WRITING POEMS

FOURTH EDITION

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VERSE IS

Catsup and Diamonds

Shakespeare was seventeen. None of his poems was written, nor even imagined. That year—perhaps a year or two earlier or later—admiring a poem, he wrote one similar to it. Possibly his wasn't a very good poem, but it pleased him. He enjoyed having written it, enjoyed saying it aloud. Soon he wrote another poem, then another. Like him, all poets begin. Like them, Shakespeare chose to write in a form called verse.

What is verse, then?

We may begin to answer by noting the obvious difference between verse and prose. When you open a book, how do you know whether you are looking at prose or verse? Prose always continues across the printed page from left margin to a right margin set arbitrarily, *externally*, by the printer. The printer determines when a new line begins, and the wider the page, the longer the line. On a page wide enough, an entire book of prose could theoretically be printed on one line.

Verse, however, is a system of writing in which the right margin, the line-turn, is determined *internally* by a mechanism contained within the line itself. Thus, no matter how wide the page, a poem is always printed in the same way. The poet, not the printer, determines line length, or measure.

The Greek word for measure is *meter* (as in *thermometer*, "heat measure"). In poetry the word *meter* traditionally refers to the conventions of verse by which poets measure their lines (for instance, iambic pentameter). *All* verse, though, even free verse, has some kind of measure—some rationale or system by which the poet breaks or ends lines. The choice of the measure may be intuitive or trained, but the nature of verse demands that poets have a clear perception of the identity of each line, even if they cannot articulate the reasons.

This crucial aspect of verse is hidden in the etymology of the word itself. *Verse* comes from the Latin *versus*, which derives from the verb *versare*, meaning "to

turn." (This root appears in such familiar words as *reverse*, "to turn back.") Originally the past participle, *versus* literally meant "*having turned.*" As a noun it came to mean *the turning of the plough*, hence *furrow*, and ultimately *row* or *line*. Thus, the English word *verse* refers to the *deliberate turning from line to line* that distinguishes verse from prose.

This deliberate turning of lines adds an element to verse that prose does not possess. The rhythm of prose is simply the linear cadence of the voice; the pauses, which break and so determine the rhythm of the flow, merely set off the clauses and phrases that are the units of sentences—and are normally marked in written or printed prose by punctuation. In verse, however, this same cadence plays over the additional, relatively fixed, unit of **line**. Reading verse, the voice also pauses ever so slightly at line-ends, as if acknowledging the slight muscular shifting of the eye back to the left margin. The element of line thus gives verse an extraordinary, complex rhythmic potential of infinite variation.

Line-breaks may coincide with grammatical or syntactical units. This reinforces their regularity and emphasizes normal speech pauses.

> How many times,
> I thought,
> must winter come
> and with its chill whiteness
> slip-cover
> field and town.

Line-breaks also may occur within grammatical or syntactical units, creating pauses and introducing unexpected emphases.

> How
> many times, I thought, must
> winter
> come and with its chill
> whiteness
> slip-cover field and
> town.

When the end of a line coincides with a normal speech pause (usually at punctuation), the line is called **end-stopped**, as in these lines by John Milton (1608–1674) from "Lycidas":

> As killing as the canker to the Rose,
> Or taint-worm to the weanling Herds that graze,
> Or Frost to Flowers, that their gay wardrobe wear,

Lines that end without any parallel to a normal speech pause are called **run-on** or **enjambed** (noun: **enjambment**), as in these lines from *Paradise Lost*:

> Of man's first disobedience, || and the Fruit
> Of that forbidden Tree, || whose mortal taste
> Brought Death into the World, || and all our woe.

A **caesura** (||), a normal speech pause that occurs within a line, may produce further variations of rhythm and counterpoint not possible in prose.

By varying the use of end-stop, run-on, and caesura and by playing sense, grammar, and syntax against them, the poet may produce fresh rhythms. Note how Milton creates an effect of free-falling with these devices:

> Men called him Mulciber: and how he fell
> From Heaven they fabled, thrown by angry Jove
> Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn
> To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
> A summer's day, and with the setting sun
> Dropt from the zenith, like a falling star,
> On Lemnos, th' Aegean isle.

The syntactical pauses, or divisions of the action, occur within the lines; and the line-ends are primarily run-on.

LINE

Line is the essence of verse. The poet's sensitivity to line, an awareness of its interplay with the other elements of a poem, is central to craft. Consider this quatrain written by an anonymous, sixteenth century poet and now called "Western Wind."

> Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
> The small rain down can rain?
> Christ, if my love were in my arms
> And I in my bed again!

