

METRICS AND FREE VERSE

"We have said...that concentration and intensity are two of the qualities that tend to distinguish the poetic treatment of a subject from the prose treatment; and we related these qualities to the emphasis on form in poetry. The form of poetry, we said, is more closely organized than is the form of prose. As an example of this principle we indicated the greater selectivity in use of detail, the emphasis on suggestiveness, and the importance in the placing of details in relation to the central intention of a poem.... These things indicate the close-knit organization of various elements which one finds in poetry. Some of the same types of organizations are to be found in prose as well as in poetry, but poetry *tends* toward a higher degree of formal organization than does prose. For example, the poor choice of words on the basis of connotation is much less damaging to a novel than to a poem. The damaged novel may still give some satisfaction, but the poem in which the writer has given little attention to connotation would certainly be a complete failure.

This tendency toward a high degree of organization in poetry is most obvious in the use of *rhythmical* language... Some people, in fact, are accustomed to think that the use of rhythmical language is what chiefly distinguishes poetry from prose. But the distinction made on this basis can in the end be one only of degree and not of kind. This is obviously true when we reflect that by its very nature language, whether in prose or poetry, involves rhythm. In any prose whatsoever we feel a rise and fall of emphasis: we do not pronounce each syllable with precisely the same emphasis. We may say, however, that even if there is not an absolute difference between prose and poetry on the basis of rhythm, there is still a very important relative difference....

If one will read, preferably aloud, the specimens given above, it will be clear that all of them are, to some degree, rhythmical, even the first one with its dull, flat, matter-of-fact statement. Indeed, if we read carefully we can see that the specimens form, roughly speaking, a sort of ascending scale in regard to regularity and emphasis of the rhythm.... Specimen 3 is taken from a work of *prose*, specimen 4 from a *poem*; yet a person hearing the two read aloud might not very easily distinguish them on this basis. Evidently there are degrees, as we have said, of regularization of rhythm, and the distinction between verse, with its regularized rhythm, and prose, with its freer rhythm, is not an absolute one.

METER

In English verse this ordering is related to a pattern of accented and unaccented syllables. By *meter* we mean the measure of the verse according to the line. The unit of measure is called the *foot*, a unit composed, in English verse, of one accented and one or more unaccented syllables. Names have been given to the various types of foot.... For instance, the most common foot in English poetry is called the *iambic foot*; it is composed of one unaccented and one accented syllable. The following line is composed of iambic feet: Is this the face that launched a thousand ships.... The line may be described as *iambic pentameter*; that is, it is composed of five iambic feet.

Because of the prominence of meter in poetry and perhaps because of the amount of attention which is usually given to the technique of *versification*...people sometimes tend to confuse verse with poetry, forgetting that *verse is only one of the instruments which the poet uses to gain his effect*... This confusion is avoided if we realize that it is entirely possible to have verse without having a poetic effect. To illustrate the fact that verse, as such, does not give the poetic effect and is not to be confused with poetry, we can point to the following line, which provides an example of iambic pentameter: 'A Mr. Wilkerson, a clergyman....' Or it would be possible to construct a pattern of pure nonsense that could be accurately scanned.... Verse is simply one of many instruments--narrative, dramatic incident, figurative language, logical sense of words, associations of words--at the poet's disposal.... One must always remember that poetry is the result of a combination of relationships among the elements and does not inhere specially in any one of them....

RHYTHM

We have said that verse represents a specialization of rhythm in language. Rhythm is, of course, a basic function of all life. In our very bodies it is the most constant fact of which we are aware--the beat of the heart, the drawing of breath, the movement in walking. Our awareness of the whole objective world is constantly referred to the rhythm of the seasons, of day and night, of the solar system. In addition to the connection of rhythm with all sorts of basic processes, the more intense states of emotion tend to seek a rhythmical expression. The life of primitive people or the habits of children or the nature of religious rituals all testify to this psychological fact. And we know how the moans of a person in great grief or pain tend to assume a rhythmical pattern. Considerations of this sort may help to indicate why verse has become traditionally associated with poetry. For poetry, though not merely emotional nor to be defined as the 'expression of pure emotion,' often treats experiences of great emotional intensity and does attempt to do justice to the emotional elements in experience.

