

Line and Syntax

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James Longenbach

Line and Syntax

Whatever else he is, Shakespeare is one of the great prose writers in the English language.

Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah! Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, sweeten my imagination.

This is King Lear's madness speaking. While the syntax holds steady in the second sentence ("there's . . . there's"), the diction leaps from elaborate Latinate words (sulphurous, consumption) to the most basic Anglo-Saxon words (pit, stench). A list gives way to repeated exclamation, pure sound: pah, pah. Then the disparities in diction take control of the logic: civet, apothecary, sweeten, imagination. The roaring prophet who begins this speech is in no time superseded by a courtier in search of a fine perfume.

Shakespeare's sentences have many of the qualities we associate with the texture of great poetry (patterned syntax, varied diction, metaphorical implication, disjunctive movement), but they are not set in lines—at least they are not set in lines in one of the two earliest printings of *King Lear*. In the other printing, however, these sentences are set in lines. A few of the words are different, but the basic shape of the sentences remains the same.

Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness,
There's the sulphury pit, burning, scalding,
Stench, consummation. Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!
Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,
To sweeten my imagination.

We don't know what Shakespeare intended. One compositor set this passage as prose, the other set it as poetry; they may have been working from different manuscripts, neither of which was necessarily Shakespeare's own. How does the division of these four sentences into four and a half lines change our apprehension of them? What procedure determines the length of the line? Does that procedure introduce arbitrary

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line endings, or are the line endings functional in their own right?

In this essay I will discuss metrical lines (which follow a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables), syllabic lines (which adhere to a fixed number of syllables, whether stressed or unstressed), and free-verse lines (in which the relationship between stressed and unstressed syllables is consistently various). In every case, however the line is shaped, what will matter is not the line as such but the relationship of the line to the poem's syntax—to the unfolding structure of the poem's sentences. That relationship is endlessly various. Short lines or long lines don't inevitably function in any particular way. A rhyming line doesn't necessarily function differently from a free-verse line. In the end, line doesn't exist as a principle in itself. Line has a meaningful identity only when we begin to hear its relationship to other elements in the poem.

Shakespeare's lines are organized metrically. While his plays often contain passages of prose, the language of his plays is most often cast in blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter lines. That is, unrhymed lines in which there are usually five pairs of syllables: the second syllable of each pair gets more stress than the first syllable.

BeNEATH is ALL the FIEND'S. There's HELL, there's DARKness

None of the lines in the passage I've quoted from *King Lear* is a perfect pentameter: although it contains five stressed syllables, this line has an extra unstressed syllable hanging on to its end. The second line is missing an unstressed syllable at its beginning. And the third line scans programmatically only if we stress the syllables in an unnatural way.

Stench, CONsumMAtion, FIE, fie, FIE; pah, PAH!

No actor would say the line this way, if only because he would not give all the stressed syllables an equal amount of stress. As in all accomplished poetry, there is a tension here between pattern and variation. If we've heard a lot of iambic pentameter lines before encountering these ones, we will feel this tension as pleasure.

Counting the stresses helps us to recognize a principle that divides Shakespeare's prose sentences into lines, but merely counting the stresses won't let us understand the function of line. That's because I've so far described the line only as an arbitrary unit: something that might contain a certain pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Now we need to listen to the way in which this unit, this way of organizing the syllables, plays against the syntax of the sentences. Listen to the whole of *King Lear*'s speech, paying attention to the varied length of the sentences in relationship to the relatively consistent length of the lines.

When I do stare, see how the subject quakes!
I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?
Adultery? Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery!
No, the wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight.
Let copulation thrive, for Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters

Got 'tween the lawful sheets. To't, luxury, pell-mell,
 For I lack soldiers. Behold yon simp'ring dame,
 Whose face between her forks presageth snow,
 That minces virtue, and does shake the head
 To hear of pleasure's name:
 The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
 With a more riotous appetite. Down from the waist
 They're centaurs, though women all above.
 But to the girdle do the gods inherit;
 Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness,
 There's the sulphury pit, burning, scalding,
 Stench, consummation. Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!
 Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,
 To sweeten my imagination.

This speech is made of twenty-one lines, most of which are pentameters. The speech is also made of fifteen sentences. What is the relationship between these sentences and these lines? How does that relationship help to make us hear the unfolding of the speech in one way rather than another?