In love and away from home, the poet longs impatiently for spring when the lovers will be reunited. In prose the poet might have written something like this:

> I long for spring to come, with its westerly wind and its fine, nurturing rain; for then at last I will again hold my love in my arms and we will be in bed together!

Compare the poem and its prose imitation. What makes the poem richer?

Speaking *to* the wind, for instance, suggests isolation as well as loneliness. In prose we address inanimate objects only rarely, as someone who has just struck a thumb with a hammer may address the hammer. In the poem both wind and the "small rain" are personified—**personification** is treating something inanimate as if it had the qualities of a person, such as gender or (here) volition—and "can rain" suggests that the rain shares the speaker's impatience for spring. Similarly, the direct address to the wind suggests that the exclamatory "Christ" in line 3 is also, in part, a prayer. The speaker's world is a world of forces—wind, rain, and Christ—as the merely human world of the prose imitation is not. The poem expresses the natural procreativity of the speaker's desire more passionately than the prose version does, so that the human in the poem also seems to be a force among forces. The incomplete conditional of lines 3–4 conveys more by implication than the prose's explicit but flat "we will be in bed together." What is longed for is simply

beyond words. The poem's singular "I in my bed again!" seems at once more vigorous and, because it is in some measure joking, less intimidated by circumstance than does the rather passive prose.

All of this dramatization might be presented in prose, but it occurs more naturally, more succinctly in verse. The compression of verse calls for an alertness of attention, word by word, line by line, that we rarely give to prose. More happens in less space (and fewer words) in verse than in prose, which is habitually discursive and given to adding yet something further, drawing us onward to what is next and then next, and next again. We half expect the prose to continue, whereas the poem seems finished, complete. Prose, like a straight line, extends to the horizon. Verse, like a spiral, draws us into itself.

This reflexiveness of verse causes us to attend to, hear, *feel*, the poem's rhythm as we do not the prose's rhythm. Only two syllables in lines 1–2 (the second syllable of "Western" and "The") are not heavy. The lines are slow, dense, clogged, expressing the speaker's anguish and the ponderousness of waiting. By contrast, lines 3–4 are filled with light syllables; only "Christ," "love," "arms," "I," and "bed" have real weight. These lines seem to leap forward, expressing the speaker's eagerness for the eventual release of longing into forthright action. The poet's measuring of lines is also a measuring of feeling. Rhythm is meaning. The "equal" lines of verse differ more tellingly from one another than the elements of the freer, looser prose can do. The young lover's desire, carrying its own music with it, is less a speech than a song.

Verse invites our attention line by line, adding a spatial dimension that prose cannot imitate. Study the following poem. One of a number of "chansons innocentes," it is by the indefatigable experimenter who elsewhere brilliantly wrote "mOOn," E. E. Cummings (1894–1962).

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and
    the

        goat-footed 20

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

Cummings uses line and word-spacing to choreograph the rhythms visually. Most obvious is the speeding of words run together, "eddieandbill," "bettyandisbel," as the children "come running" or "come dancing"; and the slowing (and so distancing) of words open-spaced, like "whistles far and wee" in line 5. This adverbial phrase is repeated twice, spaced differently for increasing emphasis:

far and wee

then, with a line for each word at poem's end:

far
and
wee

This repetition-with-variation seems appropriate for a poem about the cycle of seasons and return of spring. We notice also that "in Just- / spring"—where the strong, hyphenated run-on (and then extra space in line 2) suggests how *barely* it is spring yet—is picked up in lines 8–9 by

        and it's
spring

and again in lines 15–18 by

                and

it's
spring
and

The poem establishes its own conventions, and, once they are established, is able to vary them. One example is the alternating of four- and one-line stanzas, which suggests a slower, faster, slower pace. The indentations and stanza-breaks of lines 18–21—

and
    the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles

—suggest a slow, almost dragging gait.

The poem's lack of punctuation (except for apostrophes and hyphens) lets it end without the sense of finality a period might imply. And the convention of using lower-case throughout is significantly varied in "Just-" and "balloonMan." The first perhaps seemed only for added emphasis. At line 21, however, the capitalized words seem intentionally linked to mean that the seller of balloons is *just* a *man*—not, as we suddenly realize that the poem has been quietly suggesting, the goat-footed and licentious god Pan.

"in Just-" is an extreme instance, but the inimitable effect of any poem derives from the *lines* of its verse. Cutting across the sentences, the lines give to every poem its essential difference. Something to say, **content**, and the way of saying it, **form**, are inseparable. As with a diamond, we value not the carbon itself but the form it has taken under pressure.

FORM