for stress; see if you can find out if your admiration had to do with its rhythm. See if you can write something else in the same rhythm, and whether you like that imitative statement too. And next time you write up a shopping list, try arranging the items into groups according to their metric structure: it may not help you navigate the supermarket, but it might help prove how built into our daily lives these little rhythmic units actually are.

So far so simplistic, but the repercussions of this kind of observation are important: form is not something imposed on language, it is derived from something naturally arising within it. So by the simple act of listening attentively, we can perceive rudiments of form in any piece of writing. Equally, by overlooking the essentially stress-based patterns of English, we can fail to see how closely form is linked to speech, and thereby the central error of the formal verse/free verse schism comes into being.

When people think of metre, line and stanza as carapaces, shapes into which language must be forced, where it sits the way an invertebrate's flesh is contained in a shell, they lose connection with the rhythmic roots of speech. When they write free verse and think of themselves as cracking the old moulds in which words used to be straitjacketed, they overlook the

pattern-building facility which drives all verse from nursery rhymes to renga, from the ballad to the calligramme. In other words they assume that a metrical writer has divided structure from content, whereas their proper practice is to unite these in a unique event.

A writer who managed to express some of the functions of form succinctly was, perhaps unexpectedly, Robert Louis Stevenson. Writing in a period when conventional assumptions about verse were being challenged by French prose poems like those of Baudelaire, and America's more rhetoric-driven structures, typified by Whitman, and being familiar with the experiments in free verse of his close friend W. E. Henley, Stevenson showed himself sympathetic to both innovation and tradition:

> Verse may be rhythmical; it may be merely alliterative; it may, like the French, depend wholly on the (quasi) regular recurrence of the rhyme; or, like the Hebrew, it may consist in the strangely fanciful device of repeating the same idea. It does not matter on what principle the law is based, so it be a law. It may be pure convention; it may have no inherent beauty; all that we have a right to ask of any prosody is, that it shall lay down a pattern for the writer, and that what it lays down shall be neither too easy nor too hard. (Stevenson 1905)

This is admirably even-handed, and still applicable today if slightly incomplete, as is what he goes on to say about line:

> Hence . . . there follows the peculiar greatness of the true versifier . . . These not only knit and knot the logical texture of the style with all the dexterity and strength of prose; they not only fill up the pattern of the verse with infinite variety and sober wit; but they give us, besides, a rare and special pleasure, by the art, comparable to that of counterpoint, with which they follow at the same time, and now contrast, and now combine, the double pattern of the texture and the verse. Here the sounding line concludes; a little further on, the well-knit sentence; and yet a little further, and both will reach their solution on the same ringing syllable. The best that can be offered by the best writer of prose is to show us the development of the idea and the stylistic pattern proceed hand in hand, sometimes by an obvious and triumphant effort, sometimes with a great air of ease and nature. The writer of verse, by virtue of conquering another difficulty, delights us with a new series of triumphs. He follows three purposes where his rival followed only two; and the change is of precisely the same nature as that from melody to harmony.

What Stevenson is suggesting here is that the poetic line is fundamental to our sense of verse as something structurally distinct from prose. This helps us to build up a theory of the line, one that can function independently of our sense of it as a metric unit. I've just been arguing that a sense of the metric foot is crucial to our understanding of rhythm. In the same way, a sense of line contributes to our sense of form. But for the moment, let's put aside the issue of lines formed from metric feet.

This is because the way the poetic line interacts with the flow of the sentence (which can be regarded as continuing to observe prose norms of syntax and grammar in the vast majority of cases) is actually the same for free verse and formal verse. There are essentially two options: to interrupt the flow of the sentence, or to coincide with it.

Let's have an example of the first. Here is Jo Shapcott's Mad Cow at the exact moment when she falls over:

> . . . and then there's the general embarrassing
> collapse, but when that happens it's glorious
> because it's always when you're traveling

> most furiously in your mind. My brain's like
> the hive: constant little murmurs from its cells
> saying this is the way, this is the way to go.
> <div align="right">(Shapcott 1992: 41)</div>

Here we can see that a line break which does not coincide with a pause in the structure of the sentence, whether that is a temporary pause for breath, a comma or a full stop, breaks into that flow and imposes the different unit of the line upon it. Whether that unit is syllabic, metrical or more instinctual, it has an effect on our reception of the sentence: the momentary pause while the eye travels to the beginning of the next line causes us, however subliminally, however involuntarily, to consider the fragment contained by the line ('the general embarrassing'), and to question the sentence so far. This can send us on to that following line with our curiosity piqued, in which case it speeds things up; and it can lodge the alternative sense of that fragment in our unconscious.