First, we may notice that the sentence and the line are not the same thing: sometimes a single sentence may take up a single line, but often the sentence is either shorter than the line or longer than the line. Second, we may notice that even though sentence and line are not the same thing, there is no regular relationship between the sentences and the lines; the sentences do not exceed or fall short of the line in any predictable way. Third, we notice that the lines end differently. Some lines end with a full stop—a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point. Others end with a comma, a semicolon, or a colon that joins together two clauses or phrases within a sentence. And others end with no punctuation at all: the syntax continues in the next line. We might be tempted to say that the line “breaks” at such a moment, but the line merely ends—it doesn’t break. Rather than thinking about what often gets called “line breaks,” it’s more helpful to think about “line endings”: the syntax may or may not break at the point where the line ends.

The opening line of the passage is made of one complete syntactical unit: the syntax does not break. The homeless, bedraggled Lear is clinging pathetically to his lost power, and the opening line feels like a declaration.

When I do stare, see how the subject quakes!

The second line is also syntactically complete, but it is made of two sentences, a statement and a question.

I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?

Then the third line, also syntactically complete, is made of three units: a question, a statement, and an exclamation.

Adultery? Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery!

Though we move from one to two to three syntactical units within these lines, all three lines are end-stopped: syntax ends where the line ends. What is the effect of three such lines in a row?

King Lear is blinded by madness here. He imagines that his friend Gloucester is merely an adulterer who has come before him for mercy, when in fact Gloucester has literally been blinded by the husband of one of Lear's daughters. The relationship of the lines to the syntax does not make Lear sound mad, however: the lines organize the syntax in a way that feels balanced and coherent. Any actor reciting this passage would be led by the relationship of the syntax and the lines to read this passage with a strong sense of reasonableness: the opening declaration (in which syntax equals line) is superseded by lines that are divided logically into two and then three syntactical units. The sound of logical thought is not inappropriate here, for there is a strange logic to what Lear says. Gloucester is indeed an adulterer, and he has been unable to distinguish his loyal legitimate son from his disloyal bastard son.

What happens to the relationship of line to syntax as the speech progresses?

No, the wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight.
Let copulation thrive, for Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

Here we have two sentences, the first of which takes up two lines, the second of which takes up two and a half lines. For the first time in the passage, syntax has exceeded the end of the line, spilling into the following line. We say that such lines are "enjambéd," the word "enjambment" referring generally to lines that end while the syntax keeps going. What is the effect of these kinds of lines, following on the three end-stopped lines preceding them?

First, the mere fact that these sentences are longer than the ones preceding them makes us feel that Lear's mind is in motion, launched from the runway of the three end-stopped lines. Second, the fact that both these sentences are enjambéd or broken across the line introduces a formal tension to the sentences, one that is completely lacking in the first three end-stopped lines. Consider the effect of the first longer sentence if it were written this way:

No, the wren goes to't. And the small gilded fly.
They lecher in my sight.

Had Shakespeare broken up the sentence, he would have continued with the sonic decorum established by the three opening lines of the speech, in which sentences are short and always end where the line ends: the sound of coherence would prevail. Instead, we move in these lines to a new sound—the excitement of syntax overriding the line to which it had previously been subservient. It's important to recognize that no particular kind of line has any inevitable relationship to sound or sense; that is, an enjambment does not necessarily speed up the line or contribute to a sense of frantic movement in thought. But in this speech, we feel Lear's rabid enthusiasm for his

own thought increasing as the speech unfolds, moving from one kind of relationship between syntax and line to another relationship. This progression is appropriate, since the impression of logic is disintegrating as Lear speaks: we know, though Lear does not, that Gloucester's bastard son was not kind to his father.

The disintegration continues as Lear begins to rail at what seems to him the essentially lascivious nature of female sexuality.

Behold yon simp'ring dame,
Whose face between her forks presageth snow,
That minces virtue, and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure's name:
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite.

Even if we don't follow Lear's sense here, we hear the rising passion of his voice because of the increasing tension between syntax and line within the longer sentences. Again, the lines offer implicit instructions to the actor: having begun by reinforcing the impression of reasonableness, the speech should devolve into an increasingly questionable passion. Blaming women will get Lear nowhere.

How, then, do the final lines of this speech, the lines with which I began, sound after we've listened to this movement from an initial trio of end-stopped lines to a group of mostly enjambed lines?

Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness,
There's the sulphury pit, burning, scalding,
Stench, consummation. Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!
Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,
To sweeten my imagination.

Here, at the end of the speech, we return to end-stopped lines. Unlike the trio of opening lines, these lines don't all end with a full stop, but the lines are not enjambed: some definitive turn of syntax takes place at the moment when the line ends. The result is that we feel we have returned to a sonic decorum similar to the one with which we began. The speech begins firmly, determinedly; then it grows into an enthusiasm fueled by Lear's madness; finally it calms down again.

The opening and concluding lines have a different effect, however, for while the concluding lines may *sound* like a return to sanity, they are in fact the most wildly associative lines in the speech: Lear is still talking about the female body when he says "beneath is all the fiend's." Formally, the speech moves from the initial order of syntax matching line through the excitement of syntax exceeding line, ultimately returning to the initial terms of order. But thematically, the speech moves inexorably toward increasingly disordered thought. The fluctuating tension between syntax and line is itself in tension with the thematic content of the speech, and there is no predictable relationship between the form and the content. In other words, the passage does not simply describe a movement of thought; it embodies and complicates that movement through the relationship of syntax and line. This is what great poems do.

The lines I've examined so far are of course taken from a play written in verse, not from a poem as such: I've begun my discussion with dramatic poetry so that I might speak freely of the passage as something we hear. It's a commonplace to talk about the speaker of any poem, but the notion of a speaker may or may not be useful; a poem might feel more like a concatenation of various linguistic strands than like the utterance of a single person. In any case, however, the sonic properties of the poem's language are always crucial. When a poet creates a relationship between the syntax and the lines of her poems, she is trying to organize the language on the page so that it corresponds to what she hears in her head. The poet may speak the lines out loud while composing the poem, but she generally does this to test what is on the page against what she hears—much as a composer turns to the piano not to discover the melody but to confirm it. Then, once the poem is finished, its sounds are re-created in the mind of the reader, and the relationship between line and syntax is one of the primary means through which this sonic information is transmitted. Reading a poem out loud helps us to hear that relationship, but poetry does not literally need to be spoken in order to exist primarily as a sonic work of art.

Listen to the first three stanzas of a little poem by William Carlos Williams. The syntax of the first line follows from the poem's title.

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand.

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

By eschewing most punctuation, this poem puts even more pressure on the relationship of syntax and line to shape the pulse of thought. The poem's first sentence is made of run-on syntax; it is also heavily enjambed. As a result, when we come to the first line of the second stanza—

They taste good to her

—we feel that the poem has reached a stable point after the initial movement of the syntax through the lines. But then Williams makes us think about the way we've heard this syntactically complete line. We hear the following line and a half differently because of the way the syntax is broken over the line ending.

They taste good
to her

And we hear the next line and a half differently as well.

They taste
good to her

The sentence has not changed, but the relationship of its syntax to the line has adjusted the way we hear the sentence's pattern of intonation and stress: because of the location of the enjambment, we hear the sentence first as "They taste GOOD to her" and then as "They TASTE good to her."

Williams is altering the sound of his sentence, but it's interesting to note that the next line of the poem is "you can see it": we have heard the syntax in a particular way because it is arranged and rearranged on the page in a particular way. We know a poem is divided into lines because of the visual arrangement on the page, but the function of the line is sonic. So when we come to the final lines of the poem—

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

—we return to the same point of syntactical stability we encountered in the first line of the second stanza: "They taste good to her." But our sense of the line is now enriched by the different ways in which this little string of five monosyllabic words could be stressed. The line looks the same, but we hear the line differently.

Williams's poem is written in free verse: that is, rather than following a particular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (as the iambic pentameter lines of Shakespeare's blank verse more or less do), each line has its own rhythmic identity. But just as there are many kinds of metered verse, so are there different varieties of free verse. While Williams's poem depends, like Shakespeare's, on the strategic interplay of enjambed and end-stopped lines, Walt Whitman's free-verse lines are almost never enjambed.

In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,
In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs,
In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,
In vain the razor-bill'd auk sails far north to Labrador,
I follow quickly, I ascend to the nest in the fissure of the cliff.

Here, every line is a complete syntactical unit. The poem's energy derives not from the variable tension between line and syntax but from the variety of rhythmic patterns within the line, the different patterns playing off the steady beat of the repeated phrase that begins each line ("In vain").

