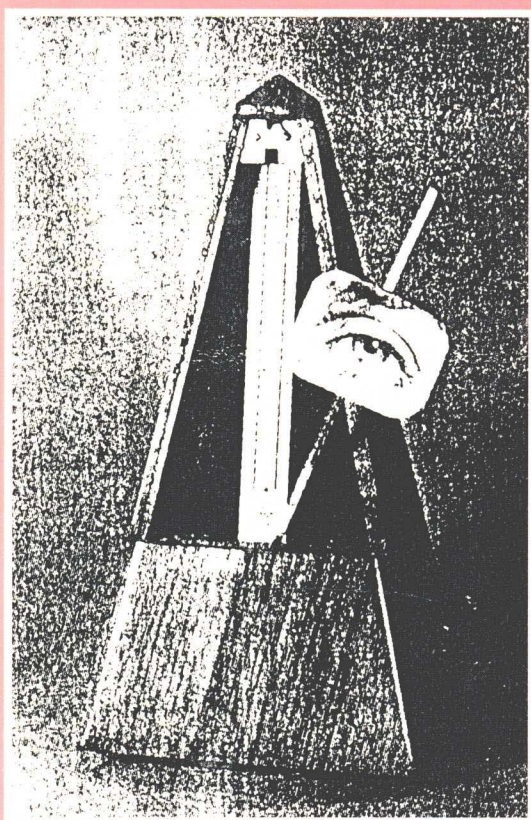


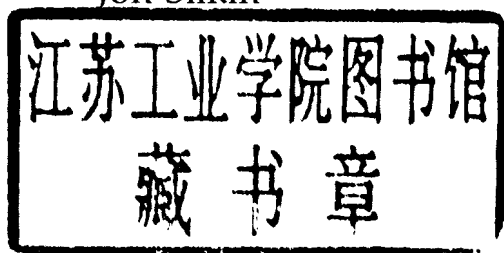
THE LIFE OF
METRICAL AND FREE
VERSE IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY
POETRY



JON SILKIN

The Life of Metrical and Free Verse in Twentieth-Century Poetry

Jon Silkin





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Note on the Scansion Marks

/ stands for a stressed syllable, but I have avoided using u for an unstressed one. First, it would have cluttered the verse quotations even more, and second, the mark stands in the way of questions concerning the gradations of stress and unstress. Additionally, I wanted to avoid confusion with the sign \times , which I have used to denote, not a weaker stress in a system of weaker and stronger syllables, but a situation in which I perceived an as much as possible no-stress situation, usually one in which rapid movement occurs. I have also used a bar — over the top of a syllable to indicate duration more than stress, and a combination of bar and accent when I felt both to be operating. I have used \sim , a bridge, to suggest that sometimes a stress is distributed over a cluster of syllables; and finally, I have used a bar under pairs or groups of syllables to indicate alliteration or assonance.

Generalizations are frequently out of place, and, worse still, misleading. So I'll offer just the one, which stems from what I believe I have noticed in reading my contemporaries. I believe I have detected in poets who began writing in the post-Second World War period a tendency to modify the weak/strong system of syllables in their work. There is not only an apparent tropism towards anapaestic/dactylic rhythms, but also a moderating of the contrasting syllables of stress and weak stress, a greater deliquescence in the rhythms. Here again, in some of his work, Lawrence anticipates this, as I briefly suggested in contrasting his rhythms with Rosenberg's, the poet killed in the First World War. Clearly it is a matter of degree, but in Fisher's case there is a noticeable flowing fluid movement in his rhythms in contrast with those of, say, Larkin, who inherits an earlier ethos and its tone. I have made related comments on the work of Tomlinson and Redgrave, so it's superfluous to repeat those here. But it is worth remarking of Geoffrey Hill, who writes both free and metrical verse, that, in some of his metrical poetry, there tends to be a subtle avoidance of the earlier version of metricity I have indicated. Readers will notice,

each in his or her own way, but if I have picked up something that seems, currently, to be the case, then it is possible to suggest that this modification of metrical verse is the result of the practice of free verse, and may thus indicate the way things are presently tracking.

Note on the Text

The sources of quotations in the text are invariably cited within the text itself, by means of the title of the work and the page numbers concerned. Fuller references are made in the listing at the end of the book, and, wherever possible, the main works are cited in the order of their appearance in the relevant chapter.

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1

The Healing Process – Metrical and Free Verse

The verse of the poem is a delicate thing. It has almost ceased to beat, and seems maintained only by the flutter of tenuous hopes and sickening fears.

the unlooked-for claim
At the first hearing for a moment took
More hope out of his life than he supposed
That any old man ever could have lost.

Wordsworth, who was so often an imitator, here speaks with his own voice; and the verse is the contribution he makes to prosody.

