

Line Breaks and Back-Draft: Not a Defence of a Poem

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For me, the measure of a poem is the word, not the line. This is a re-lineation and slight editing (one line) of a poem published originally (1999) in John Tranter's web journal, *Jacket* :

And Everyone Gathered In Objection Yet Again
for Robert Adamson

And suddenly there was a presence,
as if it were worth something,
the pylons sticking up out of the water
like busted bones out of flesh.

A waterbird landed
but didn't make much of an impression –
a damp squib by comparison –
though a couple of fishermen

couldn't take their eyes off it.
Bloody voyeurs, somebody muttered,
and the bird, as if taking offence,
lifted and vanished

into the confident glow of the poem,
the crowd encrypting itself
into the scene's diffident colouration,
troughed and crested

like the hum of the current.

As written above, it basically subscribes to the one-unit-of-thought-per-line, "natural" if elided clusters of speech, and hypotactic clause structure. The lines, if not end-stopped, are weighted as points of sub-closure within the greater sentence structure of the poem. If the content is not conventional, the layout certainly is, with minor digressions. In terms of what's being

“said”, the poem is expectedly periphrastic – it’s a roundabout journey to get to the main point because there are many other possible points of departure in meaning and tone on the way. However, the predictable lineation limits the possibilities of this periphrasis, unless as readers we read against the line breaks – say, taking random points within an ensuing line as an end/beginning to the unit of (de-)lineation.

Within the figurative expectations of the poem, I performed this “adjustment” in response to a discussion on the poem on a metrics chat site, recently brought to my attention. When I draft a poem with line breaks that go against expected or formulaic (in poetry) speech patterns or, as the commentator on the chat site remarked, “syntactical or rhetorical boundaries”, it often begins in that staccato and stilted fashion of much lineated metrical verse. It’s a set of ideas and images measured by line breaks – I gain a sense of balance and perspective in the draft, but rarely get the poem as I’ve seen it in my mind’s eye (I literally see poems written before I “copy” them).

In a sense, I back-draft. The original drafts are often comparatively closer to the linguistically controlled specimens that a more formalist poet or reader might desire. Sometimes I let them stay that way if it suits my broader purpose. But through a process of drafting de-lineation, often in fact relying on the physical measurement of a line in a particular font (which often changes when the poem is published) by way of “weighting”, using the centre of the line not so much as caesura but as pivot, I distract or displace the expected measurements.

Of course, for me, “syntactical and rhetorical” boundaries are prisons. My poetry is a direct result of my politics and ethics, and form for me is a box to be pushed against; to be used pragmatically at times, but ultimately to be tested at every opportunity. I do not want my poems to give pleasure, I don’t want them to be comfortable, and I don’t want them to “tell”. I want my poems to suggest and to bother – to irritate, and to instigate.

Language for me is a generator, and has an organicism that leads to the myriad creation of meaning (out of context); and so is form. Form is not simply the safe house of aesthetic and artistic control that allows us to know a text is a poem; form is not necessarily the guide to interpretation and instruction many hope for. It’s how we are taught, maybe choose, to read, that matters. I don’t want to package a poem.

Even in the re-draft, the “dangling” last line might somehow partially gain this effect – a resistance to the bracketings of the previous four-line stanzas – but equally it might provide a more restrictive packaging through suggesting total closure. I see this draft as more anatomically correct than I find enticing. I don’t want my poems to leisure or pleasure, but I do want

them to allow for a polymorphously perverse interaction with both myself and the reader. They are fetishes, but hopefully with adjustable appendages. They will change with time and place.

