

A
LITTLE BOOK
ON FORM

*An Exploration into
the Formal Imagination of Poetry*

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ONE

1. A single line is a naked thing. It is both light and heavy. It is, obviously, the basic unit of all lyric forms. Two of them make a couplet or, in Bantu song, a combination, three of them a blues lyric or a stanza of Dante's terza rima, four a hymn stanza or a ballad stanza or a Chinese quatrain. Five in Japanese make a tanka, and so on.

By itself it is identical with itself, if it is syntactically complete.

2. Robert Lowell: "it's much easier to write a good poem than a good line."

Robert Duncan:

By stress and syllable
by change rhyme and contour
we let the long line pace even awkward to its period.
The short line
we refine,
and keep for candor.

This is the Yulelog that warms December.

This is new grass that springs from the ground.

3. The first formal fact about the single line is that it is either identical with itself or not, matches a completed or partially completed grammatical sense—

April is the cruellest month,

Or does not—

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

and from this fact the energy and movement of verse—the word means “a turning”—derives.

4. If it makes a completed sense, the line is heir and hostage to the structure of English grammar in which (noun-verb-object) something happens to something:

All things that love the sun are out of doors.

And worms will try your long-preserved virginity.

I have done it again.

Or has the quality of something:

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Unless it chooses not to be, as in this line from Clark Coolidge:

Ink of this Egyptian knock over night.

(Even to a line like this the ghost of syntax sings. We want to read “knock over” as an adjective.)

5. The hidden paradigm of the single line is the completed sentence, without which idea there would be no enjambment.

The sentence imitates insight. It is the mode of individuation, the thought that separates us from others and gives us a self. To say it another way, the sentence is being, enjambment is excess of being, or being in process, reaching toward itself. Which is its basic characteristic. Excess and instability and movement and change. The sentence moves and it arrests movement.

The sentence is also an action, an event in time. In one way of thinking, being is stasis; in another it is movement, that is, the only being we have is becoming, and the self is movement (we are not things but processes). However, the sentence is the instrument through which the self-as-a-process mimics being-as-a-process, at the same time that it arrests it. A sentence, unlike actions in the world, is a proposition of finitude; it has a beginning and an end. The tension in the sentence between its action and its stillness is a source of endless paradox.

In another way of thinking, being is movement, but the self is not movement. There are two ways of saying this, quite different from each other, and they bear on what we think both the sentence and the line are for.

One way to say it is the currently out of favor “essentialist” position, that the self is, and can be accurately represented as, the still point from which movement is perceived. The existentialist version of this is to say that the self wants to be (and can never altogether be)

the still point from which movement is perceived, and that is the energy and the torment (or the dance) of this desire that constitutes it. And is the problem inherent in representing the way perception happens, since something happens to something in the English language and both somethings are moving targets.

The other way to say that the self is not movement is to say that it is nothing. Looked at, it's nothing. And this fact—experience, really—has been a traditional way out of instability and change. For some the impersonality of form echoes an emptiness because it's not personal. Form feels different from subjectivity. It feels like it belongs to other, larger rhythms. This is the reason some Buddhist artist/thinkers like John Cage have been attracted to the most arbitrary forms.

And in this way there are perhaps three basic attitudes toward form. First, that it is being, or mimics it, elaborated to a fullness. Second, that it is the emptiness against which being plays, through which it courses. Third, that it is made thing, the work of man the maker constructing a world out of the paradoxical movement and stillness of the sentence:

These fragments I have shored against my ruin

And there is a fourth idea, associated with Oulipo and other experimental practice, that it is, like everything else, a throw of the dice (or of the device) and so the more arbitrary the formal principle that generates it, the better.

6. Greek mathematicians did not think one was a number because the concept *one* did not involve number. To them, two was the first number. And the hybrid marriage of one, which was not a number, and two, which was, begot three, the second number. And from one, two, and three, all other numbers proceeded, so that all odd num-

bers had in them an element that was not number. This is why Plato said that the leap from one to two was the leap to rationality.

Leonard Bernstein, speaking of music, said that two was a rhythm of the body and three was a rhythm of the mind. This has been contested by people who say that three is a rhythm of the body and two a rhythm of the mind. Not everyone has weighed in on this subject. But it seems intuitively right, doesn't it? To say that there is a groundedness in the symmetry of twos, off which threes seem to play, seem airier.

