

from

The Poetry Handbook
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Lineation

Christopher Ricks once offered the following rule-of-thumb distinction between poetry and prose: that whereas prose has to go to the end of the line, in poetry it's an option. Another way of putting this would be to say that poetry may use one additional form of punctuation, the line-break, a moment of spatial

organization different from every other mark and space. It is a bald way of distinguishing poetry from prose, but the distinction is less obvious than it seems: prose may be metrical, or even rhymed, while poetry may be in unrhymed free verse. Ricks's formulation holds good in cases where stricter definitions fail, even covering the *prose poem*, one which has chosen not to use lineation (or to use it in a very particular way).

It is consequently important to indicate the *lineation*, the division into lines, of any poetry you quote; and in embedded quotations, when each line of poetry is not given a new line on your page, the line-break should be represented by a slash (/) and the stanza break, effectively a blank line, by a double slash(//).

If a poet has chosen a regular metre or a stanza form there are clear constraints on how the line-break can be used (though the division of one line into two half-lines, as in the paragraph above, remains possible; it could be regarded as the use of medial line-breaks). Equally, the freedom of free verse has much to do with being able to use line-breaks at will. But in both cases there is at every line-break a question of what words will be on either side of it, and whether the line will be ended (the line-break reinforced by a mark of punctuation) or enjambed (the line-break used as punctuation in its own right). Both factors will affect the value the line-break has; for (like lunulae) its meaning in any given instance is determined as much by the context as by any absolute value. When there is enjambment across a stanza break (the frequency of which will depend largely on the particular stanza) the stakes will be higher, because the stanza break is heavier.

These lines are from Seamus Heaney's 'The Strand at Lough Beg' (see p. 64, n. 15 above), which is dedicated to, and about, Colum McCartney,

a cousin of Heaney's murdered in sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, while driving his car:

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" is a trochee creating an unstressed hyperbeat, and "Engine, voices," are both trochaic, inversions of the iambic metre: so that after "the sudden brakes" the impetus of the rising rhythm is lost until "the cold-nosed gun". But the metre does not have to do the work alone, for the line-break—"and stalling / Engine"—makes the falling rhythm cough or stutter, miming the treacherous car engine; and this in turn is reinforced by the commas after "Engine" and "voices", making it impossible for the rhythm of the line to get going—as impossible as it was for Heaney's cousin to drive safely away. What Heaney achieves here cannot be described without reference to the lineation which separates "stalling" from "Engine".

As with other forms of punctuation a good way to see how much lineation matters is to do without it. Here is the first verse paragraph of Tennyson's 'Tithonus'¹ (O2.1204/N909) set as prose:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall, the vapors 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.

The poem is in blank verse, and some of the lines are signalled by their metrical integrity. But restore the lineation and much is clearer:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.

¹ Tithonus loved and was loved by Aurora, the Goddess of Dawn. He asked for and was granted immortal life, but forgot to ask for eternal youth: now, hopelessly infirm, he wishes only to die.

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.

Each of the first four lines is self-contained, end-stopped, and a complete parallel clause. The full-stop after "swan", coinciding with the line-break, completes both the sentence and an unrhymed quatrain; and is immediately followed, in strong contrast, by the first enjambed line—but the enjambment requires only one word from line 6 before the semi-colon. One's ear has already become adjusted to the complete end-stopped lines, so the sequence "Me only cruel immortality / Consumes;" effectively mimics Tithonus's unending life, forcing readers to carry on when they expected to be able to stop, and giving a strong stress to "Consumes". End-stopping returns for two lines, and enjambment is then used again, more delicately, in lines 8–9, creating between "dream" and "The ever-silent spaces" an odd half-silence as the reading voice wants to stop but is forced to continue. The value of this second enjambed line-break is made more ghostly (or dream-like) because the syntax requires the whole of both lines, and there is no equivalent to the early pause enforced in line 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 verse paragraph audibly and syntactically.

