

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

POETRY UNBOUND?
OBSERVATIONS ON FREE VERSE¹

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I

THE Warton Lectures were founded in 1910 by Mrs Frida Mond in honour of Thomas Warton the younger, the two hundredth anniversary of whose death is just around the corner. In her account of Warton's importance there is a hint of a paradox that runs right through the history of western literary commentary, and which I shall once more fail to resolve in today's lecture. Warton's work, she says, 'not only led the way to the scientific study of English literature, but also stimulated creative genius, and played no small part in the Romantic Revival'. The antithetical structure of that comment—'not only . . . but also'—suggests that Mrs Mond was aware of a contradiction between, on the one hand, scientific study and, on the other, creative genius and Romanticism. Although it is in the latter role that we are accustomed to seeing Warton, Mrs Mond's primary rhetorical emphasis is on the former. Even allowing for changes in the connotations of the phrase 'scientific study' since 1910, it's an emphasis which would make most literary critics today somewhat uneasy.

Nevertheless, there are certain areas of literary study in which the scientific impetus has been a highly productive one, in ways that Mrs Mond could not have foreseen. For instance, the growth in this century of linguistics as an explanatory science (rather than a historical discipline) has provided a mass of information about the languages we speak and write, as well as

¹ Since this lecture is concerned with the relationship between reading and hearing, those who read it will have a different experience from those who heard it. I have not adapted it for the page, as the nature of that difference will be perfectly evident.

offering a series of models upon which to base the analysis of texts. It has also precipitated a crisis in analytical criticism by bringing sharply into the foreground the paradox I have already alluded to: virtually all our critical discussions of literary works are based upon the double and contradictory assumption—an assumption we inherit from the tradition of western thought about art—that the power, beauty, pleasurable or insightful quality of the literary work can be, in principle, explained *and* at the same time that these qualities, at their finest (that is, at the point at which they matter most), are in principle inexplicable. We devote enormous energy to the project of *accounting for* the unique quality of this or that text; yet the quality that *makes* it unique is always—by definition—beyond our reach.² We strive to find terms in which to characterize the elusive quality of literary greatness; yet if the *je ne sais quoi* of the great works were knowable, it is assumed, literature really would be open to the pitiless scrutiny of science, and our computers could do our writing—and our reading—for us. It's not my purpose today to speculate further on this paradox and the socio-cultural tradition that produces it; I am raising it simply as a warning that all my analytical and theoretical comments in what follows are subject to its ineluctable logic.³

II

One literary topic in which the developments in the neighbouring discipline of linguistics have had enormous impact is poetic form. The study of metre, in particular, has been transformed by the growth of a more detailed knowledge of the way languages are conditioned by rhythm—which is not simply a matter of the way they move through time, and can be measured in the act of doing so, as an earlier school of phoneticians believed, but involves an awareness of the perceptual nature of rhythm and its constant interaction with the syntactic and lexical properties of language. After the first flush of enthusiasm, when Chomskian phonologists told us that regular metre in English could be

² We are as likely to meet this paradox in the study of free verse as elsewhere; Paul Ramsey, for instance, while attempting a comprehensive description of free verse that rightly resists treating it as a monolithic entity, insists that 'something is indescribable in any rhythm we hear': 'Free Verse: Some Steps Toward Definition', *Studies in Philology*, lxxv (1968), 103.

³ I have discussed this paradox further in *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (London and Ithaca, New York: Methuen and Cornell University Press, 1988).

reduced to a few simple rules (and some literary critics believed them), we are now realizing that there is no single linguistic key to metrical structure, and are building up a fuller sense of the complexity of the formal achievements of English poets based on an understanding of the complexity of the rhythms which exist in every utterance we make.

Very few have doubted that traditional metres in English are a matter of rules, even if those rules are resistant to straightforward formulation. For this reason, prosody has always constituted a semi-scientific domain within the body of literary criticism; but for the same reason, poetic forms that do not appear to result from the application of rules to language have tended to receive short shrift. Free verse in English has usually been treated either as a deviation from the norms of metrical poetry, a kind of wilful transgression of the rules which nevertheless still takes its bearings from those rules, or as a domain in which the traditional rigorous methods of analysis do not apply, and have to be replaced by a more impressionistic and idiosyncratic approach.⁴ The striking difference between the number of essays on metrical and on free verse listed in Brogan's mammoth bibliography⁵—1440 as against 153—is not entirely to be accounted for by historical periodization: the majority of these books and essays were written when free verse was already an established form. It became established more through the efforts of poets than of critics, however. When Graham Hough delivered the 1957 Warton Lecture on the subject 'Free Verse', he was careful to play down the importance of his chosen topic: 'It would seem that we have in free verse materials for a yet unwritten chapter of English poetical history. Only a chapter, and probably not a very long one; for we find comparatively little written in free verse before this century, and we find little now.'⁶ Thirty years

⁴ A notable exception is the treatment of free verse in John Hollander's *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2nd edn, 1985). See especially ch. 5, "'Sense Variouslly Drawn Out': On English Enjambment"; ch. 11, 'Observations on the Experimental'; and ch. 12, 'The Poem in the Eye'. See also Hollander's exemplification of various kinds of free verse in *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 26–30.

