

On Free Verse: A Minority Report

by Samuel Hux (December 2016)



I have been quarreling with colleagues for years about the existence of “free verse” (including “some of my best friends” who write it), I contending that while the “prose poem” is a contradiction in terms and an opportunity for people who cannot write poetry to “write poetry” (and not to be confused with “poetic prose,” which is what happens when natural poets, say Herman Melville, try to write prose), free verse may exist—may rarely, may occasionally, may just now and then exist—but is most often merely a miserable prose poem arranged in lines instead of paragraphs. So yes, free verse *can* exist. But the sub-genre invites my skepticism because in the vast majority of cases it is just too easy to do, presenting no formal challenge to the writer. Robert Frost famously said that he would sooner play tennis with the net down as write free verse. Edmund Wilson called it “a kind of broken-up prose,” and he was exactly right. A critic reviewing a much-rewarded and acclaimed poet in the *Harvard Review* praised her thus: “Her finely wrought free-form verse reads as easily as prose”—without even mentioning the obvious reason why. But if free verse *can* exist, when *does* it

exist? That's the difficult question. And the answer is not "whenever the poet says he's writing it." It's a difficult question because it is all a matter of the ear, because hearing is becoming a lost art, because most readers brought up in the last few decades on ostensible free verse splattered on the page by ostensible poets are as tone deaf as those who commit the splattering.

Free verse does exist only when it makes the same musical impact upon the ear that great formal poetry does but without the aid of rhyme and/or alliteration and/or metrical regularity and its tactical violations. I like what Sir Herbert Read called this musical impact: *incantation*. And to succeed without the organized, formal use of the tools of incantation one has to be that rarest of all artistic birds, *the poetic genius*. Few of those about!

But plenty of pretenders about. Survey the poetry journals—not the general cultural journals (*New English Review* being an example) which publish *some* poetry and tend to have standards, but the journals devoted, ostensibly, solely to the craft, which tend to be devoted, actually, to the avoidance of traditional forms of the oldest of literary arts. (A prime example is The Poetry Foundation's *Poetry*, once a great journal born in 1912, now a trash bin with only an occasional accidental gem). Or attend a few poetry readings. I have used the following metaphor before, but I like it so much. . . .

Suppose you attend a dance recital and witness several "dancers" walking back and forth across the stage. You wait for something different to happen, but nothing beyond strolling does. Some of you walk out (since you're as capable of walking as the so-called performers on the stage); some of you chance to read the program notes, which inform you that you are about to witness the artistry of everyday perambulation. You had always thought that dancers danced instead of walked because they were dancers, but now. . . . So you walk out. Now, such an event is hard to imagine. But few walk out of an event that's very likely to happen, the typical poetry reading, in spite of the fact that they are unlikely to hear anything verbal that is analogous to dancing. They have become used to the fact that any sound that differentiates poetry from prose is unlikely to be heard. The mainline poet today is a walker.

I have called this a "minority report"; but I may be demoting my view unjustly. A majority of the literary world—poets themselves and others trained by English Departments, those bastions of Up-to-date Lit Think—may go all googoo

when they read verse which sounds jus' like ordinary people talkin' . . . but ordinary people themselves have more or less abandoned poetry all together. A love of poetry (at least a declared love) is no longer considered a requirement for being cultivated or having any pretense in that direction (something new in the last half-century in American culture), and a case can be made—I have made it myself elsewhere—that there's a direct connection between that lamentable fact and the dominance of a "poetry" that practically anyone with passable grammar, competent syntax, and some imagination can master.

Do I have an example of a poetic genius in mind? Yes. A few years ago I came upon the work of the Welshman David Jones, *In Parenthesis*. Published in 1935, re-issued in 2003 by New York Review Books (God bless this house for the revival of forgotten classics!), it grew out of Jones's six-months of trench warfare in France, December 1915 to July 1916, before being sent back to England having been wounded at Mametz Wood in the Battle of the Somme. T.S. Eliot called it "a work of genius" and W.B. Yeats was so enthusiastic that Jones was even embarrassed by the effusions.