Now an example from Julia Darling, called 'The Recovery Bed':

> I am riding a raft that was made by kind women
>
> who have left me here, who gave me a key,
> for I was forgetting to look out of the window, but now,
>
> I shall float home, firm as this mattress.
> You will find me quite sure, convalesced.
> <div align="right">(Darling 2004: 46)</div>

Here those line breaks which coincide with a pause, a piece of punctuation, be it a comma or a full stop, slow things down and affirm the sentence. Each time, the line silently underscores the pause and redoubles its impact. In doing this it is implying there is consonance between the progression of each sentence and that of the poem, between the form of all the sentences and the form of the whole poem. As this unspoken agreement builds, its conclusion can sound like the resolution of a harmonic progression.

Poetry which is aware of the play between the sentence and the line is filled with a sense of pace and elasticity. Poetry which is not feels either loose or hobbled: loose because there's no tension in the way syntax overflows the line; hobbled because the line-breaks meekly and continuously agree with the syntax.

You can experiment with this with your own drafts: take a poem and rearrange its lines so they always coincide with syntax; then rearrange it again, so they never do. In each case note the points at which the line break feels most effective. Then rearrange the poem a third time to accommodate the best of both options, as it were. Finally, compare this draft to your original layout: is it exactly the same? Are any of the changes improvements?

So far so free. To bring metre back into the equation, we can now say it tests our sense of line by imposing a structure which interacts not only with the sentence but with our instinctive sense about when to break the line. When a formal restraint stretches or compresses that instinct, it challenges it: it shows us when we care passionately about a line unit, and when we are indifferent. Clearly it is not going to be enough to be indifferent. When a formal restraint matches our own instinct seemingly exactly, it affirms sentence, line and structure: there is a triple underscoring of what the poem is saying.

Frequently, when we are writing formally, the demands of fitting phrase to metre and sentence to line cause us to say something we wouldn't come up with normally. Opponents

of form regard this as unnatural; proponents find it as natural as any other act of communication. Composing within form is a dialogue with form, even a debate. In passionate dialogues, in arguments, we may say things we didn't expect to – something gets blurted out. Frequently we say that we didn't mean it; secretly, we sometimes discover that we do. What is drawn from us in the dialogue with form lies close to the point of writing poetry at all.

Poetry is a means whereby we can discover what we didn't know we knew. Form is a means of generating these unknown messages. What we have to say to satisfy the form can be judged quite starkly: it is either false or a new truth. And the line is the unit within and across which these outbursts, these new truths, are tested and found sound or wanting. The line is a unit of attention for the reader, and a unit of intent for the poet. It is the place where both meaning and formal scope are discovered. It is the unit within which these two essential elements of a poem are found to be either ignorant of each other, or in opposition; in harmony with each other, or even identical, one indisputable impulse.

Let's take a retrograde step, and look at how a genuine old master handles iambic pentameter. You may protest that I should at least be citing a contemporary example, but be assured, there will prove to be method in my antediluvianism. So here is Wordsworth, describing birds in Spring with no less energy than Jo Shapcott, and with as much attention to line-endings as Julia Darling, but with the clear formal design of iambic pentameter:

> They tempt the sun to sport among their plumes;
> Tempt the smooth water, or the gleaming ice,
> To show them a fair image, – 'tis themselves,
> Their own fair forms, upon the glimmering plain,
> Painted more soft and fair as they descend,
> Almost to touch, – then up again aloft,
> Up with a sally and a flash of speed,
> As if they scorned both resting-place and rest!
>   (Wordsworth 1994: 247)

Wordsworth distends his sentence for as long as possible, allowing his phrases to pause at the line-endings, and using a strong break within the line – what's known as caesura – to catch the rapid shifts of the flock. He sets the stability of pentameter against the instability of his subject, in other words, reassuring the ear with long lines and definite end-of-line pauses, and destabilising that reassurance with more abrupt internal phrases. He gains the same effect within his lines as Shapcott does at the ends of hers, implying chaos can be contained within an underlying and finally affirmative order. So when he concludes line, verse paragraph and sentence with that triumphant exclamation mark, there is a real sense of fulfilment as well as release. His use of pentameter serves several purposes at once. Used well, form is always multi-tasking.

The purpose of form is sometimes described as pleasurable or mnemonic. Though it is both of these things, this is too narrow a definition. As Wordsworth shows us, it actually gives us another way of speaking within the poem. Stevenson talks about the interplay of the line with the sentence. To this we should add the way that form interacts with subject, approaching and shying away from mimesis. And this isn't all.