⁵ T. V. F. Brogan, *English Versification 1570–1980: A Reference Guide with a Global Appendix* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). These figures refer only to the section on 'Metre'; the disparity would no doubt be even higher if the count were extended further.

⁶ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xliii (1957), 157–77; the essay is reprinted in Hough's *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (London: Duckworth, 1960).

later, it seems safe to say that free verse will appear in future literary histories as the most characteristic poetic form of the twentieth century.

The task of redressing this critical imbalance is a daunting one, and all I shall venture today are some suggestions that point towards a possible reconceptualization of the notion of free verse, in the hope that this will remove one or two of the barriers that presently stand in the way of a full understanding of what it is that poets (and readers) are doing around us every day. An example of such a barrier is the conceptual opposition between 'free verse' and 'regular' or 'metrical' verse, with its implied historical opposition between the 'modern' and the 'traditional'. Although this dichotomy has an obvious validity, there is something to be said for considering other ways in which the rhythmic variety of poetry in English might be categorized. This may mean treating with some scepticism the claims made by poets about their own formal revolutions, but it will, I believe, allow us to see their achievements as more continuous with the rich history of English poetic practice.⁷

A minimal definition of verse might be that it is a form of language which heightens the reader's awareness of its own working—its movement, its sounds, its capacity to represent sensations and feelings. And it would be widely agreed that the minimal device whereby verse achieves this heightened awareness is the division of the continuous flow of language into segments, even though no sharp distinction can be made between verse and prose on this basis alone.⁸ (A more familiar term than 'segments' is 'lines', but for reasons that will become evident I am avoiding it here.) What I wish to concentrate on today is the method by which a text's division into segments, which constitutes it as verse, is signalled. Segmentation is, in fact, nothing other than a signal to the eye or to the ear that a division of some sort occurs at a point not *necessarily* determined by anything within the conventions of the language itself.

⁷ See Hollander's brilliant chapter on metrical experimentation, and the theoretical claims that have gone with it, in *Vision and Resonance* (ch. 11).

⁸ This point is made by Marjorie Perloff in 'The Linear Fallacy', *The Georgia Review*, iii (1981), 855-69, and 'Between Verse and Prose: Beckett and the New Poetry', *Critical Inquiry*, ix (1982), 415-33, reprinted as ch. 6 of *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). A study which takes an opposing position is Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

There are two ways in which this signal can be given. The first involves a sense of structural units arising directly from the fact that the properties of the spoken language have been organized in a particular manner. Here is an example:

There was a young poet of Kew,
Who failed to emerge into view;
So he said: 'I'll dispense
With rhyme, metre, and sense.'
And he did, and he's now in *Who's Who*.⁹

You had no difficulty in perceiving that stretch of language as a structure of separate units, and could easily write it out as five lines. Unmistakeable signals—for anyone conversant with the English popular verse tradition—were given by the closely controlled interrelation between a metrical pattern of alternating beats and double offbeats on the one hand and a system of rhymes and syntactically or informationally determined breaks on the other; the result was the familiar limerick structure. (Of course that structure was announced in the conventional opening, 'There was a young . . .', so that your ears were already attuned to hear it.) The verse form requires no *additional* signal beyond its own verbal components to make its segments perceptible; you had no visual layout to guide you, and I did not employ any trick of the voice to indicate when I had reached the end of a segment. In a sense, the issue of individual segments disappears, since the limerick structure is so familiar, and so firmly grounded in more general rhythmic principles involving the hierarchical doubling of beat-offbeat units, that it is perceived as a structural whole: it would make little difference if, by convention, limericks were printed as four instead of five lines, with an internal rhyme in the third line. In the regular forms of rhymed English verse the relation between metre, segmentation, rhyme, and end-stopping is predominantly one of mutual reinforcement: and once rhyme and end-stopping divide an alternating metre into units of a length that conforms to one of the standard patterns, that familiar pattern takes on a power of its own to structure the material to come and to emphasize further the segmental divisions.

Now here is another example:

⁹ E. O. Parrott (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Limericks* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 116.

