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Free Verse

The main nineteenth- and twentieth-century departure from traditional systems of metrical regularity deserves a chapter by itself. The first problem is the very term *free verse*. If we are persuaded with T. S. Eliot that “there is no freedom in art,” the term *free verse* will strike us as a flagrant oxymoron. But if *free verse* seems an affront to logic, the term has the merit of familiarity and is thus handier than the pedantic *cadenced verse* or the awkward *non-metrical verse* or the pretentious *vers libre*. We will use *free verse*, but we will want to be aware that *free* has approximately the status it has in the expression *Free World*. That is, free, sort of.

Another problem is that the designation *free verse* seems to imply something clearly distinguishable. But free verse is a matter of degree. Just as accentual-syllabic verse with abundant trisyllabic substitutions shades into accentual verse, so, if the number of stresses per line is not uniform or predictable, accentual verse shades into free verse. In the same way, as it leaves behind—like much contemporary poetry—the sense of the line as a strong element of pattern, free verse shades into rhythmical prose. But even if the term *free verse* is not precise, it is precise enough to distinguish the essential method of post-Yeatsian verse in general. Whatever it is, a poetic medium must be more than a faddish “relaxation” of a former convention if it has served as the medium of major achievements by such undoubted modern

masters as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and D. H. Lawrence. Whatever it means, *free verse* designates the modern style, and anyone aspiring to experience the permanent masterpieces of modern poetry must achieve some understanding of its techniques.

“It is no use inventing fancy laws for free verse,” says D. H. Lawrence, and we can agree. But an empirical study of thousands of free-verse poems will lead any reader to some generalizations by way of definition. Like other distinguishable verse mediums, free verse—despite its name—follows its own more-or-less strict imperatives. Two of these are instantly obvious to ear and eye. The free-verse poem establishes a texture without metrical regularity—measurable meter is as much an anomaly in a free-verse poem as the want of it is in a metered poem. And most free-verse poems eschew rhyme as well. One reason Ogden Nash’s poems are funny, indeed, is that they offer studiously self-conscious rhymes in an un-metrical texture where we have been taught not to expect rhyme. For example, the beginning of “The Terrible People”:

People who have what they want are very fond of telling people who
haven’t what they want that they really don’t want it,
And I wish I could afford to gather all such people into a gloomy
castle on the Danube and hire half a dozen capable Draculas to
haunt it.
I don’t mind their having a lot of money, and I don’t care how they
employ it,
But I do think they damn well ought to admit they enjoy it.

Other imperatives honored by many modern free-verse practitioners are more mechanically typographical or orthographical: abandoning the tradition that each poetic line begins with a capital, for example; or forsaking punctuation; or exhibiting a just-folks idiosyncrasy in informal abbreviations like *i.e.* and *etc.*, or like Pound’s *sez, shd, wd, sd, yr, cd* for *says, should, would, said, your, and could*; or using every symbol on the typewriter, like *&* and the equals sign; or using things like “(!),” which would surely defeat the most resolute scanner of a standard metrical line.

Other traditions of free verse work to determine the conduct and often the theme of the whole poem. As Theodore Roethke

observes, the technique of enumeration or catalog has been standard in free verse since early Hebrew practice, as in *Job*, where the Lord runs through a catalog of items indicating Job's ignorance and weakness:

Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib?

...

Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich?

...

Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?

...

Does the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south?

Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high?
(39:9, 13, 19, 26-27)

In the middle of the eighteenth century Christopher Smart catalogued the attributes of his cat Geoffrey in free-verse lines recalling those of the Old Testament or of Christian liturgy:

For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.

For this he performs in ten degrees.

For first he looks upon his fore-paws to see if they are clean.

For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.

For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the fore paws extended.

For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.

For fifthly he washes himself,

and so on up to

For tenthly he goes in quest of food.

(*Jubilate Agno*)

If the catalogs of ancient epic seem to lie behind the heroic enumerations in the Ossianic prose-poems of Smart's contemporary James Macpherson and in Blake's loose-lined Prophetic Books, Whitman's enumerations intimate a sometimes astonishing equality in the things catalogued, and we get a foreshadowing of the often ironic juxtapositions of *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*:

The pure contralto signs in the organ loft,

The carpenter dresses his plank . . .

The duck-shooter walks by cautious and silent stretches,

The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar . . .

The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half-shut eyes bent sideways,

As the deck-hands make fast the steamboat the plank is thrown for the shore-going passengers. . . .

And then one of Whitman's happiest near-juxtapositions:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck, . . .

The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great secretaries.