Yes, form dictates the length of that line Stevenson speaks of, setting its regularity against the irregularity of the sentences. It plays with the patterns of the speaking voice, reforming what we normally say without losing the thread of how we normally say it. But

it also engages in a dialogue with past examples of itself. It is not too large a leap to say that Wordsworth's glad birds, celebrating the end of winter with aerial acrobatics, echo and contrast with Dante's famous image of the souls of adulterers in the Inferno, constantly blown around on a scouring wind.

In this sense not only is the Paradise of the English Lakes being set against the Peninsula's conception of Inferno, the iambic pentameter itself is being compared with Dante's terza rima as its British rival and equivalent. And this crucial ability of form to speak to form, present to speak with past, is a dialogue free verse would appear to deny itself.

Everyone is aware of a slight sense of intimidation when they write a line in iambic pentameter because they are conscious of Wordsworth, Milton and Shakespeare standing over their efforts. This sensation is even more pronounced when we use the pentameter as a building block in something larger – say the sonnet – because everyone knows something of the illustrious history of that form (Auden, Keats, Shelley, WordsworthMiltonShakespeare). One response to the terror of how to create something new in an old form is parody (or pissing in the ear of Ozymandias). Abandoning such forms altogether is another response, and both have their roots in timidity as well as a desire to free yourself from the burdens of a heritage.

But form in the best sense rehabilitates parody, because it establishes it as a dynamic dialogue with the past. This is a matter of structural allusion, for instance choosing a stanza form with a specific history, and it can occur alongside verbal allusion. (Verbal allusion has a similar relationship with pastiche, and, as Eliot taught us, a similar capacity for serious purpose.) Form is about treating structure as recyclable, and finding new uses for it each time, uses that have specific resonances with past instances. Instead of ridiculing or denying the past, form acknowledges and engages in dialogue with it.

Most of us hope our work will resonate with future readers, whether five, fifty or 500 years ahead – a space we obviously can know nothing about. Form teaches us that we can relate to and resonate with the past, whether with those works that have proven their longevity, or with those we choose to resurrect, becoming their most receptive future readers. The sense of continuity this generates might even create a little momentum to carry us a short distance into that unpredictable future. Here is Douglas Dunn considering the suicide in the early nineteenth century of the Paisley poet, Robert Tannahill:

> Gone, gone down, with a song, gone down,
> My Tannahill. The tavern town
> Said one book was your last and frowned.
>   The River Cart
> Ran deep and waste where you would drown,
>   Your counterpart.
>   (Dunn 1981: 73)

Here Dunn uses a form Tannahill worked in, the Burns stanza or Standard Habbie. As its name suggests, use of this form harks back to Robert Burns, another poet from the labouring classes, and is thus, in itself, a reference to Dunn's theme of the unacknowledged autodidact bard. Into that form he pops a verbal allusion to another Scottish writer, William Soutar, 'Gang doun wi a sang, gang doun', changing his vigorous resistance to death into a lament (Soutar in Dunn 1981: 73). So this poem is engaging with its predecessors and addressing its successors, and, crucially, it uses its form as eloquently as its content.

You can experiment with this use of previous form by picking the structure of a formal poem you are fond of and writing something of your own to fit exactly into that metric

shape. Don't try and match your subject to that of the original, but don't fight it if some form of echoing or contrast creeps in. Now select a number from three to six, and another number from five to eight. You can combine these two numbers to form a stanza structure, in which the first will be the number of feet you'll be using, and the second the number of lines per stanza. Rewrite your draft so that it conforms to this new shape. Does your poem 'belong' in the original, borrowed form, or is it just as happy (or indeed just as unhappy) in the new, invented stanza? Is there something you can do to the new stanza to make it feel more at home? Shorten a line length, say, or introduce a rhyme scheme? Or is there another subject matter which would now seem more appropriate for the original?

So in a formal poem, not just imagery and music, or sentence and metre, but also verbal and structural allusion are all in dialogue with each other as well as with the subject of the poem: this is language in a heightened state of perception. And it's the dynamics of these interchanges which make it difficult for the formal poet to divide structure from content: structure is in the best instances creating or influencing content. The argument that metre forces language into a pre-arranged shape, bruising or mutilating the voice, is too aggressive an interpretation: form is certainly an act of will, but its purpose is to transcend the will. We surrender to form in order to find out what it enables us to say, and in those best instances we find it generates further meaning, even further levels of meaning.