In Parenthesis is in part what one would expect from a recollection of the Great War: "They reached a place where the high walls of the communication trench considerably contracted at a turn, reducing the strip of sky above them. These reeking sack walls block all lateral view, and above, nothing is visible save the rain-filmed, narrowing ribbon of sky." But what-one-would-expect is the exception. For *In Parenthesis* "out-alludes" Eliot's *The Wasteland*. World War I, Herodotus, Homer, Milton, Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Mallory, the Bible, Arthurian legend, Welsh mythology, especially Welsh mythology, and God knows what all else, are mixed in a brew that leaves you intoxicated, but sober enough to be intrigued. . . . and moved, and stunned. Haunted. It is confusing, no doubt about it. Eliot said, "if *In Parenthesis* does not excite us before we have understood it, no commentary will reveal to us its secret." Even the title is obscure except in the sense that war is parenthetical to peace: Jones in preface wrote that it was "called 'In Parenthesis' because I have written it in a kind of space between—I don't know between quite what."

I would rather prefer the normal free verse celebrants not discover Jones, for I can imagine them congratulating themselves that poetry needs no cadences, no "incantation," so long as the verse is "free." To which, in reference to Jones's "work of genius," I would make the following two-step response.

(1) David Jones pointedly did not call his 200-odd page piece “poetry.” In his preface he repeatedly called it “a writing.” The single time he uses the word *poetry* is when, discussing the “impious and impolite words” that 1930s publishing censors kept him from repeating, he comments that his Welsh and English comrades employed a vocabulary of curse words so creative the “repetition of them made them seem liturgical” and often “reached real poetry.” It is others, including W.S. Merwin, who wrote a forward to the NYRB edition, who call *In Parenthesis* poetry. And one can understand why. Merwin quotes from one of the truly great sections of the work, a five-and-a-half page boast by one of the Welsh soldiers beginning in a kind of demotic Homeric: “My fathers were with the Black Prince of Wales / at the passion of / the blind Bohemian king. / They served in these fields, / it is in the histories that you can read it, Corporal-boys / Gower, they were—it is writ down—yes.” Merwin’s selection:

I was with Abel when his brother found him,

under the green tree. . . .

I took the smooth stones from the brook,

I was with Saul

playing before him. . . .

I watched them work the terrible embroidery that He put on.

I heard there, sighing for the Feet so shod.

I saw cock-robin gain

his rosy breast.

I heard him cry:

Apples ben ripe in my gardayne

I saw him die. . . .

But this is not a quite fair representation of the five-and-a-half page boast, Merwin’s sensitive selection. Read it yourself: pages 79 through 84, NYRB

edition, followed by, no transition, "The morning bore all that quiet broken only by a single and solitary action that consorts with wet weather. That kind of day when kitchen-help half-opens doors in areas, poke pink hands to hurrying tradesmen. . . ."

(2) And yet (and so?) Merwin and others were right. But *In Parenthesis* is poetry not because Jones *was writing poetry*—rather he was, by his own insistence, writing "a writing"—but because *he could not help it*. Eliot was right: Jones had the genius. I am lucky enough to possess a recording of Jones reading from the closing "writing" of his epic, a part of which I offer here. "The Queen of the Woods. . . ." (Don't ask me, I don't know. Some Welsh rigmarole? Or a primitive deity of Mametz Wood, where Germans—note Emil, Ulrich, and Hansel below—as well as English and Welsh knew the terrible community of warfare?)--

The Queen of the Woods has cut bright boughs of various flowering.

These knew her influential eyes. Her awarding hands can pluck for each their fragile prize.

She speaks to them according to precedence. She knows what's due to this select society. She can choose twelve gentle-men. She knows who is most lord between the high trees and the open down.

Some she gives white berries

some she gives brown.

Emil has a curious crown it's

made of golden saxifrage.

Fatty wears sweet-briar,

he will reign with her for a thousand years.

For Balder she reaches high to fetch his.

Ulrich smiles for his myrtle wand.

That swine Lillywhite has daisies to his chain—you'd hardly

credit it.

She plaits torques of equal splendor for Mr. Jenkins and Billy Crower.

Hansel with Gronwy share dog-violets for a palm, where they lie in serious embrace beneath the twisted tripod.

Siôn gets St. John's Wort—that's fair enough.

Dai Great-coat, she can't find him anywhere—she calls both high and low, she had a very special one for him.

Among this July noblesse she is mindful of December wood—when the trees of the forest beat against each other because of him.