The poem cited is not one of my personal favourites. It was written in response to Robert Adamson's great poem of collation and sublimated dialogue with voices of romantic and modernist urges in poetry, 'The Rumour'. It arose from the occasion of a boat ride on the Hawkesbury with Adamson, remembered a few years later in the context of re-reading 'The Rumour'. It's a poem about displacing displaced and re-represented voices. "Packaging" it would be inappropriate. Here's what Adamson had to say about 'The Rumour' in an interview I conducted with him in the mid-'90s – what's crucial in terms of discussing the lineation of my response is that 'The Rumour' was always a poem about process, about a broader imaginary conversation on process and inspiration:

RA: ...And then I said that to Creeley, "Ah, I understand, I understand," and he was laughing. He said, "Okay, okay that's fine to understand it. I'm glad I can help. But now what you've got to do is write your poem in Australian." I said, "What are you talking about?" I had versions of poems, and that would have been early versions of 'The Rumour', especially that one I wrote before 'The Rumour'. Because it's a bit like Hart Crane, 'The Rumour'. I started it at the beginning and the end, and then filled in the middle. So one of the first things I wrote was that section called 'Everybody Gathered in Objection'. That was an early version. I showed it to Creeley and he said, "Okay, what you've got to do now is write like Ted Berrigan, only you're Australian so..." He looked at a lot of poetry in my house and he couldn't find anything that sounded Australian. I grabbed Bruce Dawe and Bruce Beaver and he said, "Yeah, they're getting there, they're getting there as far as using the language". He said, "I hear this language, I've never known it before but I hear it in the air, I've heard it for three days and I can hear the tune you're all playing."

That's the way he put it. He actually said to me take the high art and put in the language of your everyday conversation. "You're talking to me in poems that are much better than the poems you've got down here on the page." It sounds so simple, it really does, but he taught me how to write down the rhythms of conversation and couple that with – this is just

technical but it wasn't just technical – couple that with the language of high literature or high modernism, whatever you like, and play that off against it. So what will happen then in the technical exercises, you'll find – this is Creeley saying to me – you'll find that steeped in language like that, your subject will arise out of the language. You won't have to worry about where you're taking it, it'll come out, or you know, it's just that when you find the right form you'll have the content. So you know, the thing about that was that, in a strange weird way, Berrigan came into that poem, although there's no traces of it in there.

JK: There's a rumour of it.

RA: Yeah.

JK: A fact, something we know, a scientific fact for example, can be bent, can be altered to a certain end, can be propaganda-ised if you like. A rumour inevitably will be because it can't be reconstructed as fact. How does that notion fit in with the definitive poetics that you're trying to explore?

RA: In the book it's very important, that quote from Wallace Stevens at the beginning, "In the long run the truth does not matter". Now that's really the first line of the poem. So I write, "In the long run the truth does not matter", and then go on to investigate that. Because truth will be poetry and poetry is the one thing that cannot be corrupted.

(<http://www.johnkinsella.org/interviews/adamson.html>)

In my poem, the boat is flowing against the current, the swimlines are not those of the received speech patterns of "old-timers" of the river Adamson has so vividly scored in his own poetry, and that I have heard around the river on visiting him. In some ways, I feel it's harder to write against the line when lines are so clearly announced – that is, when they compile themselves in search of a chronological and event-linear format. I believe this is the case in the above version, with maybe the exception of "as if taking offence" – and there I have deleted the key "on their behalf", going for a more conventional ambiguity through tight expression – a lie I've re-admitted to the poem, and maybe in tune with issues of honesty and

untruth in 'The Rumour', but antithetical to the drive of the poem.

On the web chat site I have referred to, my poem was cited as unredeemable "writing" (the title and first stanza – which remain the same across both versions – were not included, though a link to the *Jacket* URL containing the entire poem was), and its line breaks described as "radical" and sometimes "silly". The protest was against a supposed "modernist" urge towards creating lines of the same physical length, creating seemingly arbitrary line breaks which add nothing to meaning/sound etc. The general prosiness of contemporary poetry was deplored, and then the discussion sidetracked into contemporary poets being read solely by contemporary poets because of this. I have paraphrased this from memory, but think I have the basic gist of the arguments.

The idea that "radical line breaks" (to quote one of my critics) involve the breaking of units of common speech or expression and associative meaning might be allowed, I guess, in a kind of obvious declarative enjambment, where meaning carries over the line for a specific dramatic effect (and I'm all in favour of enjambment), or as an antidote to the repetitive staidness of the end-stopped line; in the same way that substitution of a foot in metrical verse brings relief to the reader and good opportunities for the poet to show how elastic set form really is. This is all good, but working within the shape and framework of the de-formalised poem one can, of course, go further. That's what interests me: keeping enough of the form for it to be recognised as coming out of some kind of "tradition", but radicalising enough to question the heritage and the need for variation itself. It's self-damning as much as "illuminating".