The rose fades
and is renewed again
by its seed, naturally
but where

save in the poem
shall it go
to suffer no diminution
of its splendor¹⁰

If that poem by William Carlos Williams, which is entitled 'Poem', is unfamiliar to you, you would have had to rely on my slight vocal signals to guess at its division into segments and larger units. Unlike the limerick, there is nothing in its metrical structure, its sound repetitions, its informational groups, or its syntactic units to indicate how it is divided up. Here it is again, read without those vocal signals:

The rose fades and is renewed again by its seed, naturally, but where save in the poem shall it go to suffer no diminution of its splendor.

What the signals in my first reading informed you, more or less successfully, was that this sentence is divided into eight lines (we can now use the familiar term, since we are dealing with what is primarily a visual property of the poem). There is also a stronger division after four lines. Read on the page, of course, (and I have that advantage over you) the poem poses no problems of segmentation: it appears as two four-line paragraphs, each line consisting of two to four words. It thereby evokes a long tradition in English lyric verse which uses four-line stanzas (an allusion which operates rather like the imitation of wooden structures carved in stone in Greek temples). The line- and 'stanza'-divisions are presented unambiguously to the eye, and their resistance to the onward drive of the sentence is felt irrespective of the degree of aural realization they are given in the reading. Unlike the limerick, however, this poem would lose its structure entirely if it were printed without any graphic indication of lines and paragraphs.

These two examples mark extremes between which we could place any poem in English. However, the spectrum of verse-types

¹⁰ Quoted from *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems: Collected Poems 1950-1962* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

that would result would not be one that divides easily between regular verse and free verse. The axis which runs between what we might call *internally-segmented* and *externally-segmented* verse (which is not strictly a division, since much verse has elements of both) is quite distinct from that which runs from metrical to nonmetrical verse. To illustrate this point, let me present two more examples.

Here is a section of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, read without any external indications of lines:

Or do my eyes misrepresent? Can this be hee, that Heroic, that Renownd, irresistible *Samson*? whom unarmd no strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand; who tore the Lion, as the Lion tears the Kid, ran on embatteld Armies clad in Iron, and weaponless himself, made Arms ridiculous, useless the forgery of brazen shield and spear, the hammerd Cuirass, *Chalybean* temperd steel, and frock of mail Adamantean Proof. (lines 124-34)

Like the limerick, this is metrical verse, but I doubt if anyone was able to detect the division into lines from that reading. The blind Milton doubtless saw the patterns of lines on his mind's page, and perhaps envisaged a formal delivery that would signal the changing lengths by oral means, thereby mimicking the sung choral odes of Greek drama. This is how one might read the passage with such a hypothesis in mind:

Or do my eyes misrepresent? Can this be hee,
That Heroic, that Renownd,
Irresistible *Samson*? whom unarmd
No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand;
Who tore the Lion, as the Lion tears the Kid,
Ran on embatteld Armies clad in Iron,
And weaponless himself,
Made Arms ridiculous, useless the forgery
Of brazen shield and spear, the hammerd Cuirass,
Chalybean temperd steel, and frock of mail
Adamantean Proof.

The reason why it is impossible to detect the line-divisions if they are not signalled visually or orally is that choral passages like this in *Samson Agonistes* not only employ unrhymed run-on lines with many metrical variations (including the freedom to drop the initial iambic syllable), but lines with differing, and unpredict-

table, numbers of beats.¹¹ Milton has chosen a verse form that depends absolutely on the eye for a full apprehension of its segmentation. On the scale of internal to external segmentation it is very close to the example by Williams; and the experience of reading it on the page, allowing the visual image to structure the text, impede the onward drive of sense and syntax, and draw attention to the materiality of the language, is similar to that of reading much modern free verse.

Let us turn now to another example, a poem by Sylvia Plath entitled 'Crossing the Water'. I shall read it without any special signalling of segmental divisions, and the question I wish to ask is whether, in such a reading, the language itself seems to imply divisions:

Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.
Where do the black trees go that drink here?
Their shadows must cover Canada.

A little light is filtering from the water flowers.
Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:
They are round and flat and full of dark advice.

Cold worlds shake from the oar.
The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.
A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;

Stars open among the lilies.
Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
This is the silence of astounded souls.¹²

You probably heard that as twelve separate segments, each with a certain degree of syntactic and informational completeness; and you may have sensed each group of three segments as having some internal cohesion, especially the first two groups. And this is how Plath presents the poem on the page: as twelve lines divided into paragraphs of three lines each. What this means is that, like the limerick, this poem's structure is implicit in the language out of which it is made, and unlike either the Williams poem or the passage from *Samson Agonistes*, no special signalling is necessary to

¹¹ See Edward Weismiller's illuminating discussion in 'The "Dry" and "Rugged" Verse, in Joseph H. Summer (ed), *The Lyric and Dramatic Milton* (Selected Papers from the English Institute, New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 115-52.