She carries to Aneirin-in-the-nullah a rowan sprig, for the glory of Guenedota. You couldn't hear what she said to him, because she was careful for the Disciplines of the Wars.

It is *incantatory*. (And not surprisingly: *to incant* is a favored word for Jones, used several times in the preface to his more intentionally "poetic" *The Anathemata*, 1952.) It rhymes but on occasion: the *eyes/prize* or *down/brown/crown*, and even the approximate *years/his* I keep hearing although I suspect it isn't really there. The meter is essentially iambic (*These knéw her influéntial éyes*) with the iambic switching as it often will to trochaic (the way convex will appear concave if you look at it long enough), and slowing to the ponderous spondaic when mood and narrative thrust necessitate (*Dái Gréat-cóat, shé cán't fínd him ánywhére*). With all the deviations I know the pacing is always right, and not only because I can still hear Jones's reading in my memory. And the right diction!—the Great Books heights of "the Disciplines of the Wars" (actually Shakespeare: the Welshman Fluellen in *Henry V*) playing off against "That swine Lillywhite" and the Cockneyish "you'd hardly credit it." (Jones said in preface that as Latin is to the church, so is Cockney to the army.) And *In Parenthesis* is the epitome of *unparaphraseability*, and if we think it isn't we haven't understood the poem—yes, the *poem*—at all.

Should one argue that Jones is simply writing a prose poem, one would reveal oneself to be tone-deaf (for poetry's sake little better than stone-deaf). One

would be closer to the truth to say that Jones is writing poetic prose—after all he does write that he is writing “a writing,” avoiding the word *poem*. I put this down in part to Welsh crankiness. But only in part, because in fact it is indeed very difficult to distinguish poetic prose from the verbal composition which “makes the same musical impact upon the ear that great formal poetry does but without the aid of rhyme and/or alliteration and/or metrical regularity and its tactical violations.”

I mentioned Herman Melville some pages back as one who wrote “poetic prose” because he couldn’t help it. Let’s try a little experiment.

Here is the beginning of *Moby Dick*. “Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses. . . then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship.”

Now let me arrange it in lines, indicating as well as I can the accented syllables. Note for instance how some lines have an irregular beat (You, reader, do the work!) while some are quite regular (as in line 2 which begins with two iambic feet and then in the parenthetical clause switches to four trochees, or line 7 with its six iambic feet, or the penultimate line with its five trochaic feet). Note that in line 11 as Ishmael recalls “pausing before coffin warehouses” the line itself pauses, slows down with two spondees, as if imitating the action. And so on. . . .

Call me Íshmaél.

Some yéars agó—néver mínd how lóng precisely—

háving líttle or no móney in my púrse,

and nóthing partícular to ínterest mé on shóre,

I thought I would saíl aboút a líttle

and seé the wátery párt of the wórld.

It ís a wáy I háve of dríving óff the spleén,

and réguláting the círculátion.

Whenéver I fínd mysélf grówing grím aboút the móúth;

whenéver it ís a dámp, drízzly Novémber ín my soúl;

whenéver I fínd mysélf invóluntárilý paúsing befóre cóffin wárehoúses. . .

thén, I accóunt it hígh tíme to gét to seá as soón as I cán.

This ís my súbstitúte for pístol and báll.

Wíth a phílosóphical floúrish

Cáto thróws hímself upón his swórd;

Í quáetly táke to the shíp.

Could one call this prose paragraph set in verse lineation a prose poem? Only if one is being perverse. One would have to be oblivious to the metrical patterns I mentioned above. One would have to be oblivious to—for example—the almost Whitmanesque pattern of “Whenever. . . whenever. . . whenever. . . then” a few years before Whitman. No, Melville is writing poetic prose because that’s what happens when he writes “prose.”

Let’s consider a piece of Melvillean writing *intended* as poetry. Here’s his 1859 contemplation of John Brown, “The Portent”—chosen for its brevity as well as its aesthetic excellence. Scansion, as usual, courtesy of me:

Hánging fróm the béam,

Slówly swáying (súch the láu),

Gáunt the shádw ón your greén,

Shénandóah!

The cúit is ón the crówn

(Ló, Jóhn Brówn),

Ánd the stábs shall héal no móre.

Hídden ín the cáp

Ís the ánguish nóne can dráw;

Só your fúture véils its fáce,

Shénandóah!