Both Whitman and Williams are creating a particular relationship between line and

syntax, and both poems depend, as all poems do, on the interplay of what changes with what stays the same—the simultaneous creation and disruption of pattern. But the differences between Whitman and Williams ought to feel as prominent as the similarities between Williams and Shakespeare: everything I’ve said about the fluctuating relationship of syntax and line in Williams’s free verse applies equally well to Shakespeare’s blank verse. Attention to the line tends to undermine a narrow preference for one or another form of poetry, for if you can hear what line is doing to your experience of the syntax in a free-verse poem, then you can hear what line is doing in a metered poem.

It’s instructive to remember that blank verse once seemed as controversial as free verse seemed in the early years of the twentieth century. The earliest surviving poetry in the Western tradition is organized in lines. Tellingly, it was not always written down in lines, a fact that reminds us that line is ultimately a sonic rather than a visual element of the poem. As poetry began to be written in vernacular languages, the addition of rhyme to the line seemed to many people a barbarity. Then, by the seventeenth century, when Milton was writing *Paradise Lost* in blank verse, the deletion of rhyme from line seemed to some people equally barbarous. What does the addition of rhyme do to our sense of the line’s relationship to syntax? In what way does rhyme alert us to the work that all lines, rhymed or unrhymed, metered or unmetered, end-stopped or enjambed, are performing in relationship to syntax?

The three stanzas of Donald Justice’s “Nostalgia and Complaint of the Grandparents” end with the same sentence: “The dead don’t get around much anymore.” Like Williams, Justice lineates the refrain differently in each stanza, the shifting enjambment asking us to place additional stress on the syllable with which the line ends. This version of the sentence—

The dead
Don’t get around much anymore

—sounds different from this version.

The dead don’t get around
Much anymore.

Unlike Williams, however, Justice draws attention to his enjambments by marking the ends of the lines with rhyme. At the end of the penultimate line of the first stanza we emphasize the word “dead” not only because of the enjambment but because the syllable rhymes with “spread” in the line preceding it. The syntax urges us forward but the allure of similar sounds pulls us back.

Our diaries squatted, toad-like,
On dark closet ledges.
Forget-me-not and thistle
Decalcomaned the pages.
But where, where are they now,
All the sad squalors

Of those between-wars parlors?—
Cut flowers; and the sunlight spilt like soda
On torporous rugs; the photo
Albums all outspread . . .
The dead
Don't get around much anymore.

And at the end of the penultimate line of the second stanza we emphasize the word “get” because it rhymes with the word “set.”

There was an hour when daughters
Practiced arpeggios;
Their mothers, awkward and proud,
Would listen, smoothing their hose—
Sundays, half-past five!
Do you recall
How the sun used to loll,
Lazily, just beyond the roof,
Bloodshot and aloof?
We thought it would never set.
The dead don't get
Around much anymore.

And at the end of the third stanza we emphasize the second syllable of the word “around” because it rhymes with “ground.”

Eternity resembles
One long Sunday afternoon.
No traffic passes; the cigar smoke
Curls in a blue cocoon.
Children, have you nothing
For our cold sakes?
No tea? No little tea cakes?
Sometimes now the rains disturb
Even our remote suburb.
There's a dampness underground.
The dead don't get around
Much anymore.

The impact of the shifting refrain depends on the fact that everything else about the stanza stays pretty much the same. In each case, the second and fourth lines rhyme (“afternoon” and “cocoon”), the sixth and seventh lines rhyme (“sakes” and “cakes”), and the eighth and ninth lines rhyme (“disturb” and “suburb”). But this complicated stanza form doesn't matter in itself, just as the fact that Shakespeare's iambic pentameter line has five stresses doesn't really matter in itself. What matters is the way in which the syntax of the poem's sentences moves through these lines of varying length. What matters is the way in which the rhymes make us especially aware of what is happening to the syntax at the ends of these lines. What matters is the way in which the consistent pattern of the stanza works against the variable grain of the

sentences, forcing us to hear their sense in a particular way. If you read the poem out loud, your voice rises and falls not where you like but as the lineation demands.

What's more, the power of the lineation increases as the stanza moves forward, making the shape of the stanza feel not like a cookie cutter but like a dramatic linear process. Because the first and third lines of each stanza don't rhyme, we might not immediately notice that the second and fourth lines do, especially since the fifth line doesn't rhyme either.