¹² Quoted from T. Hughes (ed.), *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1981).

create a sense of its constituent units. It works primarily as an *aural* entity, an accretion of segments each with its own cohesion, and each continuing and complicating what has gone before. In this example, the lack of any counterpoint between segmentation and syntax has the effect of leeching out some of the potential emotional force and tension; the blackness, coldness, expressionlessness, silence of the scene is reinforced by the formal structure. Imagine, for instance, how much more dramatic would be a visual break in the third line:

Their shadows must cover
Canada.

At present our ability to talk about effects of segmentation is limited by our imperfect understanding of the way language is perceived as a series of units. Up to now, it has generally been assumed that this is simply a matter of syntax, and that run-on effects, for instance, can be discussed as a relationship between the line-break and the syntactic structure it cuts through. But some extremely interesting work currently in progress, little of which has yet been published, is demonstrating that there is more to it than this. Drawing partly on recent music theory, Richard Cureton, of the University of Michigan, is examining the ways in which we tend to organize the language we read or hear into *hierarchical* structures, with distinctive patterns of rise and fall, departure and arrival, at the various levels of the hierarchy.¹³ At every level, from syllables and words, through phrases of various kinds, to sentences and blocks of sentences, we habitually perceive English utterances as sequences of *groups* (not necessarily coinciding with syntactic units), each of which has a peak and may have a rise before it, a fall after it, or both. Groups at one level cohere into larger groups at the next level, obeying perceptual rules that also operate well beyond the domain of language. In metrical verse, these groups operate with, and are to some extent influenced by, the patterns of beat and offbeat that constitute the metre, but in free verse they function more independently to create the rhythmic character of the poem as they interact with its segmental divisions.

One way of explaining the curious immobility of Plath's poem,

¹³ For an example of Cureton's approach see his long review of Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* in the *William Carlos Williams Review*, xii.2 (1986), 34-52. His book, *Beyond Metrics: Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*, is forthcoming from Longman.

for example, would be to show how unusual it is in its lack of a clear grouping structure and of the onward drive that goes with the identification of strong peaks of energy. Consider this line, for instance:

The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.

This sentence is obviously a single group with two constituents, but which is the strong one? Does the line fall from a statement about 'us' to a statement about the 'fishes', or does it rise? At the next level down, the first group divides again into two constituents, 'The spirit of blackness' and 'is in us', but on which one does the major emphasis fall? The same ambiguities occur at higher levels when we try to relate one line or one verse paragraph to its neighbours. Moreover, the poem's segmentation into lines and paragraphs corresponds very closely to its group organization, so there is no generation of tension through counterpoint. By contrast, the Williams poem we considered earlier is a strongly organized structure of rising and falling groups: the sentence forms a two-constituent rising group, and each of these constituents would also form simple rising groups, were it not for the single word 'naturally', which is balanced against all that has gone before, and thus strongly emphasized. At lower levels there are both rising and falling groups, providing a complex onward momentum. But the visual division into lines and paragraphs only partially coincides with the major grouping divisions, to create a tension that is not finally resolved until the last word.

III

What I am suggesting, then, is that we can come closer to an adequate understanding of the way segmentation operates as a crucial feature in both regular and free verse, and at the same time make more subtle (and I would hope useful) distinctions among the formal choices open to poets, by thinking in terms of two broad categories of verse, with a considerable area of overlap in the middle. In one type—what I have called 'internally-segmented verse'—very little is lost if the poem is read aloud without any particular attention to the visually indicated line-divisions; the major units of the verse are determined independently of its appearance on the page. The mode of existence of such verse is primarily aural (or, to be more accurate, aural and

muscular, since rhythm is as much felt as heard), and its written or printed form functions largely as a transcription; it is possible to imagine it being passed on purely in spoken form. Most rhymed verse is of this kind, rhyme being an ancient aural signal of segmental division. (It remains somewhat puzzling that the most strongly regular metrical structures, with full end-stopping, seem to demand rhyme, even though in such verse there may be no need for a further device to mark segmentation. It is perhaps a matter of cultural conditioning: our expectation for rhyme at terminal points in such structures is extremely strong—so much so that its absence can be used for comic effect, as in this well-known limerick, or anti-limerick:

There was a young man from St Bees
Who was stung on the arm by a wasp;
When asked, 'Does it hurt?'
He replied, 'No it doesn't—
It's a good thing it wasn't a hornet.'