Of 'Michael': James Smith, 'Wordsworth:
A Preliminary Survey', *Scrutiny*, no. 7, 1938.¹

No doubt this widespread metrical ignorance is itself a symptom of some deeper change: and I am far from suggesting that the appearance of *vers libre* is simply a result of ignorance. More probably the ignorance, and the deliberate abandonment, of accentual metres are correlative phenomena, and both the results of some revolution in our whole sense of rhythm – a revolution of great importance reaching deep down into the unconscious and even perhaps into the blood.

C.S. Lewis, 'Donne and Love Poetry in the
Seventeenth Century' (from *Seventeenth Century
Studies Presented to Sir Herbert Grierson*, 1938)²

1. Reprinted in *William Wordsworth: Penguin Critical Anthologies*, ed. Graham McMaster, 1972, p. 347.
2. Reprinted in *Seventeenth Century English Poetry*, ed. William R. Keast, 1962 pp. 99–100.

The second characteristic excellence of Mr Wordsworth's works is: a correspondent weight and sanity of the thoughts and sentiments – won, not from books, but – from the poet's own meditative observation. They are *fresh* and have the dew upon them.

S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Everyman Edition, p. 265 (my emphasis)

I group these three analyses in two heads. James Smith's feeling for the prosodic and living motion of Wordsworth's lines intimates a concern for movement that can be realized without distorting metre. If iambic pentameter is ten syllables with a norm of five emphasized and five unemphasized syllables (or a mixture of emphasis and length/duration), Smith indicates what is achieved in collaboration with the reader, whose mind can keep the metronomic frame in 'active suspension' and play into it an extreme version of the metre that 'has almost ceased to beat'. His feeling is beautifully put, and it is this combination in prosodic counterpoint enacting a delicate pulse of feeling that makes Wordsworth's lines so fine. It constitutes one of the poet's many contributions to the development of prosody.

I group C.S. Lewis's comment with James Smith's. The 'ignorance' and 'abandonment, of accentual metres are correlative phenomena, and both the results of some revolution in our whole sense of rhythm – a revolution of great importance reaching deep down into the unconscious and even perhaps into the blood'.

Interesting as this assertion is, what strikes one more is that it appears to presume that rhythm is basic, that it cannot be got 'beyond' or 'under' – and it is atomic and primary. Yet I wonder if beneath rhythmic impulse something springs which might be referred to as the processes of active imagination.

What if a poet has no *active* choices? If s/he can write only in free verse because s/he has not tried or cannot write metred verse, or if the poet cannot put aside metre and try free verse, s/he is, I believe, limited, because so much of recent creative flow, with all its imperfections, has realized itself in the improvisation of free verse.

Without options, the conceiving of the poem in its primitive early stages of creation is hardly provisional, not conceived but put forth half-born in the poet's limitations. Evidently all human creation has limitation, but I mean to identify some form of making which is pre-made. What matters in such a case is that what has been made

has been denied the creative modesty, which the provisional endows. It is the difference, again, between a bird with a fixed song engineered in the brain through a conjunction of particular synapses enabling only an invariable route, and a composer able to explore some options. Or the plant that assembles its car(s) on an established matrix, as against a designer exploring the possibilities of locomotion without consideration for the oil companies.

Wordsworth is Coleridge's equal as a critic, but it is the latter's incisive insight that is crucial in his positive judgements of his friend's poetry. I put his comment in a second heading; Wordsworth's poetry of whom he wrote in his *Biographia Literaria*:

thoughts and sentiments – won, not from books, but – from the poet's own meditative observation. They are *fresh* and have the dew upon them.

(my emphasis)

Such freshness is 'won' through Wordsworth's being determined to have feeling engage with and invigorate its eventual form. Metricists will assert that Wordsworth's poetry works metrically, which is almost true. Yet the range within his metrical working is not an argument for our having to use metre to the exclusion of free verse, but more properly an indication as to how much Wordsworth wishes to draw the utmost variation into the limitations of metre, and how metre was submitted to the needs of his 'fresh' shaping impulse.

Moreover, although the 'Immortality' Ode is made of various metrical units, Wordsworth's composition (in the musical sense) comes within sight and hearing, syntactically and rhythmically, of free verse, in the very disparateness of its metrical parts, and the swift unexpected modulations between each metre. Hopkins puts his apprehension of this music in a letter to his friend R.W. Dixon (23 October 1886):

The rhymes are so musically interlaced, the rhythms so happily succeed (surely it is a magical change 'O joy! that in our embers').

But in any case the argument between metricists and free verse writers is wasteful, since it is not a question of feeling, or of being, compelled to choose between either but of using, if the poet wishes, both:

It seems to me we have reached an impasse right now, and there IS an urgent need to reconcile meter and free verse, if that is possible, because meter is getting starved without the improvisational powers, and free verse simply turns to very dull prose without any connections to song.