Eternity resembles
One long Sunday afternoon.
No traffic passes; the cigar smoke
Curls in a blue cocoon.
Children, have you nothing

But beginning with the sixth line, the rhymes move closer together, increasing the tension between syntax and line, binding the lines together more tightly at the same time that the length of the lines begins to vary.

For our cold sakes?
No tea? No little tea cakes?
Sometimes now the rains disturb
Even our remote suburb.

These two rhymed couplets in a row prepare our ears for the slam-dunk rhyme that shifts the way we apprehend the stanza's final sentence—

There's a dampness underground.
The dead don't get around
Much anymore.

—but what matters here is not the simple fact that the third stanza ends with a trimeter followed by a dimeter line (“The dead don't get around / much anymore”), the second stanza with a dimeter followed a trimeter (“The dead don't get / Around much anymore”), and the first stanza with a monometer or single-stress line followed by a tetrameter (“The dead / Don't get around much anymore”). What matters is that the same sentence is made not only to sound slightly different in each case but to mean something slightly different in each case. The sound of the poem is its poignancy.

A poem like “Nostalgia and Complaint of the Grandparents” gets called traditional because it generally employs the whole poetic tool kit: rhyme, meter, and line (as well as lots of other tools). But the best poets who fought for the legitimacy of free verse in the early years of the twentieth century were not trying to make us choose between apparently different kinds of poetry; they were attempting to open our ears to a wider range of poetic possibilities. Following them, a poet like Justice learned as much from Williams and Pound as he did from Shakespeare and Keats, and one of the most important lessons was that the language of a particular poem may or may not demand the whole tool kit. If rhyme is jettisoned from a poem, what tactic must

flex its muscles in order to keep the poetic contraction in the air? Meter. And if meter is foresworn? Line. And if line is abandoned? Syntax. And if syntax is abandoned? Diction. Sometimes it will be necessary for a poet to remember every tool in the kit; at other times it will be equally crucial to forget them, though nothing can be forgotten if it has not first been remembered.

Listen to seven sentences from Richard Howard's "November, 1889," a dramatic monologue spoken by the Victorian poet Robert Browning. The twenty-two lines into which the sentences are divided do not follow a metrical pattern, and neither are they rhymed.

Curious symptoms withal
for migraine: patterns moving
over surfaces, faint
most often, fine designs
that would come as a kind of cobweb
cast iridescent upon the others, a net
intervening between me and them.
Lord! the things one sees when a fever-lit mind
grants no middle distance.
Proximity of the real!
And just when we are grateful
for the dark, when night resumes us,
comes proximity
of what is unreal,
the melting waxworks of our sleep
called dreams. I am against dreams,
not being one to trust
memory to itself.
In my delirium, then, I had
conviction of divided identity,
never ceasing to be two persons who
ever thwarted and opposed one another.

In these lines, Howard's Browning describes the world as it appears through sickness, but he also describes the poem in which he speaks: the poem is a net, a design, a moving pattern through which the world is perceived. And if Browning initially thinks that the mind might be cured, he eventually sees that anything we know—the past, each other, ourselves—we apprehend through "a net that covers the world." How is the "net" of this poem organized?

While the lines of "November, 1889" are not metered, the turns of the poem's syntax are draped across an intricate syllabic pattern. That is, the length of the line is determined not by counting stressed syllables but by counting syllables alone, no matter if they are stressed or unstressed; the syllables within the lines may, as in free verse, have any particular pattern of stress. Howard has not divided the poem into stanzas, but a repeated pattern of fourteen syllabic lines is the building block of the poem: a pair of seven-syllable lines is followed by a pair of six-syllable lines, then a quatrain of alternating nine- and eleven-syllable lines—

You can count the rest yourself. What matters here is not the syllable count as such

but, once again, the tension between the syntax and the line endings determined by the count. That tension is the reason for this pattern of lines, and the aural pleasure we take in the poem is due to the way lines marshal the language into patterns of assonance and alliteration (“cast iridescent upon the others, a net”) that don’t necessarily have anything to do with the already given parameters of syntax. Line in relation to syntax, not syntax alone, is grouping the syllables in particular ways so that we hear those patterns. On the rare occasions when syllable count and syntax match (“Prolixity of the real!”), we feel the thrilling absence of the endless spill of enjambment that otherwise thrills us because of the way it determines intonation and stress. Were the line merely “cast iridescent upon others,” there would be no tension, no rising of the voice toward the terminal syllable “net,” which pushes us forward to the next line but also tugs us back to the sound of “cast” and “-scent.”