Leaving rhymed verse aside, the most common way of achieving internal segmentation is a combination of end-stopping and some principle of coherence binding the segment itself into a unity. One example is medieval alliterative verse, where the pattern of alliteration coupled with four strong beats produces coherence, and end-stopping marks segmental divisions. When Surrey introduced blank verse to the English language in his translation of Books Two and Four of Vergil's *Aeneid*, he made sure the hearer would seldom be in any doubt as to segmentation, thanks to a regular and easily recognized metre and, for the most part, clear end-stopping:

It was the time when, graunted from the godds,
The first slepe crepes most swete in wery folk.
Loe, in my dreame before mine eies, me thought,
With rufull chere I sawe where Hector stood:
Out of whoes eies there gushed streames of teares,
Drawn at a cart as he of late had be,
Distained with bloody dust, whoes feet were bowlne
With the streight cordes wherwith they haled him.¹⁴

Eighteenth-century blank verse—including Thomas Warton's—often uses the coincidence of line-breaks with syntactic or

¹⁴ *The Aeneid, Book Two*, lines 340–7; Surrey, *Poems* (ed. Emrys Jones, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

informational breaks at fairly frequent intervals to keep the segmentation audible.

Instead of being combined with a *metrical* pattern, end-stopping can be combined with syntactic or semantic parallelism to create coherent and demarcated segments. The origin of this type of verse is, of course, Biblical, and it has been a distinctive component within the English verse tradition, whether in the strong form used by Christopher Smart, William Blake, Walt Whitman, or D. H. Lawrence—what John Hollander calls the ‘oracular’ tradition¹⁵—or in more muted forms, like the Plath poem I quoted earlier. Here is the opening of Lawrence’s ‘Bare Almond-Trees’; you may not be able to tell with absolute certainty where every printed line-break falls, but it matters very little, since the rhythmic structure is dominated by patterns of grouping and repetition:

Wet almond-trees, in the rain,
 Like iron sticking grimly out of earth;
 Black almond trunks, in the rain,
 Like iron implements twisted, hideous, out of the earth,
 Out of the deep, soft fledge of Sicilian winter-green,
 Earth-grass uneatable,
 Almond trunks curving blackly, iron-dark, climbing the slopes.¹⁶

The other broad category of poetry—externally-segmented verse—consists mainly of poems that have their being simultaneously in the aural and the visual medium, and cannot be experienced fully in only one of these.¹⁷ (It is possible to imagine a verse-tradition in which external signalling—by special pronunciation or musical accompaniment at line-ends—is transmitted without the poem’s ever being committed to the page, but this is unlikely in a print-dominated culture.) Within this cate-

¹⁵ See Hollander’s valuable discussion of Whitman’s poetic line in *Vision and Resonance*, pp. 231–2.

¹⁶ Quoted from Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (eds.), *Complete Poems* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971).

¹⁷ The poet whose work has been most effective in enforcing critical awareness of this duality is William Carlos Williams (in spite of the auditory emphasis of his own metrical theorizing). See, for instance, Eleanor Berry, ‘Williams’ Development of a New Prosodic Form—Not the “Variable Foot,” but the “Sight-Stanza”’, *William Carlos Williams Review*, vii.2 (1981), 21–30; Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), esp. chs. 1 and 2; and Marjorie Perloff, “‘To Give a Design’: Williams and the Visualization of Poetry”, ch. 4 of *The Dance of the Intellect*.

gory there are poems which can be quite successfully rendered orally by using line-end pauses (most run-on blank verse is of this sort), and others in which a great deal is lost if the poem is not seen as well as heard. The voice cannot, for instance, distinguish easily between sentence-breaks in mid-line and at the end of the line, or between different lengths of white space. (There is, of course, verse that exists purely in the visual medium—concrete poetry—but that has tended to remain a peripheral genre.) The origins of visual/aural verse lie perhaps in the attempts by a large number of poets during the Renaissance to write quantitative verse in English in imitation of Latin poetry; this verse often existed on the page rather than in the ear (quantities, for instance, were often determined more by the way a word was spelled than the way it was pronounced.)¹⁸ And the classical model remained important in this tradition of English verse, since the reading of Latin and Greek poetry was for a long time a page-oriented phenomenon. On the page, the unrhymed, frequently run-on verse of the Classical poets had a clear structure, which could be scanned by marking vowel lengths and counting consonants, but as pronounced in the various European countries until the pronunciation reform movements early this century, it had very little segmental coherence unless this was imposed by an artificial mode of delivery.¹⁹

Classically trained poets found a twin model in Greek literature for visual/aural poetry written without rhyme in varying line-lengths: Pindar's Odes and the choruses from the tragedies. Milton drew on both for the choruses in *Samson Agonistes*, and we know from diary entries that at least two of the poems Matthew Arnold wrote using a similar form in the mid-nineteenth century were conscious attempts at pindarics, while two others are obviously imitations of Greek choruses.²⁰ A different source for a strongly run-on style of unrhymed verse is Jacobean drama, though this has more to do with a suitable style for the stage than

¹⁸ See my discussion in *Well-weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 118–19 and *passim*.