None of this invalidates free verse in the slightest: almost any verbal structure can become a form in the terms discussed here (though from that point we might go on to raise questions of its flexibility and resonance). It is certainly the case that many experimental forms from the last two centuries were intended to replace form, to become new forms, and by now there are very few of them with which it is not possible to have that structural dialogue which I have been relating to, and would suggest is a transcendent use of, parody.

The thing to note is that the freedom or freshness associated with breaking away from established form is momentary: it belongs to the writer in the act of composition, the reader in the first apprehension of the new text. Strictly speaking, it belongs to the writer intoxicated by the moment of creation, the reader distracted from their memory of other work. Crucially, it doesn't belong to the text. Because the moment at which the piece settles into its final draft coincides with the moment at which it acquires the status of a new form, the moment at which it starts to become independent of its author. Compositional space is anterior to this, but, since it is where the pleasure of writing takes place, for the new or unpublished writer, or the inexperienced reader, it is easy to equate this space with that inhabited by finished works. In fact these are connected yet separate zones, adjoining chambers: the completed poem is still charged by the energy of creation, but it is more responsive to its ancestors, more open to its successors, than it is beholden to its creator.

> Toll a muffled peal from the bells;
> Hang flags halfway on the standards, on spires, and on steeple;
>   hang flags half mast on the ships that come from afar;
> Hang crape in the churches – on the galleries, on the pews, on the pulpits –
> The good old town is gone, irrevocably gone, dead, vanished!
>
>   (Geddes 1991: 99)

Few people reading these lines by the minor Scottish poet James Young Geddes, for example, could read them as doing anything other than alluding to the work of Whitman,

and in doing so they are clearly treating Whitman's verse as a definable form. In the hands of Allen Ginsberg, that allusion goes beyond imitation into a discovery of new uses for the long, breath-based rhetorical line that equal the reinventions of the sonnet or the ballad we see in generation after generation of British poets.

> I saw you Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber,
> poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the
> grocery boys.
>   I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the
> pork chops? What price banana? Are you my angel?
>
> (Ginsberg)

(Why not try the exercise suggested above for formal verse for a free verse poem you admire? Analyse its structure as closely as you can, then write a new poem to fit it. Then revise the poem so that it finds its own best form: will this be another free verse shape, or does it require some kind of formal framework?)

Similar tactics to Ginsberg's can be seen in Tom Leonard's relocation of William Carlos Williams to Glasgow; Barry MacSweeney finding a home, half-Geordie, half-Cambridge, for, among others, Michael McClure; or many British and American poets' rephrasing of the distinctive tropes of Frank O' Hara or John Ashbery, from Ted Berrigan to Mark Ford. Formalists who are reluctant to concede this are as hidebound as experimentalists unable to contemplate writing a single line in pentameter.

These are all cases of writers who are aware of the formal tradition they are working in, even if in some cases they have had to invent that tradition. But what many apprentice writers produce under the heading of free verse is more based in bookless assumption than any sense of continuity. And there is a structural weakness inherent in the pursuit of the apparently liberated voice.

Where there is no perception of form in terms of metrics, and so no sense of an underlying support to decisions about line, the writer frequently must rely instead on the restraints of rhetoric. The integrity of the poetic voice becomes the strongest principle holding a poem together. This places pressure on the poet to produce significant utterance. That pressure of course already and always exists, but now the intensity of that utterance is directly related to the structural competence of the poem: it must be sound, in both senses of that word. There is therefore an inherent temptation to pump up the rhetoric and with it the status of the poet producing it, to become overblown. Ironically, form, by providing a simple means of validating poetic structure, acts as a restraint against this type of potential strain: it is a protection against preciosity.

Of course there are other strategies the poet can employ before turning to formal metrics. The American poet Jane Hirshfield, for instance, places emphasis on the integrity of the syntax in her poetry. The weight of utterance in her work is comfortably held by the interaction of line break and grammar, by the clarity of punctuation:

> Brevity and longevity mean nothing to a button carved of horn.
> Nor do old dreams of passion disturb it,
> though once it wandered the ten thousand grasses
> with the musk-fragrance caught in its nostrils;
> though once it followed – it did, I tell you – that wind for miles.
>
> (Hirshfield 2005: 29)

But, muscular as this writing is, people who express some commitment to form would argue that metre provides the essential vertebrae, the skeletal structure onto which those muscles should fit, on which the flesh of subject hangs, into which the organs of its imagery may all be placed exactly. This is as fundamental to them as the music of a poem, or the way metaphors and similes can combine or contradict each other, and complement or contradict the sense of the text. In fact, Glyn Maxwell would use the same physical imagery to argue that a sense of metre is above all a bodily function: 'Poetry is an utterance of the body . . . It is the language in thrall to the corporeal, to the pump and procession of the blood, the briefly rising spirit of the lung, the nerves' fretwork, strictures of the bone' (Maxwell 2000: 257–8).

