

Syntax and the Poetic Line 2

The next elemental unit of poetry, building from the unit of the word, is the poetic line. Poetry's peculiar feature, that the lines stop (usually) before the end of the page, is what often announces to us that what we are reading is a poem. But the way the poetic line works depends upon many structures. One of these is metrical organization. The line extends only as long as a particular rhythm dictates. This we will postpone for later discussion. Another is syntax, the rules, units, and structures of grammar, which works in complex harmony and counterpoint with the construction and strategy of the poetic line.

Poetry, like all language, of course involves syntax. The language of poetry breaks up into familiar syntactical units (or purposely refuses to do so): phrases of various kinds, clauses, sentences, perhaps even paragraphs, depending on the poem. The individual words in the poem, which on one level are chosen for their diction or the associations they bring to the poem, also of course function in their grammatical roles as parts of speech. Words are subjects and objects, prepositions and conjunctions and verbs. In a poem, however, there is rather more freedom in word order, and even in word forms than in most other uses of language. This is tied to the fact that in poetry, even the bland, boring orders of syntax become charged with poetic meaning. It may no longer be a matter of subject/verb/object. A poet may reverse this order, in a desire to emphasize, say, the verb. Departure from the natural order of language is in fact a common way to "foreground" or draw attention to a particular word. It is a general truth in poetry that changes in ordinary procedures—twists against the expected order—吸引 attention. It is like putting a spotlight on the word or phrase or structure that surprises, as a dramatic gesture.

Word order in a poem also often works in ways similar to word choice in diction levels. The word order may be very formal, rais-

ing the “pitch” of a poem the way high diction does or it may be very colloquial to lower the level of diction. Or, word order may conform to normal grammar; but the way the phrases are broken up can strongly affect the impression the poem makes. And, of course, where the sentences come to completion is always very important.

It is this question of grammatical phrasing and ending that orchestrates relationships between syntax and the poetic line. Sometimes a sentence, or phrase, or clause comes to an end as the line does, so that the rhythm and syntax work together. But sometimes a sentence, or phrase, or clause spills over the end of the line, into the next line. This is called *enjambment*: the excess of syntax over the boundaries of the poetic line. With enjambment, line and syntax do not match together; each one instead goes its separate way. Great poets are masters at using these coincidences and departures, correspondences and breaks, to attain particular effects in their verse. When Milton’s Satan, for example, first addresses Eve in tempting her to Fall, he says to her: “Thee all things living gaze on, all things thine / By gift” (*Paradise Lost* Book IX 539–540). The syntax of the line proves to be incomplete; the full sense of the phrase “all things thine” is only filled in by the next phrase in the next line. In fact, as so often in Satan’s speeches, the next line not only completes but reverses the meaning of the line as left suspended and enjambed on its own. It is almost completely opposite to tell Eve that all she sees and who see her belong to her, as her possession and command; as against admitting that creation is in fact hers only “By gift” of a greater Power Who commands the world and to Whom she owes gratitude. It is the difference between self-conceit and self-reference, as against putting herself in wider and generous contexts. It is of course Satan’s purpose to insinuate the enjambed meaning, and to repress the completed one, as an underlying and underhanded suggestion that he hopes will bear fruit (as alas it does). Here the placement of “all things thine” at the end of the line adds further emphasis to its apparent, enjambed meaning. This art of stopping or continuing lines, of establishing line breaks, is called *lineation*.

Since it is not only difficult, but impossible, to follow a discussion of poetic syntax in abstract terms, let us turn at once to examples. In the last chapter, we already touched on poetic syntax in discussing “Today We Have Naming of Parts.” The piecemeal world of the army camp, reflected in the language of the army manual, was

also realized through a syntax of short, abrupt, and truncated phrases and sentences. The phrasing contributed as well to the low diction level, especially in its colloquial use of prepositional phrases (“whose use you will see of,” which ends with the preposition) as well as word order and dependent clauses (“Which in our case we have not got”). The enjambing, or cutting-off of lines in mid-sentence, where the pause is not expected, similarly intensified the sense of disjunction and lack of connection between experiences in the army camp (“And this / Is the upper sling swivel”). This clipped effect contrasted with the longer, flowing sentences of the garden, where enjambment has a different effect. “Japonica / Glistens like coral” uses enjambment to create a sense of overflowing continuity of garden life. This also is an important point. No stylistic feature has only *one* function or effect, but rather takes on its meanings within the context of the poem and as the poet employs it at a given moment.