¹⁹ Hollander observes that free verse in English in the twentieth century is often 'modeled on line-for-line prose translations of the classics' (*Vision and Resonance*, pp. 205–6).

²⁰ See headnotes to 'The Youth of Nature', 'The Youth of Man', 'Fragment of an "Antigone"', and 'Fragment of Chorus of a "Dejaneira"' in Kenneth Allott (ed.), *The Complete Poems* (revised Miriam Allott, London: Longman, 1979). The best-known of Arnold's poems in this verse-form are 'The Strayed Reveller' and 'Rugby Chapel'.

the influence of the page. Later admirers of Shakespeare, however, would often have come to know his plays in printed form (remember Johnson's preference for Shakespeare in the study), and this experience undoubtedly encouraged freer blank verse in non-dramatic poetry—not only Milton's but that of many nineteenth-century writers. Browning, perhaps, goes furthest to baffle the ear of its desire to identify the beginnings and ends of iambic pentameters, and Browning is acknowledged as a forebear by this century's most influential proponent of the visual/aural mode, Ezra Pound. It is this mode that dominates the writing of poetry today, as almost any little magazine or current anthology will testify. Even some rhymed verse relies on the page more than on the ear, since without regular metre and a fixed line length or stanza form, chiming syllables may not be enough to signal segmentation.²¹

There has always been resistance to verse that relies on the page for its full effect, a resistance that takes the form either of a dismissal of the poetry itself or of an unwillingness to accept the contribution made by the eye in a full response to it. Blank verse—even in Surrey's end-stopped style—caused bafflement in the sixteenth century, and Samuel Johnson's endorsement of the dismissive view that blank verse such as Milton's is 'verse only to the eye' is well known.²² In this century, the fierce arguments about the legitimacy of free verse provide a great deal of evidence for a similar hostility. Even Hough, in his Warton Lecture, resists the notion of a poetry that works partly by visual means: in the face of a mass of evidence to the contrary, he asserts that the free verse line is only a line because it is 'a unit of sense, a unit of syntax' (op. cit., p. 174). Such responses are part of a deep cultural distrust of the written word, with its capacity to elude the individual will and the guarantee of personal commitment; most readers remain deeply attached to the phonocentric myth of the speaking voice as the unmediated channel of

²¹ This is demonstrated by an exercise reported by Hartman in *Free Verse*, pp. 75–7: he gave his students a copy of Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' typed out as prose and asked them to guess at the line-breaks. In doing so, they ignored the poem's rhymes.

²² For a discussion of the debate about the reading of run-on blank verse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see Richard Bradford, "'Verse Only to the Eye'?" Line Endings in *Paradise Lost*, *Essays in Criticism*, xxxiii (1983), 187–204. (Bradford exaggerates the degree to which the lines of *Paradise Lost* are typographical entities, however.)

human truth, and prefer to think of their favourite poems as utterances rather than as texts.²³

These two kinds of verse (whether used exclusively in a single poem, or, as is often the case, combined) exploit the rhythmic potential of language in different ways to heighten attention, create a sense of order, modulate emotion, control emphasis, and complicate verbal meaning. To appreciate their difference is, I believe, to make an advance in what Mrs Mond called 'the scientific study of English literature', though it would also be my hope that any such advance in understanding would contribute to the creative activity whereby literature continually outstrips the criticism that seeks to explain it. In order to suggest some of the ways we might talk about what I have called the visual/aural mode, I shall comment briefly on one free-verse poem. In doing so, I am conscious that many of the discussions I have encountered of the formal operation of free verse seem to fall far short of the actual experience of reading such poetry. What discussions of this kind often demonstrate is that it is not at all difficult to identify in free verse patterns of stresses and nonstresses, repetitions of sounds, momentary exemplifications of traditional metres, marked run-ons, and the emphatic placing of words: the problem is that this can be done with the weakest as well as with the most powerful of poems. There often seems no connection between our responses to a range of poetry and our analytical machinery—though this fact frequently goes unnoticed, since we use the machinery only on poems we admire. One technique that could be used more often is the testing of any claim that this or that feature produces this or that effect by rewriting the poem to alter the feature in question, and asking exactly what difference has been made. We have a great deal to learn about how poetry works—and our endeavours are always haunted by the paradox I began with: if we *could* explain all the effects in a poem we enjoy, the poem would, by that fact, become trite and valueless.

IV

The poem I am going to discuss is Geoffrey Hill's 'September Song'.²⁴ But first here is what Hill *might* have written: a free-verse

²³ This privileging of speech over writing has been fully demonstrated by Jacques Derrida in his readings of Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Saussure, and Lévi-Strauss, among others.