I’ve said that “November, 1889” does not rhyme, at least in the conventional way—rhyming words placed at the ends of the lines. But there is enough sonic echo in the poem to make us mark the final syllables of certain lines with particular emphasis. I’ve also said that the poem is not metered, but it’s important to note that a syntactically complete line in this poem (“Prolixity of the real!”) feels like a resting point, just as a syntactically complete line does both in Shakespeare’s metered verse (“When I do stare, see how the subject quakes!”) and in Williams’s free verse (“They taste good to her”). These three ways of thinking about the line in itself—metered verse, syllabic verse, free verse—have different effects, but in any case the line exists not because it has a certain pattern of stresses, a certain number of syllables, or an irregular number of stresses and syllables: the line exists because it has a relationship to syntax. You might say that a one-line poem doesn’t really have anything we can discuss as a line, except inasmuch as we feel its relationship to lines in other poems. We need at least two lines to begin to hear how the line is functioning.

Lines can be short, as in Robert Herrick’s “Upon His Departure Hence.”

Thus I
 Passe by
 And die:
 As One,
 Unknown,
 And gon:
 I’m made
 A shade,
 And laid
 I’ th grave,
 There have
 My Cave.
 Where tell
 I dwell,
Farewell.

Lines can be long, as in this passage from William Blake’s “The Book of Thel.”

Why a Tongue impress’d with honey from every wind?
 Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?

Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror, trembling, & affright?
Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy?
Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?

And lines can be even longer than that, as in this passage from Allen Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra."

I walked the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade
of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills
and cry.
Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole, companion, we thought
the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the
gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery.
The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on top of final Frisco
peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those mounts, just ourselves rheumy-
eyed and hungover like old bums on the riverbank, tired and wily.
Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray shadow against the sky, big as
a man, sitting dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust—
—I rushed up enchanted—it was my first sunflower, memories of Blake—my
visions—Harlem
and Hells of the Eastern rivers, bridges clanking Joes Greasy Sandwiches, dead
baby carriages, blank treadles tires forgotten and unretreaded, the poem of the
riverbank, condoms & pots, steel knives, nothing stainless, only the dank muck
and the razor-sharp artifacts passing into the past . . .

The danger with Herrick's monometer (or single-stress) lines, grouped in rhymed triplets, is that the line endings manipulate the syntax with such rapidity that the poem seems tricky. And the danger with Blake's fourteeners (or seven-stress lines) is that the line may too easily break in two, making the lines sound like the more familiar ballad meter: alternating four- and three-stress lines. And the danger with Ginsberg's attenuated free-verse lines is that they might stop functioning as lines, maintaining no particular relationship to the syntax. But Herrick's quietly natural syntax keeps his poem from feeling merely like a feat. And Blake's repositioning of the caesura (or pause) within each line prevents his fourteeners from breaking into regular pieces, while his repetition of a syntactical pattern plays against the irregularity. And the first three lines of Ginsberg's poem, all of them syntactically complete, establish a stable relationship between line and syntax—a launching pad for the ecstatic fourth sentence, enjambed across several lines. The length of the line does not in itself have a predictable effect.

Nor does the variation of the length of the line within a single poem, as in this rhymed and metered stanza from George Herbert's "The Collar."

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
I will abroad.
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free; free as the roe,
Loose as the winde, as large as store.

Or in this rhymed and syllabic stanza from Marianne Moore's "The Past is the Present."

If external action is effete
and rhyme is outmoded,
I shall revert to you,
Habakkuk, as on a recent occasion I was goaded
into doing, by XY, who was speaking of unrhymed verse.

Or in this free-verse passage from George Oppen's "Of Being Numerous."

Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of thought and one of his
dialects and what has happened to me
Have made poetry

To dream of that beach
For the sake of an instant in the eyes,

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds
Of the singular

Which is the bright light of shipwreck

In each of these passages the lines feel inevitable, not because the author has made a decision to use a long line or a short line or a mixture of long and short lines: the length of the line establishes a relationship to the syntax, and that relationship is guided by the author's sense of how the syntax should be paced—how the given syllables of the words should be organized so that we hear the pattern of their stresses in one way rather than another way.