(Letter from Thom Gunn, 19 April 1991)

Probably Coleridge's 'fresh' is such an attribute, without which we don't have poetry, but a simulation, whether in metre or free verse. The origination of either mode is in its primitive provisional shaping, and this is as a rule fresh only when it can choose its enablement. In a discussion with the American poet Marvin Bell (Spring 1991), he suggested that imagination, and not free verse, metre and lineation, was now the presentiment of form. If this is so, then it is imaginative energy in its provisional magmatic condition that is the poet's recourse.

True or not, poets must feel free, even in the West, to write in metre, free verse, or a mixture of both. To argue it the other way round, if much of Wordsworth's best poetry *is* fresh, it is also true that Whitman's free verse – it is free verse – is fresh through its discovery that rhythm and nuance shall be fresh and delicately alive as the form is riven back from metricality onto the modified principles of (Hebrew) parallelism, without the original Hebrew metricality. This constituted a rediscovery of the form compacted by thought, in the Psalms for instance, as it appears in the English *prose* translations; for, paradoxically, the existence of the form translated into prose without the original verse lineation had the result of bringing out the essential form of the presented thought. I hope it will be seen by fair-minded readers that I am not advocating a formless poetry, but arguing for conditions that ensure freshness. And from the reader's viewpoint I am, to quote Coleridge again, arguing for poetry in 'its *untranslatableness* in words of the same language [otherwise suffering] injury to the meaning' (*Biographia Literaria*, p. 263, my emphasis).

Such resistance, to paraphrase, is true for good prose also, but one notices that this intrinsic 'untranslatableness' is applicable not only to the words as they finally make up the poem, but to the initial, provisional state of conception in which the feelings, meanings and sensibility are not to be transgressed by the application of pre-made form, but enabled by the finding of, in the end, the only form. This finding puts greater stress on the imagination as its initial

moves are plucked from the insistence of set lineation and the immediately demanded requisite words. This kind of 'thinking' should not find itself pressed to translate itself positivistically into final words, in the first stages of composition. What matters more is the wholeness of the initial creation. Quite apart from those who think in images and pictures, many, I believe, have experienced that *something* breaking into the mind's surface in the course of which it forms into some assemblage of meaning for which language may be the expression, but for which language isn't or may not be instantly desirable. It may be that the processes of language must start early, so that the language partake of what is in the process of formation; but to insist that these feelings 'be wracked to fit' (as Denys Harding denied it occurred in Isaac Rosenberg's poetry) is wrong, reductive of what I have suggested is creative.

If part of this be provisionally accepted, then perhaps some of the difficulties between metricists and free-versers may give way to prior and more important questions of imaginative energy.

Once again, this is not a plea for formlessness. On the contrary, because the energies are to be allowed to emerge, the most careful (I don't mean 'brutal'), sensitive and vigilant controls need to be brought into the complete shaping. It may also happen that the work comes out well first time, or nearly so, but writers have also to be prepared to work, as Owen did with 'Strange Meeting', work over and over the emerging poem without harassing or bullying it into shape, but on the contrary working with patience and often perhaps with despair, hoping that the work will open up its best possibilities and resolutions – if such exist. Sometimes, we must walk away from the poem so as to discover whether what one has made is 'right'. Such a discovery is indeed as blessed as it is rare. Is all this a plea for the organic form to which Coleridge was apparently committed? I believe not, though it clearly shares certain attributes. It is different in as much as Coleridge knew or at least recognized only the options of metre for his poetry, and in the event was prosodically less adventurous than Wordsworth. I am asking for the imagination to shape its substance within the full recognition of known but more diverse parameters than Coleridge seemed prepared to do, and, if needed, to disclose new limits. I am asking for something less vague *and* more flexible.

This sketch of a difficult situation might seem to imply that writers and readers are puzzling over the same territory, but this is probably not the case. It is the disjunction between writer and reader

over what was, earlier, common territory, which may now constitute much of the reading problem. If, for instance, readers who may have been bored with poetry at school are even so now buyers of new verse and of literary magazines, they may still be trying to read free verse as if they imagined it to be metrical poetry, or a version of it. For those whose education included poetry (schools do not always provide it), the teachers themselves may have begun with modern poetry which often (though by no means invariably) means free verse. They therefore have little experience of metrical poetry. Thus their students may not, without a great deal of effort and independent-mindedness, find themselves able to feel on their pulses the structures and therefore the intricate variables metrical verse entails. How, for instance, might such readers perceive the stress and stretching of form in Hopkins' 'The Windhover', when the nature of the framework is unknown, unfamiliar or unfelt?