Perhaps because of considerations of this sort, writers have stressed the hypnotic power exerted by verse upon the hearer. In stressing this hypnotic power, such writers are thinking, it should be pointed out, not of the apparent sluggishness and dullness of the hypnoidal state, but of the increased concentration of attention and suggestibility. It is, in fact, the *attention-catching* quality of rhythm that is sometimes prominent. It is this that makes Theodore Roethke, in beginning his discussion of verse technique, seize on the lines 'Hinx, minx, the old witch winks, / The fat begins to fry.' The person in the hypnoidal condition hangs upon every word of the hypnotist and attends to, and accepts, even the slightest suggestion. One of the most interesting statements about this aspect of verse comes from Coleridge who says that meter tends 'to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention.... As a medicated atmosphere, or as a wine during animated conversation, they [the anticipations set up by the meter] act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed.'

Or, as William Butler Yeats has put it: 'The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.'

Whatever may be the merits of these speculations about the way in which rhythm is rooted in our biological heritage or about its general psychological effects, we are concerned here with an ore limited and perhaps more important matter. What is the significance of verse in any given poem? Even if verse does exercise hypnotic effect, we still have to face the fact that of many poems using verse some are 'good' and some are 'bad.' The fact that the hypnotic spell 'works' in some instances and not in others leaves us with the necessity of studying the stipulated spell in relation to other elements in the poetry. If this were not so, every poem in regular and strongly marked meter would simply overcome us.

What does verse accomplish? It is one aspect of the greater formality, or closer organization, of poetry as contrasted with other literary modes. Verse is a means for controlling the use of language. The metrical pattern--that is, the pattern of accents--once we have grasped it as a pattern, sets up the unconscious expectation that the pattern will continue. This sense of pattern, though it may seem mechanical, and even trivial, has far-reaching consequences. For one thing, it is a powerful force in establishing a pervasive impression of unity. The same thing, we may add, applies to stanza pattern. The act of threading a meaningful statement through an intricate stanza pattern...in itself imparts a certain formality to the utterance and focuses our attention on it in a special way.

Furthermore, since poetry, frequently in defiance of common sense, proceeds by its own imaginative logic, it is just as well that its unity be validated by the unwavering system of sounds. It is the authority of the meter, we might say, that promises us that the poem will ultimately make sense. It promises also that it will make sense in all of its parts; by insisting on this continuity and unity, it gives a perspective on each part. Once a pattern of rhythm is established, variations from it register forcibly, and this fact leads us to the second important function of meter. The skillful poet finds in verse a most subtle instrument for regulating emphasis, for underlining the connections between ideas, for pointing up contrasts--in other words, for

lifting utterance to a dramatic significance. Indeed, in great poetry the movement of the verse seems indivisible from the movement of the thought and feeling, and the verse seems to be an embodiment of the meaning....

How do we arrive at the normal foot and the number of feet that make up a normal line? By reading and listening to the beat of several lines--for any particular foot or line may be irregular.... Indeed, few poems are completely regular, and the irregularities--the departures from the established and expected pattern--may be deeply expressive. In our discussion of poems in this book, we shall usually concern ourselves with the irregularities and variations: what is normal does not often call for special comment.

A poem that had no variation would seem mechanical and dull. But to say this is not at all to say that the more irregular the poem, the better it is. All variation would amount to no variation--or, to put it in a slightly different way, only in so far as we have the sense of a norm can there be any variation at all. A sensed pattern--a norm of expected recurrence--is the prerequisite for meaningful departure....