²⁴ Looking for published commentary on this poem after writing this lecture I came across two superb readings, by Jon Silkin and Christopher
[footnote cont. on p. 368]

poem in the aural mode, where the segmentation is largely determined by the syntactic breaks and the parallel structures of the language itself. Or, to put it differently, this is a visual representation of the poem as it might be heard by someone without any clues to its layout on the page:²⁵

Undesirable you may have been,
 untouchable you were not.
 Not forgotten or passed over at the proper time.
 As estimated, you died.
 Things marched, sufficient, to that end.
 Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented terror,
 so many routine cries.
 (I have made an elegy for myself it is true)
 September fattens on vines.
 Roses flake from the wall.
 The smoke of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.
 This is plenty.
 This is more than enough.

The poem in this form begins strongly with a set of angrily ironic statements, mirroring in their rigid assertiveness the horrifying system against which they protest. Then there is a line in parentheses which seems to mute the anger in a moment of slightly embarrassed self-reflection, after which the poem's energy evaporates: a series of descriptive statements give way to the banality of the last two lines. Syntactic parallelism is used throughout—lines 1 and 2, 6 and 7, 9 to 11, 12 and 13—to provide a formal structure, and to suggest something of the oral tradition (the tradition of repetitive lament, perhaps), which is no doubt one reason why the clichés of the final lines seem so feeble.

Below is the poem as it appears in Hill's *King Log*.²⁶ If you follow it on the page as I read it, you will experience it in its dual existence as words to be seen and to be heard.

Ricks; Ricks includes Silkin's account in his own discussion, in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 295–304. Both critics comment valuably on the lineation of the sentence in parentheses, and Ricks stresses some of the features of the poem which can only be appreciated on the page—not only the lineation, but also the italics and numerals in the subheading, and the parentheses themselves.

²⁵ Hartman's exercise with Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' referred to in an earlier note suggests the degree to which readers without other clues assume a coincidence between syntactic breaks and line-divisions.

²⁶ London: André Deutsch, 1968.

POETRY UNBOUND?
SEPTEMBER SONG

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Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
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As estimated, you died. Things marched,
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Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
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(I have made
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Rather than poetry which creates a speaking voice, this is poetry that resists the voice, since the visual dimension defies the vocal continuities of the sentences, and there is no metrical pattern to help produce a sense of closure at line-end. It is only on the page that the words occur in lines, and the result is a movement of language more complex than that of a single speaking voice, whose rhythms are determined by sense and syntax. Instead of the rather obvious irony of the first two lines heard as parallels in my aural version, we have a line that begins with 'undesirable' and ends with 'untouchable', retaining the emphasis on the two words, with their associations of class and caste prejudice, but hinting for a moment that the subject of the poem was regarded both as undesirable *and* untouchable. It is only after the visually inserted break that the pathos of the irony emerges: how much better if this child *had* been regarded as untouchable, but the Nazi murderers knew no such scruples. The arrangement of the lines allows for an immediate repetition of 'not' in the second line that produces a different irony—the child was 'taken good care of' by the Nazi authorities—but instead of the flat statement of the single line, all too like the voice of authority that is being ironized, the broken sentence hesitates before moving on to the multiple tonalities of 'passed over', with its allusion to Jewish

history and ritual, and the complex bitterness of 'proper'. The first two lines could also be described in purely rhetorical terms, as structured round a variety of epanalepsis—the line ending with a word which almost repeats the word it had begun with—followed by its mirror image, a central epizeuxis, the repetition of 'not' across a syntactic break. This formal organization replaces the straightforward parallelism of my rewritten version with a more complicated, but equally satisfying (that is to say, in this context, chilling), balance.

These three lines are followed by a space; a visual simulation of the division between stanzas, as in Williams's 'Poem'. (Real stanzas in metrical verse have their own internal organization, of course, and usually do not need to be graphically signalled—in lengthy poems they often include a specific stanza-end signal, like a final couplet or a longer line.)²⁷ At first glance, the reader takes in the structure of the poem as five paragraphs, the last a paragraph of only one line, and this visual organization contributes to the interpretation, each paragraph constituting a single semantic block.

Again in the second paragraph the somewhat wooden parallelism of the purely aural version I gave you becomes a more precisely articulated irony in the poem as lineated by Hill. The word 'sufficient', instead of just qualifying 'Things marched', is also part of the separate segment 'sufficient, to that end,' implying the terrible efficiency both of the machinery of death and the pseudo-philosophical attitudes that produced it. (The isolation of 'Things marched' may give that phrase, too, a simultaneous physical and abstract meaning.) The following line also forms a whole, with 'patented' looking back to the name 'Zyklon' (we are dealing with a society in which poison gas is developed and authorized in the same way as a commercial product with a marketable trade-name), and to the word 'leather', producing a momentary image of an artificial glossy surface; then it runs over the visual gap to the unexpectedly unironic noun 'terror', and the return of the angry irony of 'routine'.