7. Some memorable one-sentence lines:

I sought my death and found it in my womb (1586)

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song (1596)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (1598)

Those are pearls that were his eyes (1611)

My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy (1621)

For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love (1633)

I am a little world made cunningly (1635)

Is all good structure in a winding stair? (1638)

(Collect your own.) A hundred lines by other people arranged by you is a cento. A cento can be arranged so that the lines from different sources and context make continuous sense. Or not. See John Ashbery, "The Dong with the Luminous Nose."

8. *The one-line poem in Japanese*: As far as I know, there is only one such form in wide use and it is a mixed case, the haiku. It has, of course, a three-part prosodic structure, five syllables—seven syllables—five syllables. But, as written in Japanese, it is usually represented in a single line and there is a long controversy about

whether it should be translated as a one-line or a three-line poem. Hiroaki Sato is probably the best one-line translator of haiku. His versions can be found in *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. You will notice, however, that the haiku, a one-line form with a three-part prosodic structure, usually consists of two images. And so you'll also notice that inside what is apparently a single line, there is a play of one, two, or three elements, balanced or unbalanced in various ways that are expressive in relation to what the poem is saying.

Ten by Matsuo Bashō:

Old pond: frog's jumping's water-sound.

Crow just settled on a bare branch—autumn evening.

Snowy morning, by myself, eating salmon jerky.

As for the hibiscus on the roadside, my horse ate it.

The bee staggers out of the peony.

First snow falling on a half-finished bridge.

End of fall and we're parting, clamshells on the beach

Spring going, birds weeping, tears in the eyes of fish

Walked past a man with a swollen face in the winter wind.

What's cool? the clean lines of the pine.

Ten by Buson:

I go, you stay, two autumns.

Coolness: the sound of the bell as it leaves the bell.

Green leaves, white water, the barley yellowing.

Plum petals burning on the clods of horseshit.

Apprentice's day off: hops over kite string, keeps going.

Straw sandal half sunk in an old pond in sleety snow.

Yellow of spring, no whale in sight, the sea darkening.

Mad girl in the boat at midday: spring currents.

Farmer goes out to check his scarecrow and comes back.

Short night: bubbles of crab froth in the river reeds.

Ten by Kobayashi Issa:

Goes out, comes back: love life of a cat.

The man pulling radishes points my way with a radish.

Deer licking first frost from one another's coats.

This world: hell's top's flower-gazing.

Even with insects, some can sing, some can't.

Wren: here, there—you lose something?

Icicles hanging from the nose of the Buddha on the moor.

Washing saucepans: moon glowing on her hands in the shallow river.

Not very anxious to bloom, my plum tree.

Not knowing it's in a kitchen, the fish cooling in a tub.

9. *The one-line poem in English*: They hardly exist, of course. But there have been experiments. I'm not sure whether to think of John Ashbery's "37 Haiku" as thirty-seven poems or one poem called "37 Haiku," in which case it is not an example of the one-line poem but of the one-line stanza.

A few examples, in the event that they are individual poems:

Too low for nettles but it is exactly the way people think and
feel

You have original artworks hanging on the wall oh I said edit
Pirates imitate the ways of ordinary people myself for instance
Planted over and over that land has a bitter aftertaste

What trees, tools, why ponder sox on the premises

In winter sometimes you see those things and also in summer
A child must go down it must stand and last

I lost my ridiculous accent without acquiring another

In Buffalo, Buffalo she was praying, the night sticks together
like pages in an old book

Did you say, hearing the schooner overhead, we turned back
to the weir?

Allen Ginsberg had the idea that the image in a blues refrain was the American haiku. He recalled W. C. Handy writing that the first blues he ever heard, played by a black man in a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, had this lyric: "I'm goin' where the Southern cross the Dog." First, here are some refrains from blues lyrics to be reconsidered as haiku:

I hate to see that evening sun go down.

Wild women don't worry, right there that's the news.

Uh oh, black snake crawling in my room.

Blues come from Texas loping like a mule.

Good morning, blues. Blues, how do you do?

If you don't like ocean, don't fish my sea.

See see rider see what you have done.

Thirty days in jail with my back turned to the wall.

Think someone else's mule is kicking in my stall.

Ain't no use to wandering neither to strutting around.

Get full of good liquor, walk the streets all night.

Just make me a pallet on your floor.

He comes around but the mill done broke.

Blood red river and a rocker chair.

Ginsberg called his adaptations, one-line poems that he thought of as fusing the haiku and the blues line, "American Sentences." Here are a few examples:

Tompkins Square Lower East Side NY

Four skinheads stand in the streetlight rain chatting under an
umbrella.