If we view the basic reason for line breaks as rhythmic, and rhythm in poetry as directly connected with mood and meaning, then it inevitably brings us to the question of what necessitates a particular rhythm in the first place. Back in the Western Australian wheatbelt, and surrounded by paddocks, I make use of my brother's full drum kit to vent some of my... er, rhythmic urges. Drumming can drive itself. You start with a basic four-four beat – common time – then maybe slip into doubles, then compound a three-four beat into a six-eight, a waltz to Spanish variations – and build from there and break away (you can frame anything, do it in any denomination you want); or you can listen to (or hear in your head) a piece of music and drum to it with the same principle. My brother drums to words – lineated and non-lineated!

Either way, the ability to keep time is the skill; the art comes in breaking free of that – to my mind at least. And I'm not only talking about jazz-like innovation – divergences that ultimately take you back to a point of reference – but rather the notes of discord or arrhythmia that genuinely

contradict the form you are working in or through. It might be that one aspect remains consistent – the accent of the drumming, for instance – a little like the length of the line becoming the measure of rhythm rather than the integrity of speech grouping or associative meaning. In other words, the line forces us to hear what we wouldn't hear by reading for literally expressed meaning (even where it's "figurative") – it forces us to listen against expectation. It doesn't have to sound pleasing at first listening, but a different way of listening and thus hearing is suggested.

On the Microsoft Help and Support site on the web, the imperialism of correct expression finds its most paranoid and authentication-hungry expression. It's where the new media self-validate through the philanthropy of assistance and explication. It struck me: what of the line faltering between email packages – a common experience for poets and editors. "Because I have problems with lineation, I have marked the end of each line with..." Anyway, here's a little MS internationalism at work:

OL2002: Posts Do Not Honor Line Breaks in Plain Text Format

View products that this article applies to.

Article ID : 287816

Last Review : June 27, 2001

Revision : 1.0

This article was previously published under Q287816

SYMPTOMS

When you create a new plain text formatted post that contains line breaks, the line breaks are removed when the Auto Remove Line Breaks feature is enabled unless there are two successive line breaks. However, the posts do not display any indication that this has occurred, other than the change in formatting. The information bar message about extra line breaks does not appear, either in the Preview pane or when you read the post. This processing appears to happen when the message is initially posted.

(<http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=kb;EN-US;q287816>)

Experiencing this lapse in day-to-day emailing might mean confusion of meaning for the reader untried in the vagaries of email, but generally we'd be able to nut our way through it. For the poem – especially one that doesn't use

capitalisation to begin a line – it offers a real problem: a probable defeat of the original intention behind the poem...? Or, even worse, a misreading that might lead to an accusation of shoddy craftsMANship. I WANT that software. I want my line breaks to falter and differ from recipient to recipient. One error in a book is just irritating, but a generative process that recreates text in an infinitely varied way is deeply appealing. It's probably as prescriptive as "syntactical and rhetorical boundaries" – the same line break "errors" for all or most recipients. The third party infiltrates the text, but it's just their word against yours. The reader is left disappointed, maybe, but the error has been built into their expectations, their adjusted sense of rhythm. The irony is, though we can with a skilled ear detect line breaks when verse is written in metrical stanzaic forms, and quite often in free verse, it's an extremely visual way of listening. There's nothing wrong with that, but rather than sight and sound interacting, it's more a demarcation of the two.

Gertrude Stein, in Stanza LXI (Part V) of *Stanzas In Meditation* (Sun & Moon, Los Angeles, 1994, p.201) wrote:

I wish once more to mention
That I like what I see.