VERSIFICATION

All language, as has been pointed out, has the quality of rhythm. It has also been pointed out that there are varying degrees of formalization of rhythm and that between the clear extremes of ordinary prose and strict verse there are many intermediate types.... The definitions given [below] present various elements of versification in an abstract and schematic form. In studying such definitions one should realize that they are merely terms conventionally accepted to describe certain verbal situations which occur in poetry. When they are applied to the criticism of particular poems, it should be remembered that the degree of excellence achieved by any poet in his management of such technical factors is to be determined by answering the following question: *How has he adapted these technical factors to the other elements in the poem?...*

Meter, in English verse, is the systematization of rhythm in so far as this systemization is determined by the relationships between accented, or stressed, and unaccented, or unstressed, syllables. (This relationship between **accented** and **unaccented** syllables is a fundamental factor, but not the only factor, in determining the **rhythm**. Other factors involved--pause and emphasis conditioned by the length of syllables, consideration of sense, rhyme, and so on, which will be treated below--contribute to the total rhythmical effect.) The following set of terms is conventionally accepted to describe meter:

foot: The metrical unit, a combination of one accented and one or more unaccented syllables. The following types of feet will describe most metrical situations which occur in English verse:

- iamb** An unaccented followed by an accented syllable (avoid)
- anapest** Two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable (intervene)
- trochee** One accented followed by one unaccented syllable (only)
- dactyl** One accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables (happily)

The **line** of verse is composed of one or more feet. The following names are used to denominate various line lengths:

- monometer** One foot
- dimeter** Two feet
- trimeter** Three feet
- tetrameter** Four feet
- pentameter** Five feet
- hexameter** Six feet (or **alexandrine**)
- heptameter** Seven feet

(Since a line is really a unit of attention, lines composed of more than six feet tend to break up into smaller units. Thus a heptameter line tends to break up into a tetrameter and a trimeter line.) There are two items involved in the metrical description of a line: the kind of foot and the number of feet. Thus, a line

containing five iambic feet would be described as **iambic pentameter**. A line that ends with an extra unaccented syllable is said to have a **feminine ending**.

Even in a single poem a poet does not necessarily adhere to a single type of foot. For various reasons, he may make a **substitution** of one type of foot for another. For instance, in the opening of the following line a trochaic foot has been substituted for an iambic foot: 'Crowned from \ some sin \ gle herb \ or tree'

Thus far in discussing a scheme for indicating the scansion of verse, all accented syllables have been assumed to have equal value; and in an abstract schematic sense this is true. But obviously, in the rhythm as one actually experiences it in a particular line, accented syllables may be of very unequal emphasis. By the same token, unaccented syllables are not on the level as an abstract scheme would seem to indicate. Sometimes a syllable which, according to the abstract metrical pattern, would be unaccented, receives, because of rhetorical considerations, what appears to be an additional accent in its own right. For instance, consider the first foot of the following line: 'Ah, what \ avails \ the scep \ tred race' The syllable *Ah* may be said to receive a **secondary accent**... In considering the relationship between the two syllables of such a foot as *Ah, what*, some metrists describe the situation by saying that there is a **hovering effect**, or a **hovering accent**...

A similar situation is created when by substitution, or by the use of an **imperfect foot** (a foot from which the unaccented syllable or syllables are missing...two regularly accented feet are thrown into juxtaposition. When a secondary accent occurs, or when two regular accents are forced together, there is said to exist a **spondaic movement**. (This term is derived from one of the feet in classical metrics, the **spondee**, which is composed of long syllables, for classical verse is founded on **quantity**. But the term is frequently used with reference to English verse, which is founded on accent, to describe any situation in which two accents appear in succession--either when the two accents are not in the same foot, or when one is a secondary accent.) Though English metrics is founded on accent, the factor of quantity has an importance in determining the final rhythmical result of a piece of verse as actually experienced. But quantity never appears in systematic form; it work, merely, to condition and modify the rhythmical pattern defined by accent.