Approaching Seoul by Bus in Heavy Rain

Get used to your body, forget you were born, suddenly you
got to get out!

Put on my tie in a taxi, short of breath, rushing to meditate.

—November 1991, New York

Rainy night on Union Square, full moon. Want more poems?

Wait till I'm dead

The use of title and dates may be thought to violate the pure proposition of a one-line poem. Well, so what? Many of the haiku poets

gave their poems brief superscriptions that function like Ginsberg's titles to create a context. And a recent book by Carol Snow, *Breath As* (Em Press), contains both titled and untitled one-line poems:

For K.

Then Kathy—"Is that mine?"—ran out to the crying in the yard.

In Brief

"—necessitated, you know, by his impairments—"

At the Beach

But kept "—then threw back the shell."

Elegy

And now that I can no longer . . . — no longer have to—visit him . . .

Breath As

tidal—ardor . . . fervor . . . horror . . . as moon . . . —

What comfort?

10. *One-line poems in other languages*: I don't know too much about this subject. Here is my memory of an anecdote about the Russian futurist poet Valery Bryusov. In the first issue of an image-centered manifesto in a new literary magazine he published a one-line poem. (I am improvising on my memory of the translation):

Oh! her thighs on the bicycle like fish in the brilliant river
leaping!

And then he revised and republished it in the second issue:

Oh! her thighs and fish in the brilliant river!

And, aiming for greater purity and concentration, published this version in the fourth and last issue:

Oh! her thighs!

Czesław Miłosz has published a handful of titled one-line poems, if his "Notes" is many poems rather than one. Here are some samples:

On the need to draw boundaries

Wretched and dishonest was the sea.

Landscape

Unending forest flowing with the honey of wild bees.

Language

Cosmos, i.e., pain raved in me with a diabolic tongue

Supplication

From galactic silence protect us.

Aim in Life

Oh to cover my shame in regal attire

11. *One-line stanzas and free verse*: The one-line stanza shows up quite often in free verse poems with irregular stanzaic patterns where it has the heaviness and lightness I mentioned at the outset and gets used in the middle or at the end of a poem for emphasis. The one-line stanza as a uniform pattern, unlike the poem in two- or three-line stanzas, is relatively rare because its expressive effect is usually of—depending on the spacing between stanzas—a slow or rapid series of discrete sentences, resistant to or disruptive of time and relation, which enjambement, the turning of verse, essentially expresses. This suggests the

way in which two of the impulses of poetry, to condense and to render in language the mind stilled or the mind's experience of the world's movement in time, are at odds. The form, I suppose, can express a slow piece-by-piece consecutivity. Ashbery's "37 Haiku" may be an instance of the slow series of discrete but consecutive statements.

12. One form, implying a kind of consecutiveness, imitates the notebook or book of pensées. Some of Wallace Stevens's "Adagia" can be thought of as an instance. John Cage's "Themes & Variations" is another. Here is a sample from Cage:

Move from zero.

All audible phenomena = material for music.

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter (Creation, Preservation,

Destruction, Quiescence).

Possibility of helping by doing nothing.

Music is not music until it is heard.

Music and dance together (and then other together).

Men are men; mountains are mountains before studying

Zen. While studying Zen, things become confused. After studying Zen, men are men; mountain are mountains.

What is the difference between before and after? No difference. Just the feet are a little off the ground.

(Suzuki)

If structure, rhythmic structure.

Boredom plus attention = getting interested

Principle underlying all of the solutions = question we ask

Activity, not communication.

The nine permanent emotions (the heroic; the mirthful; the wondrous; the erotic; tranquility; sorrow; fear; anger; the odious).

In other cases, like Michael Palmer's "Notes for Echo Lake 10," the stanzas are both more and less continuous. Here is a bit of it:

He would live against sentences.

Trees here broad of leaf the several speakers.

Tiered objects of her talking and the water below.

Trees of sound to broaden shadow.

Damp walls will quiet things.

Ahab or Alcibiades.

He-she before the figure before the mirror.

This order or Orient is the eighth part and a dislocation,
emerald rock to emerald rock.

Rain hanging and endless plain.

As water below thought below object.

I want to see them yesterday.

Reflects gardens of horizon leaning against an arm of neutral
shore.

Reflects the ardent eye or Alcibiades.