We can hear that line break and don't really need to see the page. But knowing it's Gertrude Stein we might doubt it a little. Stein had an intense sense of the line (one non-believers called prosaic, despite its musicality), and where the expectation of a line break might be... broken. Seeing is to gain comfort. Milton's great sonnet of his blindness is a poem about seeing as much as loss of sight. Few poems embrace the blindness of the line, think outside the kind of drumming that simply keeps the beat. I've always admired Keith Richards's wise words about Charlie Watts, sublime drummer of the not-so-sublime Rolling Stones, that went along the lines of: "a lot of drummers have the rock, but Charlie has the roll..." The roll happens alongside the rhythm, and is part of it, but it's also the slippage between the lines. Something to aspire to, maybe.

So, to cut a long story short, here's the published version of the poem with its much-drafted line breaks:

And Everyone Gathered In Objection Yet Again
for Robert Adamson

And suddenly there was a presence,
as if it were worth something,
the pylons sticking up out of the water
like busted bones out of flesh.

A waterbird landed but didn't make
much of an impression – a damp squib
by comparison – though a couple
of fishermen couldn't take their

eyes off it. Bloody voyeurs
somebody muttered, and the bird,
as if taking offence on their behalf,
lifted and vanished into the confident

glow of the poem, the crowd
encrypting itself into the scene's
diffident colouration, troughed
and crested like the hum of the current.

(<http://jacketmagazine.com/06/kins.html>)

The poem itself occupies an indefensible position in terms of consistency in line breaks, but I stick by them and the means of getting to them – they were certainly more bothering to write than the first version shown above. I believe the poem gains in periphrasis, and though remaining fairly conventional in expression (it's not a paratactic poem, as such), the line breaks bring a suggestion of a dislocated clause structure. Readers are encouraged to read against expectation, to ironise their own process of reading through the poem ironising its own production. The observations have a sense of the matter-of-fact about them, even flatness (the “prosaic”?), a participation in the rumour that displaces the process of witness, telling and insight. A possibly frustrating characteristic of the poem, for anyone reading and expecting a certain kind of lineation, is that the poem is primarily lyrical, though it refuses to settle into the rises and fall of lyrical song rhythms. I would hope that the distraction and displacement of lyrical impetus makes the poem more volatile in its register, more evasive, and that as Andrew Zawacki noted in his *ABR* and *Notre Dame Review* piece, “‘And Everyone Gathered In Objection Yet Again’ plies an eerie natural and aesthetic transfiguration...” (*Australian Book Review*, November 2000, Issue 226). In this case, the upsetting of the givens is as much a result of the “radical and silly line breaks”, as it is about the words used.

What's it about? Maybe it's just about an unidentified (choice or lack?) water-bird – the lack of naming encrypting the rumour of it having been seen. So, the biggest irony for me is that “everyone gathered in objection yet again”. Maybe that's the other point of the poem. I'm sure Jo Shapcott felt the

same when, in the early years (late '90s) of the *Poetryetc* email discussion list, a well-known British avant-gardist denigrated Shapcott's astonishingly technically accomplished poetry as being inadequate because her line breaks were supposedly "without volition". Coming from a self-proclaimed innovator, this struck me as being rather imperceptive, or even hypocritical. Women poets often get the line break and form argument thrown at them – I say, thank goodness that some resist expectations of form and convention. If Joanna Russ had been a poet rather than a science fiction writer, she might have had a chapter in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (The Women's Press, London, 1983), on the male policing (or "masculine" policing), of female line breaks. The gendered reading comes from the outside as much as from inside the poem-text. Lineation can easily become a security, a status quo, that needs, on occasion, to be resisted.

My partner, poet Tracy Ryan, wrote a response to the criticism of Jo Shapcott's line breaks as part of a series of poems entitled *bloc-notes*. I leave the last words to her:

Masterclass

You're nobody without prosody. Let me show you how it's done honey. I told the bitch, I said. I love her instinctive but without prosody, without volition. The definition of lack. I broke her line like a twig for her, like a waist so slender my hero hand could. Like a neck. Snap, a match like a rhyme. Tinder and flame, just begging for it. It wasn't force but you couldn't say consent. What she needs is a good enjambment. This thing is private. Lil ol me. The lines just lay down like that. Lil ol me. I have always relied on the kindness.

For John Kinsella's Articulated Coda to this essay, see inside back cover.