Another factor which influences the total rhythmical effect of a particular line is the location of pauses defined by sense units. Although the line may be abstractly considered as a metrical unit, it is obvious that the sense unit does not always coincide with the line unit. In practice, sense divisions--phrase, clause, sentence--often terminate within the line; and conversely, the end of a line unit may divide a sense unit. The pauses within the line, their number and their emphasis, are extremely important in determining the tempo of the rhythm. The main pause is called the **caesura**, but obviously there may be other pauses, which may be called **secondary pauses**. Variety, from line to line in the location of the caesura and of secondary pauses is extremely important in versification.

But mere variety is not the only consideration, for in good verse there is usually a connection between the handling of pauses and the rhetorical (and other) devices employed in the poem. Just as sense units may divide a line, so the end of a line, conversely, may divide some units. This interplay between sense units and metrical units becomes extremely important when considered, not in relation to a single line, but in relation to a group of lines. When the end of the line does not coincide with a normal speech pause of any kind, it is called **run-on**; it is an example of **enjambment**. When a line end does coincide with a normal pause, the line is said to be **end-stopped**.

But sound as well as sense may condition the rhythm of verse. For example, the presence of certain groups of consonants may create a **forced pause**. Such combinations, which cause a sense of strain in pronunciation and a slowing of rhythmical tempo, are said to be **cacophonous**. Conversely, consonant combinations easily pronounced give a sense of ease and tend to speed up the rhythmical tempo. Such combinations are said to be euphonious. Euphonious effects are pleasant, but euphony in itself is never a primary objective of any good poem--that is, poetry, even lyrical poetry, is not merely 'verbal music.'

Thus far we have spoken of relationships among consonants. The term euphony in its largest sense is used also to designate agreeable relationships among vowel sounds. Obviously, some vowels are closely

related to each other; others are much more distantly related. For example, the vowel sounds *oh* and *ah* are formed far back in the voice chamber; the vowel sounds *ee* and *ay* far to the front. Obviously, a line dominated by closely related vowels gives--provided other factors support this effect--a sense of ease and fluency. Some lines may achieve a sense of vitality by the fact that the vowels in them are not closely related--involve shifts in position, which may be either violent or modulated. The combinations in this matter are, of course, infinite.

One may be tempted to associate certain effects with certain vowels--an effect of heaviness with the sonority of the long back vowel sounds (*oh*, *ah*, *aw*, *oo*)--but this element is effective only in so far as it operates in conjunction with other factors. Certain words have been developed, as a matter of fact, in imitation of the sounds which they designate. Words like *hiss* and *bang* are called **onomatopoeic** words. But the relation of sound to sense, in onomatopoeia, and the relation of mood to specific vowel sounds, are not fundamental factors in poetic effects.

Euphony, like cacophony, is to be considered in its functional relation to the total effect of a poem. This general relationship among the sounds in verse, of which cacophony, euphony, and onomatopoeia are aspects, is sometimes called **verse texture**. Other aspects of this relationship are **assonance**, **consonance**, and **alliteration**. Assonance may be defined as identity of vowel sounds, as in the words *scream* and *beach*; consonance as the identity of the pattern of consonants, as in the words *leaves* and *lives*; alliteration as the repetition of consonants, particularly initial consonants, as in the words *lovely* and *lullaby*.

RHYME

But assonance, consonance, and alliteration may also be considered forms of **rhyme** because they involve degrees of identity of sound combinations. The term *rhyme*, however, is ordinarily used in the sense of **end rhyme**, which is the identity in the rhyming words of the accented *vowels* and of all consonants and vowels following. (This is sometimes called *rime suffisante* in distinction from *rime riche*, or identical rhyme, in which there is identity of the accented *syllables* of the words rhymed. For instance, *incline* and *decline*.) The forms of end rhyme may be classified as follows:

masculine rhyme: The rhymed syllables are the last syllables of the words in question, as in *surmount* and *discount*.

feminine rhyme: The rhymed syllables are followed by identical unaccented syllables, as in *delightful* and *frightful*. When only one unaccented syllable occurs after the accented syllable, there is an instance of **double rhyme**... When two unaccented syllables, identical in the rhymed words, follow the accented syllable, there is an instance of **triple rhyme**. For example, *delightfully* and *frightfully*.

weak rhyme: The rhymed syllables are unstressed or only lightly stressed.

internal rhyme: Rhyme occurring within a line unit.