And if poets themselves were not instructed, and have not felt their way into *both* modes, and are not encouraged by their readers to do so, how can poets and readers hope to explore together these fuller possibilities? What we need now is not only the study of Metaphysical or Romantic poetry, but the thoroughgoing establishment of an inclusive territory of understanding and an informed mutual respect, so that our response to poetry (and other forms) is not compartmentalized into 'then' and 'now', but becomes, instead, an interacting whole. Such an inspection would have to look on metrical poetry and free verse as part of one understanding, each aspect of which modifies the perception of the other. They are different, if interrelated modes.

Not only is the argument between metricists and free-versers wasteful: it excludes mutually beneficent sources of enrichment, understanding and possible development. The problem is much more serious than an argument over forms, rhetoric and prosody, crucial though such an argument is; because *common* understanding would enable us to feel the apprehension of earlier poets – Wordsworth's felt life, for instance, in his best work slowly and deeply engaging with the suffering of others. Such a reciprocity of understanding might show us how to find fresh ways of mediating between life and our responses to it, recreated in writing. So that although this ought not to be thought of as a rhetorical problem, yet our ways of engaging it will involve us in looking at rhetoric and prosody.

Metrical verse uses the four components of which free verse

uses three only. Some (measured) metrical verse counts both emphases (or duration) *and* syllables. Iambic pentameter, for instance, the central measure for Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and much of Wordsworth, is, to the metronome, ten syllables, of which five are weak(er) and which alternate with five that receive stress, emphasis or duration. Additionally, metrical and free verse are each composed in lines, but they relate differently to the praxis and principle of *lineation*.

So here I want to look at the third and fourth components which might be seen to relate like the two sides of Saussure's 'sheet of paper'. In my picture, on one side is syntax or the energy of a sentence, and on the other the sentence's meaning. Of course, in one sense one cannot speak of the energy, or syntax, of a sentence without also experiencing its meaning. Yet if one looks at the way the energy of a sentence, its syntax, is deployed, we will be able to see the finely tuned meaning, and what tunes it. The frontal approach that asks simply, of a quite complex verse sentence, 'what is its meaning?' will receive an inadequate answer.

Supposing metre to be formalized rhythm, it may be possible to say that while metrical lines of verse have both metre and rhythm, free verse either mixes in, or has no, metrical lines, and is rhythmic only.

For poet and reader the question also involves the way in which the energy-and-meaning of syntax intersects with lineation. The position of the line-unit, and its intersection with the energy of the sentence, will reinforce and often create meanings additional to the sentence in its prose, scrolled-out form. Where metre intersects with syntax, a more distributed spread of the various components occurs than in free verse, where, by definition, it is rhythm alone that intersects with syntax in lineation.

Yet it's not a question that in one diagram we get metre and in the other, of free verse, we do not. The relationship between the components of free verse is different from the interconnection of the components in metred verse. In free verse not only does the rhythm have to bear the weight of itself *and* the absence (as a rule) of metre; it has also to relate in a more – I almost said dynamic way. Rhythm in free verse must relate, in its lineation, to syntax as a partner, with even greater interdependence than in metred verse. Thus in free verse in the interaction between them, rhythm is either more dynamic or more subtle (as Charles O. Hartman has shown) than it usually is in metrical verse. In this latter the danger comes

from the round of metrical structures taking the strain in such a way as to risk weakening rhythm's quick and essential relationship with the energy of the syntax. On the other hand, free verse risks losing the *buoyant* lyric shaping of metrical verse. Consider in this respect Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' and 'The Solitary Reaper'.

Look at two metrical examples from Lawrence and Eliot. The example from Lawrence is the opening of 'Bavarian Gentians' from the posthumously published 'Last Poems'; from Eliot, the opening of the *unrhymed* 'terza rima' section from the first movement of *Little Gidding* (*Four Quartets*). It may be objected that Lawrence's lines are more grounded 'in life' than Eliot's, which come more from the intellect. This, too, is the point I would make. Taking Lawrence's lines first:

Not every man has gentians in his house
in soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

Lawrence starts this free verse poem with two iambic pentameters which, however, have in them much of the felt nature of his previous free verse practice. The two metrical lines quickly establish the context and orientation of the poem with its components 'gentians', 'his house', 'September'. Instigating these in his 'new' metrical verse, Lawrence operates his capacity as fiction-writer working with an economy Eliot lacks; with the contrasting result that whatever virtues there are in Eliot's deliberate restating, at the end of five metrical lines we find we are no further into an understanding of the context or subject:

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending
After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
Had passed below the horizon of his homing.
(80-4)

Despite the defining words 'uncertain', 'interminable', 'recurrent' (markers of Eliot's restating process), 'unending' and 'dove', what have we understood, and where are we? (London's bombed streets during the Second World War, perhaps with Yeats, perhaps with Dante?) This part of the section is narration and colloquy, and would