If this seems an extreme position, ask yourself this: what are we acknowledging in a free verse poem through the interplay of sentence and line, if not the ghost of metric structure? What are we engaged in, other than the unwitting imitation of form through the use of unmeasured linebreaks and unscanned stresses? Here is the real phantom of form, and these are its lineaments: pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter, dimeter, and (very rarely) monometer; iamb, trochee, dactyl, anapaest, and (occasionally) pyrrhic. Let these words haunt us in the same way as the shapes they refer to haunt our verse. If we are fully aware of them we can make structures as elaborate and strange as Gray's Pindaric odes (which contain deft combinations of many of the above). Without awareness of them, we can only make structures which look as elaborate and strange as those odes. In this particular sense, free verse can only be an imitation of formal verse.

Of course we don't have to go this far. Of course well-made intelligent poems exist which are not in thrall to metre, which do not use stanza in the dialogic form I'm suggesting above. Of course poems which do utilise such techniques can be accused of a certain obscurity if their references are not commonly understood (and so few are these days, even among poets). But there is a difference between deciding not to write in metre in a given instance, and always writing in despite of it. The first decision accords your poem its own formal space alongside other forms, it acknowledges those forms but appeals to its right to operate differently. Implicitly, it acknowledges that the author may not have read everyone, but is at least aware that they might exist. The second not only denies those other forms relevance, it denies those other writers influence, and it denies itself formal analysis of its own success or failure.

The unique poem has unique problems. While a formal piece can allude structurally to the context it comes from, the poem that refuses even to acknowledge that it has a context has to teach the reader its strategies and goals at the same time as revealing its subject. Just as much of the obscurity complained of in modern poetry stems from this as from references to examples of previous writing – which can at least be researched. But if the author of the unique poem fails to acknowledge the pressure on that poem to explicate itself as well as to pronounce, the reader is left without any field of reference for the techniques or devices it deploys.

This is particularly true of typographic innovation: should its gaps represent a notation for performance or a graphic representation or an indication of some inner space? Without reference to previous practitioners, be they Guillaume Apollinaire, e. e. cummings or Charles Olson, how shall the reader know which way to proceed? All truly innovative experimentation needs to be formally aware, otherwise it is either incoherent, or an unwitting repetition.

So how do we become aware, specifically, of metric form; of how line and stanza interact to create a device, or indeed to devise a creature, which addresses contemporary and future

readers and even poetic ancestors with one and the same voice? Well, we read, in exactly the same way as I suggested earlier that we listen, that is, we read as much for form as for content (sometimes, as in the case of Gray's odes, we read despite content). We read with pen in hand making marks all over those neat printed pages (that's what all that white space is for: for you to think in).

But reading for a writer is never far away from writing, in the same way thinking is always close to practice. Try every structural device you become aware of on for size. Accept that 90 per cent will be arid exercises (that way you might loosen up enough for more than ten per cent to succeed). Examine everything you're writing in any case and check whether any of it has a hidden structure – if two or three lines fall into anapaest, consider the rest; if two stanzas rhyme ask yourself if you've seen this pattern before. Don't just wonder if something would be better recast in tetrameter, try it out.

But above all, be patient. Success is so rarely automatic in poetry I should hardly need to say this, but metrical ability, stanzaic competence, even the decision whether or not to write in free verse, are all dependent on developed skills, not your current opinions. In the same way as a musician or dancer must repeat an action enough times for the neural pathways to be established, for the body to learn what is required of it, so too rhythmic awareness needs time to accommodate itself to verbal dexterity. What is happening is a double effect: you are becoming more and more aware of how your voice fits, say, the pentameter; and the pentameter is becoming more and more aware of you. Your voice must develop as a result of interacting with metre, in the same way as it obviously changes in response to all life experiences. What must begin as deliberate is sinking back into the instincts where it belongs.

An understanding of form is fundamental to our understanding of poetry because it brings to our awareness the particular poise of consciousness from which poetry springs. We must be as aware as possible without self-consciousness – the self is of interest only as another subject matter. We must be technically adept without the need to display mere technique – form is not a decoration, it is a function. We must be responsive to instinct and inspiration without becoming slaves to one or idolators of the other. Above all we must be as aware as possible of what our language is doing, how it combines as sound and stress as well as how it builds up sense – form is the means by which we bring one into harmony with the other, and our skill in doing so, not just our eloquence or our message or our social role, is what makes us makers. Or, to use the Greek, poets.

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