In addition to the above forms of rhyme there are approximate rhymes, sometimes called **slant rhymes**. For instance, *rover* and *lover*, or *steel* and *chill*. Such rhymes are not necessarily indications of a poet's carelessness, but may be used for various special effects. When the student discovers examples of slant rhyme, he should try to determine what the effect would have been with the emphasis of full rhyme. Many rhymes that now are apparently slant rhymes were, in the past, full rhymes; therefore, a student should try to determine the pronunciation used by the poet before passing judgment on a poem of the past.

Although there is a pleasure in rhyme itself, and rhyme may serve as a decoration to verse, the fundamental function of rhyme is that of a binder. It is this function which makes rhyme so important as a device of emphasis and as a means of defining a pattern of lines, or a **stanza**. Indeed, most stanzas involve not only a fixed pattern of lines, but also a pattern of rhymes, or a **rhyme scheme**. An unrhymed stanza is to be defined by the prevailing type of foot, the number of feet in each line, and the number of lines. That is, a poem might be written in iambic tetrameter quatrains. The definition of a rhymed stanza would add to such items the description of the rhyme scheme. For instance, the rhyme scheme of the envelope quatrain, in which the first and fourth lines and the second and third lines rhyme, would be described as follows: *abba*. The most ordinary stanzas and line patterns are these.

couplet: (1) **tetrameter** couplet, sometimes called the octosyllabic couplet: iambic tetrameter, *aa*. (2) **heroic** couplet: iambic pentameter, *aa*. (A couplet is **closed** when the sense is complete within its compass.)

terza rima: iambic pentameter **tercets** in *linked* rhyme: *aba-bcb-cdc*, etc.

quatrain: (1) **ballad measure:** iambic, first and third lines tetrameter, second and fourth lines trimeter, with second and fourth lines rhyming. (This may be indicated as follows: iambic, 4-3-4-3, *xaxa*.) A very common variant of this pattern rhymes *abab*. (2) **envelope**, or '**In Memoriam**' quatrain: iambic tetrameter, *abba*. (3) '**Rubaiyat**' quatrain: iambic pentameter, *aaxa*. (4) Several other types of quatrains are commonly used but have no specific names.

rime royal: iambic pentameter, *ababbcc*.

ottava rima: iambic pentameter, *abababcc*.

Spenserian stanza: iambic pentameter, *ababbcbcc*. The last line is an alexandrine.

sonnet: An iambic pentameter poem in fourteen lines. There are two general types: (1) **Italian** sonnet: iambic pentameter, *abbacdecde*. The first eight lines, in which the general theme of the sonnet is usually presented, is called the **octave**. The last six lines, in which the poet presents the conclusion he has drawn from the theme, is called the **sestet**. Common variants on the rhyme scheme of the sestet are *cdeedc*, *cdedce*. (2) **Shakespearean** sonnet: iambic pentameter, *ababcdcdefefgg*. In its typical form this sonnet presents and develops its theme in the first three quatrains, and states a conclusion in the couplet. But there are many variations of this method of handling the idea. For instance, the first two quatrains may be used as the octave of the Italian sonnet is used and the last quatrain and couplet as the sestet. (3) Irregular sonnets: in addition to various slight departures from the strict rhyme scheme of the Italian and Shakespearean sonnet, there occur rhyme schemes which are highly irregular.