(*Song of Myself*, 15)

As Roethke is aware, enumeration, "the favorite device of the more irregular poem," is the method of his "Elegy for Jane," which begins, he points out, " 'I remember,' then the listing":

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;

And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;

And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,

And she balanced in the delight of her thought . . .

Enumeration is the essential method of countless other modern free-verse poems, from Ginsberg's *Howl* to Irving Feldman's "The Pripet Marshes." With a series of loose un-metrical lines beginning "Maury is there," "And Frank," "And blonde Lettie," "And Marian," "And Adele," "And my red-haired sisters," Feldman catalogs the inhabitants of a Jewish village in the Ukraine just before the Germans arrive. He catalogs them and stabilizes them within the theater of his poem in order to save them. Just before the Germans wheel into town, he says, "I snatch them all back."

As these examples indicate, free-verse lines, deprived of pattern in one dimension, the metrical, tend to compensate by employing another kind of pattern, conspicuous repetition of phrases or syntactical forms. A special kind of significant repetition is almost the hallmark of a certain school of modern free verse. Consider D. H. Lawrence's "The English Are So Nice," which

in its 22 lines repeats *nice* (or *nicer* and *nicest*) 17 times, or Whitman's 13-line "Tears," which repeats *tears* 12 times. A more subtle example is Whitman's "Beginning My Studies":

Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

With that we can compare Lawrence's four-line "Self-Pity":

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough
without ever having felt sorry for itself.

Phrasal repetitions occurring at the beginnings of lines, the most common kind of repetition we find in free verse, create an effect called, formally, *anaphora*:

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight, . . .

Because in free verse the length of the line is determined by feel rather than established pattern, a crucial problem for the poet is knowing when to break lines. "I think very few people can manage free verse," says Auden. "You need an infallible ear, like D. H. Lawrence, to determine where the lines should end." And two possibilities in the treatment of line-endings suggest two ultimate kinds of free verse. One kind, which John Hollander designates the oracular, exhibits unvarying line integrity, often with anaphora, as in Ginsberg's *Howl* or much of the more formal Whitman:

Welcome are all earth's lands, each for its kind,
Welcome are lands of pine and oak,
Welcome are lands of the lemon and fig,
Welcome are lands of gold . . .
(*Song of the Broad-Axe*)

The effect is that of public speaking. But if constant enjambement takes place—that is, if the sense and syntax of one line run on into the next so that a hearer would have trouble ascertaining the line breaks—we have a very different kind of free verse, a kind we can designate as meditative and ruminative or private. It is this kind of vigorously enjambed free verse which has become a common style in the last twenty years or so as a vehicle for themes that are sly or shy, or uncertain, or quietly ironic, or furtive. W. C. Williams, Frank O'Hara, Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, William Merwin are adepts at this style. To Whitman's line-by-line public proclamations above we can contrast Williams's run-on domestic confessional "note":

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

One thing notable here is the way the title itself "runs on" into the opening: the illusion is that the poem is so magically organic that not even a part traditionally considered separable can distance itself. This device seems by now almost obligatory in a certain kind of enjambed free verse which aims at wit. For example, Marianne Moore:

THE MONKEYS

winked too much and were afraid of snakes . . .

Robert Kelly:

THE BOAT

floated in the cove . . .

Marvin Bell:

HERE

on Venus, time passes slowly . . .

Tess Gallagher:

THE HORSE IN THE DRUGSTORE

wants to be admired.

Clearly, "free verse" can manage every tone from the pompously ceremonial to the apologetically informal. But this is not to imply that as a technique whose flowering is associated with American intellectual and emotional configurations in the mid-nineteenth century, free verse does not itself seem to generate certain specific themes, which such devices as unpredictable line-length and unadvertised rhythms seem to trigger. From the beginnings of its development by Whitman, the subtle rhythmic patterns discernible in sequences of free-verse lines have been likened to sea-waves, it being widely assumed in Whitman's time that the "natural" rather than the artificial and conventional is what governs the imperatives of art. To Whitman, the sea itself is a great free-verse poem, whose "lines" are "the liquid, billowy waves, ever rising and falling, perhaps wild with storm, always moving, always alike in their nature as rolling waves, but hardly any two exactly alike in size or measure." In theme as well as theory, free verse has shown an affinity with the sea, inviting us to trace a thematic tradition from Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" all the way to A. R. Ammons's "Corson's Inlet," with stops along the way at Lawrence's "The Sea," Robinson Jeffers's "Night" and "November Surf," and Marianne Moore's "A Grave." When we consider literary history it seems no accident that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century discovery of the sea as a useful emblem of infinity or freedom or wonder

and the seashore as a venue of illumination is virtually coincident with the rise to popularity of free verse.