Oppen begins with a line that, like Ginsberg's line in "Sunflower Sutra," is so very long that it threatens to flatten out into prose, the relationships between its stressed syllables all but lost in a welter of unstressed syllables.

Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of thought and one of his
dialects and what has happened to me

But by following this line with a line almost as short as Herrick's, a line whose brevity is emphasized by the unexpected rhyme between the final syllable of its final word ("poetry") and the final syllable of the long line preceding it ("me")—

Have made poetry

—Oppen suddenly tightens the rhythmic texture of the poem. This line feels epigrammatic not only because of what it says but because we now hear stressed syllables in close proximity to one another: "Have MADE POetry." As a result, these

lines seem to enact what the sentence is about: the lines make poetry, moving from a tenuous concatenation of ingredients to a terse declaration of purpose.

The subsequent lines of the passage enact a similar movement between constriction and release. Following a group of short enjambed lines that in this case embody the hesitancy of the process of thought—

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds
Of the singular

—the final line sounds like a resting place because its greater length allows for syntactical completion and a more resonant pattern of stressed syllables.

Which is the BRIGHT LIGHT of SHIPwreck

The two stresses in the middle of the line are not only wedged against each other without any intervening unstressed syllables, they also rhyme with each other: “bright light.” Then the vowel in the final stress of the line (“ship”) pulls our ears back to the vowel sound in the first two syllables of the line (“which is”). In contrast to the lines preceding it, this line feels balanced, a completed pattern of sound. So while the opening lines of this passage feel satisfying because of the movement from a very long line to a very short line, the final lines feel satisfying because of the movement from a sequence of short lines to a longer line.

Though we may not notice it at first, rhyme plays just as important a role in Oppen’s lines as it does in Herbert’s metered lines or Moore’s syllabic lines. And though the length of Oppen’s lines is not determined by the counting of stresses or syllables, there is nothing casual about the number of stresses and syllables in each of his lines. Deciding where the line should end in a free-verse poem might initially seem more mysterious than in a metered or syllabic poem, but in fact it is not: whether or not the line ending is determined by an arbitrary constraint, the line ending won’t have a powerful function unless we hear it playing off the syntax in relationship to other line endings.

Reconsider the end of King Lear’s speech.

Beneath is all the fiend’s.
There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit.
Burning, scalding, stench, consumption—
Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!
Give me an ounce of civet, good
Apothecary, sweeten my imagination.

Here, I’ve lineated the sentences that are sometimes printed as Shakespeare’s prose, but instead of organizing the language in iambic pentameter lines, I’ve made lines that encourage us to hear variations from that pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. To hear the first line as a pentameter—

Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness

—is to hear the syntax rise to the final word of the line (“darkness”) and fall away onto the next phrase: “There is the sulphurous pit.” In contrast, to hear the first line as a syntactically complete declaration followed by a triplet of parallel phrases in the second line—

Beneath is all the fiend's.
There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit.

—is to hear the syntax rise from “hell” to “darkness” to “pit” in a line that is not only syntactically complete but also more syntactically complex. As my version continues, the next line moves from three parts (hell, darkness, pit) to four—

Burning, scalding, stench, consumption—

—and I've taken the liberty of concluding this line with a dash that pushes us forward to the fifth line's five monosyllabic words: “fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!” Then, in the final two lines, I've introduced the first and only enjambment in a passage in which syntax and line have been equivalent.

Give me an ounce of civet, good
Apothecary, sweeten my imagination.

Enjambment is not in itself valuable: like everything else in a poem, its power depends on its relationship to other formal aspects of the poem—more specifically, the nature of the line endings surrounding it. I might have chosen to lineate the final sentence this way.

Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,
Sweeten my imagination.

Or this way.

Give me an ounce of civet,
Good apothecary, sweeten my imagination.

But by introducing the strong enjambment—

Give me an ounce of civet, good
Apothecary, sweeten my imagination.

—I've broken the pattern established by the earlier lineation and introduced a moment of formal tension as the passage concludes. The syntax of the penultimate line feels balanced, since its final word alliterates strongly with its initial word (“Give me an

ounce of civet, good”); at the same time the syntax feels broken, the line ending pushing us to the concluding line with a force that has not hitherto been utilized in the passage. Because the line ends on the adjective “good,” we tend to put more stress on that syllable than we would if it were followed in the line by the noun it modifies: “apothecary.”