BLANK VERSE

Although **blank verse** is not a form of stanza it may be considered here. Blank verse is unrhymed iambic pentameter not broken into formal units. This is not to say that a poem written in blank verse (or for that matter, in other verse forms not employing the stanza) may not be broken up into **verse paragraphs**, which may be defined as large rhetorical units. [Shakespeare's plays are mostly in blank verse.]

RHETORICAL VARIATION

It must have already occurred to the student that the rhythm of any individual line of poetry as actually experienced by the reader conforms only approximately to the metrical scheme as indicated by the scansion. (Indeed, as we have already said, all that the scansion can be expected to do is to mark out the pattern of accents and the accepted variations and substitutions.) No line of verse, however regular the pattern of accents may seem to be, reads with a purely mechanical regularity. Consider, for example, the following line: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 55)

Metrical considerations call for an accent on every second syllable. Furthermore, the pressure of metrical regularity pushes in the direction of an *equal* accent on every second syllable.... But obviously some accented syllables are more important than others. Considerations of sense, of expressiveness, of rhetorical emphasis see to that. To read the line [with equal accents] would be to read in a purely mechanical sing-song. In an expressive reading the conjunction *nor* could not receive so much emphasis as *mar-*, the stressed syllable of the noun *marble*; nor could *-ments* (in *monuments*) receive as much emphasis as that which falls on *mon-....*

In this line, as in all verse, two principles are at work: (1) a principle of metrical regularity which conditions our reading toward a fixed recurrence of stress and tends to level out divergencies from the norm, and (2) a principle of dramatic and rhetorical emphasis which demands stresses that sometimes coincide with those of the metrical pattern and sometimes diverge from them. The characteristic rhythm of a piece of verse comes from the interplay of these two principles. There is not only an interplay--there is a positive tension, which is necessary if verse is to have vitality and its unique expressiveness.

When the meter as such dominates meaning we approach doggerel. As Robert Frost says, 'You save it [a poem] from doggerel' by 'having enough dramatic meaning in it for the other thing to break the doggerel. But it mustn't break *with* it. I said years ago that it [verse in which the meter and the meaning have a proper

relation] reminds me of a donkey and a donkey cart: for some of the time the cart is on the tugs and some of the time on the hold-back'....

As this factor of rhetorical variation exists by the very nature of language, it appears in all verse. The competent poet is able to control it.... The student might look back over the discussion of 'The Wife of Usher's Well' for examples of the proper relationship between metrical and rhetorical stress. In this poem, the metrical pattern does not override and distort the natural emphases. Instead, the system of stresses and pauses accords beautifully with the development of the drama.... The meter, the rhetorical variations, and the other factors, such as imagery, supplement and corroborate each other. That is, we have a real coherence and unity.

In discussing some of the ways in which a good poet keeps his verse from becoming monotonous by endowing it with flexibility and proper expressiveness, we should say a further word about the use of pauses in verse. Good verse accommodates itself to a variety of pauses as expressive language generally. (It is only mechanical, sing-song verse that tends to override and even to obliterate these pauses.) There is usually, however, one principal pause, the *caesura*, within the verse line, especially if the verse has as many as four or five feet. This pause is to be distinguished from secondary pauses in the line. Variation of the placing of the caesura is one important means of avoiding monotony in verse....

STANZA FORMS

There are many different stanza forms in use in English poetry.... Any given type of stanza is used in conjunction with so many other poetic factors that a reader must be very wary of attributing special effects to special stanza forms. Only the most general principles may be arrived at concerning stanza forms considered in isolation from other poetic factors. For instance, it is fair to say that complicated stanza forms such as the *Spenserian stanza*...offer disadvantages for use in long narrative poems because the involved form may become monotonous and may impede the movement of the action. But the folly of asserting, as so many people have, that the *sonnet* is...especially adapted for love poetry will be demonstrated by the following pair of sonnets: 'How Do I Love Thee?' [by] Elizabeth Barrett Browning [and] 'On the Late Massacre in Piedmont' [by] John Milton....