The medial pause created by the semi-colon in line 6, and by the commas in lines 1 and 10, is called a *cæsura*, plural *cæsurae* (from Latin, *cædere*, to cut). Some people argue that all lines have a natural *cæsura* whether or not it is enforced by punctuation; but I think this true only of lines longer than a tetrameter. Up to eight beats the line can be (though need not be) a whole; but 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 to support itself. The ballad stanza (*a8b6c8b6*) probably originated as a heptametric couplet (*a14a14*), and became a single-rhymed quatrain when the last three feet of each line broke off at an 8–6 *cæsura*, and were moved down to form the *b*-rhyme trimeters. The *cæsurae* in unpunctuated lines will naturally occur roughly in the middle, but a poet can force the *cæsura* towards the beginning or end of the line with punctuation, as Tennyson did with his semi-colon after "Consumes", producing a

2-8 split. Arguably, a line like Heaney's "Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?" has two *cæsurae*, the commas creating a 2-2-6 split; but many critics use '*cæsura*' only of a single distinctive break, and would call what Heaney's commas create 'pauses' (or an equivalent word).

In any regular form *cæsurae* can be delicately manipulated. One of their principal effects, much used in blank verse, is obtained by having the *cæsura* in the same place in successive lines, so giving, for example, a sequence such as 6-4 / 6-4 / 6-4. If there is punctuation at the *cæsurae*, but the lines are enjambed, the last two feet of each line, after the *cæsura*, can be read with the first three feet of the next line, before its *cæsura*, to create a line of the right length which runs from *cæsura* to *cæsura* (6- 4/6- 4/6- etc.). Your eyes see the lines that are printed, but your ears begin to hear the *cæsura*-to-*cæsura* lines as counterpoint, the sense reading against the layout. Done well this creates a feeling of never reaching a finish, because the end of each line is the middle of a clause, and the end of each clause the middle of a line: this *rocking lineation* becomes a powerful engine driving the verse. You can hear that engine in Shakespeare's blank verse speeches, and the closed couplet that often ends speeches is a way of braking the momentum generated by rocking lineation.

A good example comes in Book I of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, of which (in its full form) there are two texts: 1805, the first complete version, and 1850, the text published after Wordsworth's death. In this passage Wordsworth is remembering how one evening, as a boy, he 'borrowed' a boat and rowed out onto Ullswater (in the English Lake District), where he became frightened by a mountain which, from this new perspective, suddenly loomed over him. This is the 1805 version; the last line of the quotation ends a verse paragraph:

415

420

Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes

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

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

There was a darkness—call it solitude

Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes

425

By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

In most good verse there is a swirling relationship between the clause, a grammatical unit, and the line, a poetic unit; and variations produced by clauses shorter or longer than a line are instrumental in preventing dullness. Wordsworth was capable of very great blank verse in this manner, and the first part of this quotation, down to "modes of being" (l. 420), is a fair example of it: read the lines aloud, punching through line-breaks that are enjambed, and pausing appropriately at punctuation within the line, and you will hear (and see) the patterning of clause against line. But after the full-stop in line 420 Wordsworth seizes that patterning by the scruff of its technical neck and begins to do something far more muscular, involving rocking lineation. A medial full-stop creates the heaviest possible *cæsura*, demanding a substantial pause by splitting line 420 7-3; but line 421, split 5-5, also has a fairly heavy *cæsura* enforced by the dash: and the counterpoint begins. The first counterpoint line has only eight beats, -3/5- ("In my thoughts / There was a darkness—"), but the *cæsurae* which isolate it are heavy, and the metrical brevity is appropriate to the meaning. Line 422 is again split 5-5 by a heavy dash, creating a second counterpoint line of full length, -5/5- ("—call it solitude / Or blank desertion—"), and grammatically independent as a dash'd-off parenthesis. Line 423 is also split 5-5, creating a third counterpoint line of full length ("—no familiar shapes / Of hourly objects, "). Because all three counterpoint lines begin and end in the middle of iambs they are not iambic but trochaic pentameters:

IN my | THOUGHTS / there | WAS a | DARKness—

CALL it | SOLi- | TUDE / or | BLANK de- | SERTion—

NO fa- | MILiar | SHAPES / of | HOURLY | OBJects,

The effect of hearing this falling rhythm emerging from the blank verse is a sort of aural interference, a technical disturbance which creates a metrical analogue for the mental disturbance the lines report. This admirable craftsmanship continues as the energy of the rocking lineation is harnessed: the *cæsura* in line 423 is weaker than its predecessors, enforced only by a comma; another comma end-stops the line; and in line 424, also end-stopped with a comma, the *cæsura* moves