13. *The strophe and the one-line stanza*: (Webster: "In modern poetry, any separate section or extended movement in a poem, distinguished from a stanza in that it does not follow a regularly repeated pattern") is usually based on the principle of the one-line stanza, but the line is considered one long breath, or pulse, sometimes of several sentences, followed by a pause. It has the effect of merging the idea of line, sentence, and stanza. Palmer's "Notes from Echo Lake 2" is an instance. Here's the beginning:

He would assume a seeing into the word, whoever was there
to look. Would care to look. A coming and going in smoke.

A part and apart.

Voices through a wall. They are there because we hear them what do we hear. The pitch rises toward the end to indicate a question.

What's growing in the garden.

To be at a loss for words. How does the mind move there, walking beside the bank of what had been a river. How does the light.

And rhythm as an arm, rhythm as the arm extended, he turns and turns remembering the song. What did she recall.

It can also be used consecutively as in this section of Milosz's "City Without a Name"—he's writing about Wilno, the city of his childhood, Wilno in Polish, Vilnius in Lithuanian:

Why should that city, defenseless, pure as the wedding necklace of some forgotten tribe, keep offering itself to me? Like blue and redbrown seeds in Tuzigoot in the coppery desert seven centuries ago.

Where ocher rubbed into stone still waits for the brow and cheekbones it would adorn, previous to Arizona, though for all that time no one has shown up.

What evil in me, what pity, makes me deserve this offering? It stands before me now, ready, not even the smoke from one chimney is lacking, not one echo, when I step into the river that separates us.

Perhaps Anna and Dora Duzyno have called to me, three hundred miles inside the Sonora Desert, because except for me no one else knows they ever lived.

They trot before me down Embankment Street, two gently born paraquets from Samogitia, and at night they unravel their spinster tresses of gray hair.

It is also possible to enjamb a strophe and sustain the measure, I think. See my "Spring Rain":

Now the rain is falling, freshly, in the intervals between sunlight,
a Pacific squall started no one knows where, drawn east as
the drifts of warm air make a channel,

it moves its one way, like water or the mind,

and spill this rain passing over. The Sierras will catch it as last
snow flurries before summer, observed only by the wakened
marmots at ten thousand feet,

and we will come across it again as larkspur and penstemon
sprouting along a creekside above Sonora Pass next August.

14. *The one-line stanza and chant*: The incantatory structure of chant usually involves a series of end-stopped lines in rapid succession. Think, for example, of Christopher Smart's cat, or of Ginsberg's "Howl":

who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing
obscene odes on the windows of the skull,

who covered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their
money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through
the wall,

who got busted in their pubic beards returning through
Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York,

who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise
alley, death or purgatoried their torsos night after night,

and this method picked up by Anne Waldman, in "Makeup on Empty Space," for example:

I am putting makeup on empty space
 All patinas convening on empty space
 Rouge blushing on empty space
 I am putting makeup on empty space
 putting eyelashes on empty space
 painting the eyebrows on empty space
 piling creams on empty space
 painting the phenomenal world
 I am hanging ornaments on empty space
 gold clips, lacquer combs, plastic hairpins on empty space
 I am sticking wire pins into empty space

15. A predominant sense of the single line in the lyric: There are poems made from a succession of single lines, not distinctly disjunctive and not marked off as separate stanzas, but kept separate, one sentence per line. What is the expressive effect? Michael Palmer again:

A Dream Called "The House of Jews"

Many gathered many friends maybe everyone
 Many now and then may have entered
 The ivory teeth fell from her mouth
 The typewriter keys
 Many fell at the entrance
 Many held them
 Many fell forward and aware
 Various friends gathered at the entrance
 Some held back
 The room contains a question

Many said now before then this then that
 The room contains a question to be named
 He said *I will tell the book the dream the words tell me*
 The room is not the place or the name

16. *Complex forms built largely but not entirely on the single line:* This usually depends on lineation and spacing to set off the line as a unit of energy and temporary residence of it. See Robert Duncan's "The Torso: Passages 18":

I have been waiting for you, he said:
 I know what you desire
 you do not yet know but through me .
 And I am with you everywhere. In your falling
 I have fallen from a high place. I have raised myself
 from darkness in your rising
 wherever you are

my hand in your hand seeking the locks, the keys

The visual spacing can be indicated in oral performance or not, I suppose. My experience of Duncan reading is that you did hear the pauses. Perhaps these are not single lines at all, but the visual and aural appearance of them, a scattering, to remind us, as in another Duncan poem, that the line is a seed it is Psyche's task together.