As a single line, '(I have made an elegy for myself it is true)'

²⁷ *Terza rima* is an interesting instance: the continuous interlocking rhyme-scheme (ababcbcdcdedefe...) would not be heard as divided into threes without fairly frequent strong end-stopping at the end of the tercets, such as Dante employs in the *Divina Commedia*. In Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', by contrast, it is only the visual form on the page that produces division into three-line units.

sounds like an admission—‘I have to accept that in lamenting the death of this child I am actually selfishly preoccupied with my own mortality’. But divided on the page it becomes multi-layered, since this apologetic tonal inflection is contradicted by the assertiveness of ‘I have made’ as a single segment, and by the strongly felt insistence on the truth of the poet’s art that emerges from the division of ‘it’ and ‘is true’. There is no way a single voice could manifest these conflicting tones, which raise the irresolvable question: how can poetry capture the ‘truth’ of such an event?

When the imagery shifts in the next paragraph, the run-ons prevent the three sentences from settling into a comfortable parallel of noun–verb–preposition–noun, and help to keep the connection with what has gone before: these benign autumnal images cannot be isolated from the death-camps. ‘Fatten’, ‘flake’, ‘smoke’ are not innocent words. And then again a line-by-line parallelism is resisted, and the last two apparently trite phrases are transformed by being yoked together for the eye. (There is no way the voice can signal this union, since we will always hear a break between sentences.) I find it impossible to ascribe a specific tone to this line, and its complexity could not emerge from a single utterance of it: there is one voice that is dismissive, using ‘plenty’ in the sense of ‘enough’, then correcting that to ‘*more* than enough’ (this is the voice of the Nazi authorities we have already heard in the opening seven lines), another that is bitterly sarcastic, for which these words mean just the opposite of what they say, and another that is gravely calm, for which ‘plenty’ means ‘fertile richness’, and ‘enough’ contrasts weightily with ‘sufficient’ and ‘Just so much’. Finding ourselves safe in such a world—and to be writing, the poet (like the poetry-reader) must in some sense be safe—we have no option but to combine, in an impossible fusion, rage at what is done by human beings to human beings and both guilt and a profound thankfulness that it is not done to us. The poem ends hovering between page and voice, eye and ear, a song of plenitude, as the ironic title hints, that is also a vision of dearth.²⁸

²⁸ Something of this indeterminacy of tone can be achieved in metrical verse, where the regular metre may have the effect of multiplying the possible readings and emotional colourings, and moving the poem away from the representation of a single voice. See my discussion in *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), pp. 311–14, 350–1.

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The choice facing the poet today should not be characterized, then, as primarily and overridingly one between regular or free verse, traditional or modern forms, but a choice among a wide range of possibilities and combinations. The propaganda of the free-verse poets earlier in this century can now be seen for what it was: poetry did not leap gratefully out of its bonds, but discovered new ways to bind the protean substance of language, exploiting more fully than had been done in previous centuries its dual existence as speech and writing. Free verse is not more 'natural' than metrical verse, nor does it permit of a specially 'organic' relation between rhythm and sense; these are cultural myths descending from the tradition of Romanticism which Warton helped bring into being. They have been valuable in extending the range of English verse forms, but have now served their purpose and can only limit our appreciation of the achievements of twentieth-century poetry.

I would like to end with what might be regarded as the forerunner of all our modern free-verse visual/aural poems. In 1602, Thomas Campion published an extraordinary pamphlet called *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (to observe, let us remember, is both to say and to see), in which he fused the native aural tradition of accentual verse with what was for the Renaissance the visual tradition of classical quantitative verse. You have before you one of the examples he wrote to demonstrate the potential of his proposed metrical blend, 'Rose-cheekt Lawra'. We do not have to be aware of its carefully crafted quantitative structure in order to appreciate the skill and effectiveness with which it counterpoints the visual and the aural dimensions of language, culminating in a mid-word, speech-defying run-on that a twentieth-century free-verse experimenter would be proud of. The poem's first stanza announces that the counterpoint of the visual and the aural is not just the poem's method, but its subject:

Rose-cheekt *Lawra*, come
Sing thou smoothly with thy beawtie's
Silent musick, either other
Sweetely gracing.

Lovely formes do flowe
From concent devinely framed;
Heav'n is musick, and thy beawtie's
Birth is heavenly.

These dull notes we sing
Discords neede for helps to grace them;
Only beauty purely loving
Knowes no discord,

But still moves delight,
Like cleare springs reu'd by flowing,
Ever perfect, ever in them-
selves eternall.