Ammons's "Corson's Inlet" (1965) is an instructive example of this apparently natural alliance between technique and theme. This quiet, meditative poem consists of 128 enjambed lines, varying in length from one to fifteen syllables. The rhythm sounds like that of well-written prose. But the repetitions we expect in free verse are here, and they involve words implying the relation of verse-form to theme in this poem, words like *walk*, *order*, *lines*, *forms*, and *shape*. The action of the poem is a desultory stroll along the New Jersey shore, and the point is that to trace the natural shoreline with its rounded, unplanned contours is to understand at once both a valuable intellectual and emotional range of possibilities and a verse-form which can render them suggestively. As the speaker says,

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
 straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends of sight:

I allow myself eddies of meaning:

Because, as the speaker finds,

in nature there are few sharp lines,

in thought and poems there should be few either:

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
 from outside: I have
 drawn no lines: . . .

Just as his thought is instructed by the informal curvings the sea has made in the inlet, so the speaker's lines wax and wane, extend and contract, running on freely. They reject the "limited tightness" of a preordained metrical scheme, and we feel that for bodying forth this theme, at least, Ammons's loose texture is nicely appropriate.

In a similar way, the free-verse technique of Whitman's *Song of Myself* seems virtually to determine that the theme of the poem will be "freedom" and flux as distinguished from the enclosing "houses and rooms" of traditional metrical lines and poetic forms. Related themes that likewise seem prompted by free-verse technique are the delights of wandering (Whitman's *Song of the Open Road*) and the unexpected value of the lowly (*Song of Myself*, Section 5; W. C. Williams, *Spring and All*), revealed by informal but precise scrutiny of common particulars. Again, the way free verse "moves" apparently without predictable constraints seems to establish it as a natural style for vignettes of imagistic kinesis like Whitman's "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" or Cummings's "All in green went my love riding." Robert Bly's free-verse horses, as well as his free-verse automobile drives, are in the tradition.

Because successful free verse generally avoids the illusion of stresses arranged in some form of patterned repetition, it probably cannot be scanned, but it can certainly be analyzed and appraised, and its rhythmic movements, even if subtle, can be judged as reinforcements or impediments of the progress of idea and feeling. Many free-verse poems operate traditionally to this degree: that they establish a non- or anti-metrical verbal continuum as a grid against which occasional metrical moments are perceived as especially forceful. An example is Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," which devotes seven lines to establishing a loose "sincere" quasi-prosaic grid as a field against which the remarkably regular final line of iambic pentameter emerges with special emphasis reinforcing the irony:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
 measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
 applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time

—and then the shock of regular iambic pentameter registering a different and more valid way of perceiving:

Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

This poem might be taken to illustrate Roethke's view that "free verse is a denial in terms." As he says, the reason is that "there is, invariably, the ghost of some other form, often blank verse, behind what is written." One way of analyzing Whitman's poem as a rhythmical phenomenon is to suggest that the final line discloses the ghost meter which the poem has been concealing all along.

It goes without saying that when a free-verse poem does surprise us by introducing a moment of recognizable traditional rhythm, such a rhythm should be related to meaning. As it almost always is in masters like Whitman and Pound. Consider Whitman's frequent presentation of an amphibrachic foot (~/~) at the ends of his long free-verse lines, where he seems at pains to remind the reader rhythmically of the sound of the classical heroic hexameter, the traditional medium of old-style "epic." Here in *Song of Myself*, Whitman's proposal for a new kind of lyric-epic, he contrives that the loose rhythms of each line shall clarify to a terminal amphibrach, and we are to gather that Whitman, if not a new Homer, is at least a better Longfellow:

The day getting ready for me when I shall do as much good as the best,
 and be as/prōdīgiōus;/
 By my life-lumps! becoming already a/crēātōr,/
 Putting myself here and now to the ambush'd womb of/thē shádōws./

Pound behaves similarly in his version of lyric-epic, the *Cantos*. It is to his advantage too to remind us of the atmosphere of traditional epic, especially the *Odyssey*, and although his prevailing medium is largely free verse, he deviates from it into frequent terminal amphibrachs:

In the gloom, the gold gathers the light/āgainst it./

And here the Odyssean note:

The boat's sails hung loose at/thě moóring,/

Cloud like a sail/ínvértěd./

But usually the free-verse poet's ambition is less to exhibit meter than to keep it from showing. He has numerous other methods for reinforcing sense, methods resembling those by which a writer in traditional meter "syncopates" by executing significant variations on established patterns. One way the free-verse practitioner can exploit the device of varying from a norm is to offer a long line against a preceding grid of short ones, or a short line after we've got accustomed to long ones. The latter is what, sixty-nine years old and paralyzed, Whitman does in his little autobiographical poem "The Dismantled Ship." Here the first four lines establish a medium which expands with each line. The syllables grow from 10 in the first line to 12 in the second, then to 14, and then to 20. But the anticlimactic final line contracts to six syllables, and its two stresses follow a line of ten: we get the point about the contraction of possibility and realize why the ship has been depicted as *gray* and *disabled*:

In some unused lagoon, some nameless bay,
On sluggish, lonesome waters, anchor'd near the shore,
An old, dismasted, gray and batter'd ship, disabled, done,
After free voyages to all the seas of earth, haul'd up at last and
 hawser'd tight,
Lies rusting, mouldering.

Just as the diaphragm of a camera lens opens up to admit more light or closes down to exclude it, so the openings and closings of many free-verse poems gradually expand or contract line-lengths to admit us to the vision or to dismiss us. Whitman is fond of opening poems by systematically expanding lines this way: the first three lines of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" contain 11, 18, and then 22 syllables:

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to
 face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious
 you are to me!

In "On the Beach at Night" Whitman opens the diaphragm to let the scene in with lines of first 5, then 7, and finally 8 syllables:

On the beach at night,
Stands a child with her father,
Watching the east, the autumn sky.

In the same way, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" gradually reveals the scene in the lecture-room by offering first a line of 9 syllables, then one of 14, then a third expanding to 18.

This device of expanding lines to register expanding sense Whitman exploits within poems as well, as in *Song of Myself*, Section 20, where the expansion of the understanding through the perception of accumulated figures reflects itself in the expansion of the lines from 6, to 18, to 19 syllables:

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick at
 night.

And Whitman can close down as effectively by shortening lines as if stopping down the diaphragm. Thus the end of *Song of Myself*:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, (11)
Missing me one place search another, (9)
I stop somewhere waiting for you. (8)

It is a strategy belonging less to Whitman, perhaps, than to free verse in general, as Roethke indicates when, discussing his "Elegy for Jane," he points to the way "the last three lines in the [first] stanza lengthen out":

The shade sang with her;
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.

"A kind of continuing triad," says Roethke. "In the last two stanzas exactly the opposite occurs, the final lines being,

Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover."

From these examples we can infer that a free-verse poem without dynamics—without, that is, perceptible interesting movement from one given to another or without significant variations from some norm established by the texture of the poem—will risk the same sort of dullness as the metered poem which never varies from regularity. When it solicits our attention as poetry, a group of words arranged at apparent haphazard is as boring as *tum-ti-tum*.

A lot of people take the term *free verse* literally, with the result that there is more bad free verse written today than one can easily shake a stick at. Most of it hopes to recommend itself by deploying vaguely surrealistic images in unmetered colloquial idiom to urge acceptable opinions: that sex is a fine thing, that accurate perception is better than dull, that youth is probably a nicer condition than age, that there is more to things than their appearances; as well as that Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were war criminals, that the C.I.A. is a menace, that corporations are corrupt, that contemporary history seems "entropic," and that women get a dirty deal. All very true and welcome. Yet what is lamentably missing is the art that makes poems re-readable once we have fathomed what they "say."

Indeed, free verse without subtle dynamics has become the received, standard contemporary style, as John Hollander notices: "At the present time in the United States, there is a widespread, received free-verse style marked by a narrow (25-30 em) format, strong use of line-ending as a syntactical marker, etc., which plays about the same role in the ascent to paradise as the received Longfellow style did a century ago." Or, we can add, as the received mechanical heroic-couplet style two centuries ago. But the principle of excellence in each of these styles is the same, and it can be perceived and enjoyed by anyone who will take a little time. The principle is that every technical gesture in a poem must justify itself in meaning. Which is to say that the free-verse

writer can proclaim, with Ammons, that he is "released from forms," but he'd better not be. In free verse the abandonment of capital letters and punctuation must say something consonant with what the predications in the poem are saying. The sudden shortening of a line must say something. The degree of line-integrity or enjambment must refract the rhetorical status of the poem's address. And any momentary deviation into meter must validate itself, must appear not a lapse but a significant bold stroke. For the reader to attend to things like these may be harder than for him to respond to, say, a skillfully reversed foot in a metered line. But he must learn to attend to them if he is to take a pleasure less doctrinal than artistic in the poetry of his own time.