Bút the stréaming béard is shówn

(Wéird Jóhn Brówn),

The méteor óf the wár.

The lines are predominately trochaic with an extra stressed syllable at the end, the “Shenandoah” refrain an exception since without an extra; also exceptional the fifth line and the concluding one since they are iambic with no extra. This matters little since whether iambic or trochaic the important thing is every other syllable is stressed. The exception to this pacing occurs in the penultimate line of each stanza where every syllable is stressed as if a kind of extended spondee: boom, boom, boom. With the exception of the two *Shenandoahs* there are only nine words which are not monosyllabic, and I find it hard to believe this economy of sounds is not intentional. Rhymes: *crown* and *Brown* of course, the sight rhyme of *shown* and *Brown* of course, the inter-stanzaic pair of *law* and *draw* in the second lines, and it’s possible the words ending each stanza are meant to be heard as a slant rhyme, *more* and *war*.

What’s the point? When Melville is writing poetry he is all poet—with near maniacal attentiveness. When he is writing prose he is all prose-writer? No. He tries but he cannot totally suppress his nature. In the midst of an attempt at prose there will appear (as in my lineation of the second sentence of *Moby Dick*) that rhythmic *taBOOM taBOOM–BOOMta BOOMta BOOMta BOOMta*. Or—“Cato throws himself upon his sword”: *BOOMta BOOMta BOOMta BOOMta BOOM*. Then—“I quietly

take to the ship: BOOM BOOMtata BOOMtata BOOM. Poor Herman, he just can't help himself. Let me tentatively summarize. When Melville writes poems—intentionally—he does not write free verse; he writes very formal, highly metrical poetry. When he writes prose—intentionally—he writes what one is tempted to say might just as well be called free verse—but we should resist the temptation because the free versifier is intentionally trying to avoid precisely those conventional metrical patterns that Melville is incapable of avoiding, those patterns he cannot avoid because of the nature of his talent (or his soul). Let me tactically shift gears:

This is the first stanza (or paragraph?) of a poem by the late C.K. Williams called “They Call This.” (I would quote all three whatnots, but I doubt I could get permission.)

“A young mother on a motor scooter stopped at a traffic light, her little son perched on the ledge between her legs; she in a gleaming helmet, he in a replica of it, smaller, but the same color and just as shiny. His visor is swung shut, hers is open. . . .”

I call this a poem because it appeared online in “Poem-A-Day” 11 December 2013. And of course Williams was a Pulitzer winner with other awards in his pocket, so he must really be a poet? (Could the lit world be so wrong? Well, yes, I think so.) So this must be a poem? What kind? A prose poem? The reader already knows my opinion of that “genre.” How could it be a prose *poem* since it is not apparent that there is anything poetic about the piece that makes it anything other than just. . . well. . . *prose*. So it is free verse then. If so, it is that garden variety free verse not touched by poetic genius because it does *not* make “the same musical impact upon the ear that great formal poetry does but without the aid of. . . the tools of incantation.” Which means that according to the logic with which I began this essay it cannot after all be “free verse” and therefore is after all a “prose poem,” that slug that doesn't exist.

Or perhaps I am not looking and listening closely enough. So let me reconsider the beginning of “They Call This.”

And, lo. . . ! Although the piece is without rhyme, with the exception of *she* and *he* and *but* and *shut* with their tendency to pull the disparate parts of the poem together, there is considerable alliteration: for instance the *m* sound in

mother and *motor* (an obvious conjunction since *motor* is not a necessary modifier of *scooter*), and the *l* sound in *light*, *little*, *ledge*, and *legs* (that musical *l* which we so easily associate with “love” and “lullaby” intensifying the familial intimacy of “her little son perched on the ledge between her legs”). Although there is no regularity of meter, Williams obviously wishing to avoid such (often when you think you’ve heard an iambic pattern, it is broken by a cleverly placed anapest), there are nonetheless cleverly placed spondees, such as when Williams jams together *young* and the first syllable of *mother* and the spondee-like pacing of *swung shut, hers*. And once one recognizes the pacing of the breath units—“A young mother / on a motor scooter / stopped at a traffic light,” and so forth—then all things reconsidered, the piece after all does achieve a kind of *incantation*!

The previous paragraph is, of course, utter nonsense.

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