These sonnets have precisely the same rhyme scheme, both being examples of what is called the Italian sonnet. But the difference in subject and treatment is obvious, and this simple example should indicate why one should be extremely cautious in assuming that any effect or subject matter is absolutely associated with a particular stanza form. The proper approach to the study of the significance of stanza form may be through this question: *How does the poet use his stanza form in any given poem to produce the special effect of that poem?*...

There are still other principles which must be taken into consideration in answering this question. In particular, there is the consideration of the relation of the rhetorical structure, not only to the metrical pattern within the line...but also to the stanza pattern itself. Obviously the distribution of pauses within the lines and of pauses at the ends of lines will have an important bearing on the general effect of any stanza form. Stanzas that have a large number of marked pauses at the ends of lines tend to be strongly defined; stanzas that have many run-over lines, or enjambments, tend to give an impression of fluidity and speed. But the effects of the distribution of pauses at the ends of lines are constantly conditioned by the rhythms used within the lines themselves and by the distribution and emphasis of pauses within the lines. To sum up, we may say that the relation of rhetorical pauses to the line pauses of a stanza provide a principle of vital vibration analogous to that provided by the relation of rhetorical accent to metrical accent..... But it cannot be too much emphasized that a mere knowledge of stanza forms as abstract and mechanical patterns has little to do with the reading of poetry. The student's aim should be to see what the poet has been able to do with the particular form that he has chosen.

FREE VERSE

Free verse, as the term implies, does not conform to any fixed pattern. This is not to say that none of the individual metrical situations previously discussed here may not appear, incidentally, in a free verse poem.

But it is to say that such situations occur only incidentally.... The second of the two types of verse to which the conventions we have sketched...do not apply is the old native meter, sometimes called strong-stress meter. This is a pattern derived originally from the Old English four-beat alliterative verse. In the modern survivals of this verse, the alliteration may or may not appear, but the verse is still usually characterized by four heavily accented syllables, and the line is often broken between the second and third accents by an emphatic caesura....

Red Wheelbarrow (c.1923)

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

W. C. Williams

ANALYSIS

This poem is in free verse, which, as the name implies, is verse that does not conform to a fixed pattern. But there is no knife-edge line between formal verse and free verse, just as there is no knife-edge line between verse and prose. Rather, there is a shading off from a scrupulous meter toward greater and greater informality. Over the years there has been much debate about locating the precise point where informality in free verse becomes so marked that free verse should not be called verse at all. There is certainly a point where the sense of form can be lost (except the form dictated by the principles of prose--syntax, grammar, and the like), but discussion that aims at fixing theoretically such a point is fruitless....

We must keep firmly in mind that we are talking about verse and not poetry. Poetic effects--the exciting turn of phrase, the metaphor that opens up a dazzling perception, and so on--may appear in prose. Such effects must, of course, appear in any poem, in meter or free verse, if the poem is to be truly a poem. Associated with this is the fact that writers of free verse tend to emphasize typographical features--the visualized line is more significant in free verse than in formal verse, where the heard, or felt, meter defines the line. The most famous name in this connection is that of E. E. Cummings....

What most obviously distinguishes a piece of free verse from prose? It is the lining on the page. Even in the dreariest piece of writing that aspires to be free verse, the fact of its being set off in lines has some significance. It is significant, for one thing, because it pretends to be significant. That is, we have to dwell on the line as a unit, even if, by ordinary standards, we can find no unity. The very arbitrariness of the slashing across the prose sentence may be important. The line set off by this slashing, whatever its content, is brought into special focus; it makes a special claim on our attention by the mere fact of being set off; the words demand to be looked at freshly. And the whole composition makes, we may say, an important negative claim--the claim of not being prose.