back one beat to split the line 4-6. This little welter of short clauses bleeds off momentum, as an eddy detracts from the force of the current: but through it all there is a steady backward movement of the caesura, successive lines from 1. 420 splitting 7-3 / 5-5 / 5-5 / 4-6 (or, more accurately, 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 sudden length of breath required is unexpected, and one's voice wants to stop after "forms", and again after "live", and again after "men", and even then is forced on beyond "mind" to gasp out "By day" and gratefully, finally, reach a comma and draw breath. Effectively 22 beats with no pause (because the natural pauses coincide with and are negated by the enjambment), this long clause interrupts the movement of the caesura as the "huge and mighty forms" interrupt the tenor of Wordsworth's days; but the final line (427) splits 2-8, completing the retreat (1-9 is very rare) and bringing the verse paragraph to an aurally satisfying close.

You may find analysis of this kind over-detailed, but what the technical structuring achieves can be judged by comparing the 1805 with the 1850 text (O2.194/N716), with which Wordsworth had been fiddling for 45 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,²
 And through the meadows homewards went, in grave 390
 And serious mood; but after I had seen
 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 395
 Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
 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

² The *Oxford Anthology* has a dash here as well as the comma.

The punctuation is heavier: commas are added, lessening ambiguities and eliminating the difficulties of reading aloud; the rocking lineation is eliminated; the phrasing is made more conventional, allowing without protest clichés which are distorted in 1805 ("a trouble to" rather than "the trouble of", for example); and syntactically the passage is clearer. But to my mind (and ears) it is infinitely poorer as poetry: Wordsworth would have done better to leave well alone, and I personally regret the choice of the 1850 text by both the *Oxford* and *Norton* editors.

The *Imagist* poets of the 1910s and 1920s, such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, N1202) and Ezra Pound (N1186), believed that each line of a poem should contain a single clear image, and that poetry should be written by stacking together a sequence of such lines. It is certainly possible to write fine poetry like this, but to make it a rule seems to me like arguing that a car is best driven, always, in first gear. At the other extreme is the prose poem, more popular in French than English, but recently used by Geoffrey Hill in *Mercian Hymns* (1971) (N1722; see also N1xxx). When Hill grants permission to quote from *Mercian Hymns* he does so only on condition that the lineation (and the justification of the right margin) is exactly reproduced: so although the lines may look like prose, and far more words are hyphenated around line-breaks than is usual in poetry, Hill must believe that the lineation matters. The spacing of the words sometimes has to be greater than usual to maintain the justification, as in the second paragraph of hymn VII, when one boy loses another's toy plane through the floorboards:

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

"rat" could easily be fitted into the line above, and there is no hyphen to tie the compound noun "rat droppings" together, as there could (and even should) be. The point, I imagine, is that the wide word-spaces visually represent the gaps between the floorboards, and the "rat droppings and coins" below the floorboards are together on a line of their own below the line (with the holes in it) about the floorboards. This explains one moment, but not Hill's general decision to use this form. He is a great admirer of Eliot, who also wrote prose poems; the form allows Hill to use unusual words, and to generate a language full of metrical effects but not regularly metred; and it does not have, in English, much of a history—which, as the *Mercian Hymns* are partly about English history, was probably important. Hill in effect found a

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form with only internal baggage, and used it to examine a great swathe of history, from the eighth to the twentieth centuries: any form which did have the usual historical baggage would have snagged on some bits of that history; the baggage tangling with the subject; but the baggage-free prose poem allows Hill to attend to all periods without unintentionally privileging or complicating any one.

A different sort of prose poem is Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) (N1598):

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 . . .

There are many more lines beginning "who . . .", some short, some long, and all itemizing one or another way in which "the best minds of my generation" have suffered and failed. As the title *Howl* suggests, the contents and emotions of the poem are too great and chaotic to be in a regular metre or stanza; and had Ginsberg tried for a greater regularity of metre and form the power of his poem would have been lost. It's equally true, though, that if poetry as close to prose as *Howl* were common, *Howl* itself could not have been written in the same way.

Lineation is commonly taken for granted in poetry, as its absence is taken for granted in prose: but it is often a line, as line, that is memorable. This is particularly true in free verse and open form, which put a greater weight on the organization into lines; and the greatness of many distinctively modern poets (Walt Whitman [N961] is a good example) is in substantial part a mastery of lineation and the line-break.