GIVE me an OUNCE of CIVet, GOOD

As a result, we hear the alliteration of “good” with “give” more powerfully, just as we hear the rhyme between the two other stressed syllables in the line (“give” and “civ”). Our ears are pulled back to the beginning of the line by similar sounds, and at the same time they are pushed forward to the next line by the strong enjambment. Sonic echo is working with line in order to determine the particular way we hear the syntax.

There is not necessarily one way to do this.

Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, sweeten
My imagination.

This arrangement sacrifices what to my ear is the more attractively complex music of a line whose syntax feels both balanced and broken; but this attenuation of the penultimate line, ending with an even more dramatic enjambment on the verb (“sweeten”), is worth considering. In fact, I wouldn’t have settled on my preferred arrangement without considering it. The weighing of such alternatives goes on in the composition of any line, whether or not its length is determined by a metrical or syllabic pattern. Robert Frost once said rather impishly that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down; in fact, writing any kind of poem is more like playing tennis on a court in which the net is in motion at the same time that the ball is in motion.

Listen finally to the opening lines of “Nostos,” a free-verse poem by Louise Glück. The title is the Greek word for homecoming.

There was an apple tree in the yard—
this would have been
forty years ago—behind,
only meadow. Drifts
of crocus in the damp grass.
I stood at the window:
late April. Spring
flowers in the neighbor’s yard.
How many times, really, did the tree
flower on my birthday,
the exact day, not
before, not after? Substitution
of the immutable
for the shifting, the evolving.
Substitution of the image

For relentless earth. What
do I know of this place,
the role of the tree for decades
taken by a bonsai, voices
rising from the tennis courts—
Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut.

This passage is made of twenty-one lines. It is also made of nine sentences, some of which are syntactically incomplete, the first of which is a run-on sentence. As in the pentameter version of the passage from *King Lear*, there is no regular relationship between the sentences and the lines. The sentences do not exceed or fall short of the lines in a predictable way, and neither is the way in which the lines end predictable: some end with a full stop, others with a comma or a dash, and still others with no punctuation at all. But like *King Lear*'s speech, Glück's poem begins with a syntactically complete line. It proposes the presence in the past of something that no longer exists in the present, and it could not do so in more plainly.

There was an apple tree in the yard

Following this moment of sonic stability, however, the poem not only describes a more tenuous process of thought, it also makes us hear the shifting hesitancy of the process in lines that disrupt our natural apprehension of the syntax.

Substitution
of the immutable
for the shifting, the evolving.
Substitution of the image
for relentless earth.

So while we hear the sound of certainty at the beginning of the poem ("There was an apple tree"), we feel here the evolving drama of discovery as that certainty unravels. Unlike Shakespeare, Glück is dramatizing the encroachment not of madness but of self-doubt, and in both cases the lineation is determining the pulse of thought, the interplay of different kinds of line endings creating different ways of apprehending syntax as thinking. Not this—

What do I know of this place,
The role of the tree for decades taken by a bonsai,
Voices rising from the tennis courts

—but this: lines that become a runway for the sonic boom of revelation with which the poem concludes.

What
do I know of this place,
the role of the tree for decades
taken by a bonsai, voices

rising from the tennis courts—
Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut.
As one expects of a lyric poet.
We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.

Here, at the end of “Nostos,” we return to syntactically complete lines: the opening line makes an observation about the past, and the three concluding lines offer a sequence of declarations about the mental processes through which we come to understand the relationship between the past and the present. In between, the enjambed sentences embody that wayward process.

As is the case in Lear’s speech, however, these concluding lines have a different effect from the syntactically complete line with which the poem opens. At the beginning of “Nostos,” the confluence of syntax and line suggests a security about knowledge and memory that the poem persists to unravel; in retrospect, that security sounds unexamined, the plain declaration of existence weirdly naïve: “There was an apple tree.” At the end of the poem, in contrast, the confluence of syntax and line sounds rueful, the hard-won product of thought rather than a declaration masking the necessity of more thinking: “As one expects of a lyric poet.” It’s not that the poem has concluded by saying anything particularly challenging: one has only to imagine a poem beginning with the line “We look at the world once, in childhood” to feel that the poem is thrilling because of the way it moves to its concluding wisdom, not because of the wisdom as such. The line is no arbitrary unit, no ruler, but a dynamic force that works in conjunction with other elements of the poem: the syntax of the sentences, the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables, and the resonance of similar sounds.