The only line of 'Red Wheelbarrow' that is not absolutely arbitrary is the first, which does have a certain intrinsic structure, the structure of a clause. The lining is so arbitrary that we have to see the poem in print before we have any notion that it is intended as a poem at all. But the very arbitrariness is the point. We are forced to focus our attention upon words, and details, in a very special way, a puzzling way. Now the poem itself is about that puzzling portentousness that an object, even the simplest, like a red wheelbarrow, assumes when we fix attention upon it. Reading the poem is like peering at some ordinary object through a pin prick in a piece of cardboard. The fact that the pin prick frames it arbitrarily endows it with a puzzling, and exciting, freshness that seems to hover on the verge of revelation. And that is what the poem is actually about: 'So much depends'--but what, we do not know."

Cleanth Brooks & Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Poetry, 3rd edition
(Holt 1938-61) 172-74

"In this notably sentimental piece, Williams can only dimly specify 'what' depends—himself in his vocation as poet. He assures himself that he is what he is by virtue of his power to collocate such objects into sharply annotated images like these. He must feel himself into the things of his world; for he is as dependent on them as occasions to be himself—as poet. Perhaps—and herein lies the pathos—they depend on him as much as he depends on them. 'So much depends' too upon a poet's being there to make them what, at their best, they can be: objects in a poem. At its worst this is togetherness in a chicken-yard. At its best it is an exercise in the creation of the poetic out of the anti-poetic. Not the least significant characteristic of Williams' work is that the best in it cannot but bring out the worst. Like his friend and enemy Pound, he has had the courage to go all the way with his convictions."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 339

"Compared with Pound's poem ["In a Station of the Metro"], the anthologists' other favorite illustration of the practice of Imagism is both a more attractive and interesting poem and considerably less 'pure' as an example. Williams' 'The Red Wheel Barrow' [*sic*] treats 'things,' but treats them as though the speaker *is* and the reader *ought* to be related to the things because they contain intrinsic values. Instead of 'treats,' it might better be said that the poem 'celebrates' 'things.' In doing so, it moves beyond Imagism to Williams' 'philosophy' of 'realism,' his insistence that by paying the closest attention to the 'thingness' of things, we find value, not just neutral, external 'fact.'

The poem begins by saying, 'So much depends' on the two precise images that follow, of red wheelbarrow glazed with rain and of white chickens beside it. It does not tell us *what* 'depends' on these objects, but by the precision of detail with which they are described it gives us the clue we need. If we are to live in the "real" world, Williams in effect is saying, and not move into the transcendent realm of meaning too quickly... We must pay the closest, most loving attention to what both the thoroughly 'practical' and the thoroughly 'transcendental' man might call 'insignificant' details. We must look long, carefully, and lovingly at the details of the world if we are to see their beauty and their meaning. Images are important because they contain intrinsic meaning and value.

This poem does not fit Pound's first principle of Imagism nearly so well as 'In a Station of the Metro,' especially if that principle is interpreted in the light of Pound's definition of the image. There is no suggestion of determinism in Williams' poem, or of the alienation of the observer from his own observations, or, finally, of an 'impersonal' art. Indeed, the poem begins with, and is totally dependent on, a forbidden 'comment' or interpretation. A *mind* is at work here, not a chemical reaction. Williams, we would conclude on the basis of this sample, was either no Imagist at all, even early in his career, even though he himself thought he was, if we use the term *Imagism* strictly; or the best of the Imagists, if we use the term very loosely, ignoring Pound's principles and definitions and making it mean only a kind of poetry that emphasizes the concreteness and particularity of experience, and does so at the expense of *interpretation* of experience.

Insofar as Imagism implies something like the dispassionate and objective observation supposedly characteristic of the scientist in his laboratory, no poet could well be further from the Imagist ideal than Williams. He wrote always as the completely involved and wholly committed man, even when he wrote most simply of 'things.' What he said late in life describes even his early 'Imagist' practice: 'I have always had a feeling of identity with nature, but not assertive; I have always believed in keeping myself out of the picture. When I spoke of flowers, I *was* a flower.'"

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 342-43

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