In Robert Frost’s poem “Design,” the striking final lines similarly achieve their effect through syntax no less than diction. “What but design of darkness to appall” sounds formal and even stilted or contrived compared to the more ordinary speech of the poem’s first part. This oddness has mainly to do with Frost’s use of the infinitive (to appall), which allows a certain latitude or openness in the way the line can be interpreted. On the one hand, the line suggests that it is the purpose of the design to appall—that it is an evil design. Or it can mean that the design appalls or frightens, though not intentionally. Cause and effect thus become crossed, as does the whole question of intention which the poem is examining.

Such moments of hesitation before phrases or words that could carry more than one interpretation introduce a sense of ambiguity which can be central to a poem’s art, and which poetry’s syntax deploys and controls. A flexibility in the order of the words can allow them to be read in a number of different ways, each of which, however, has some significance, and which then work together in a way integral to the poem’s meaning. In Milton’s famous elegy “Lycidas,” for example, Milton writes: “Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more / For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead.” Here, the syntax allows for two readings. The shepherds should not weep, because Lycidas is not dead—he is rather in Heaven, as the poem goes on to urge. Or, they should not weep, because their sorrow for Lycidas is not dead; it has, rather, produced important responses and insights. Milton often artfully controls the syntax

in his poems to multiply meanings, which the reader must then assess.

Artful syntax may contribute particular effects in a poem, or may serve as the very core of the poem's art. "Leda and the Swan," by William Butler Yeats, provides an example:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

This is one of the great sonnets of the twentieth century. Yeats is a poet with an especially melodic ear. He succeeds in achieving lines of poetry that are at once supremely melodious and yet also incredibly natural (he once said a good line takes a year to write, but looks as if it were written in a minute). Here, too, his phrasing is very natural and yet shows tremendous artistry.

It is, to repeat, always important to watch where the sentences fall in the poem. Here, the first quatrain (the four-line divisions of a sonnet) is also a sentence: the sentence and quatrain division coincide, by ending together. The second quatrain is composed of two questions, each extending over two lines. Then the last six lines of the poem (the "sestet" of the sonnet) is separated into two complete syntactic units. First there is a sentence, and then a question. A break in the middle of the third line shows the move from the one to the other.

But the first quatrain begins with a phrase all its own, a sharp, powerful phrase, "A sudden blow." This phrase is set off almost as

a sentence fragment; and it represents a fragment of action, sudden, unsituated, plunging us into the poem without warning. It catches and suspends us, just as Leda, “the staggering girl,” is caught and suspended by Zeus, who comes in the shape of a swan to rape her. But although the title identifies these two figures, neither one is identified in the poem itself. Instead, Yeats uses the general article “the” to indicate the actors: “the great wings” (a synecdoche, or part, standing for the whole swan); “the staggering girl.” The two only exist as they appear within the action the poem depicts, an action, as it will show, that is momentary but momentous. All happens in an instant—“A sudden blow.” But immense consequences follow.

The first lines of the poem sustain the sudden and suspended sense of that opening blow. It keeps the action in an extended present, and does so by inflecting verbs as participles in a continuous present (the —ing form): “the great wings beating still.” “Staggering” is also in participial form, although it is used as an adjective, and similarly keeps the action in the present, as if the girl continues to stagger on and on. When the poem then does introduce a past tense—“caressed,” “caught”—it does so still in the sense of ongoing action, as if the poet were describing what he continues to see before him, using verbs (past participles) mainly as adjectives and not as active verbs at all.

The grammatical effect of seeming to suspend the action is made still stronger by the way Yeats arranges his lines. Here we come to a good example of the way grammar can play off against line in a poem. “Still,” the word ending the first line, and “caressed,” the word ending the second line, are both enjambed. The end of the line does not match the end of the grammatical unit, so that the phrases spill over from one line into the next. This leaves each end-word suspended, making the reader pause there, held, just as the girl is held. Finally, we notice that in these phrases the girl is strangely poised between serving grammatically as the subject and the object. “Her thighs” are the noun, but the adjective “caressed” places them in the passive position. The same holds for “her nape caught in his bill.” “Nape” is the sentence’s grammatical subject, but it is passively caught. Indeed, the girl appears only as a list of body parts—thighs, nape, and then breast. (This is not a grammatical feature, but is instead a figure of speech, or trope, that plays parts against whole metonymically or synecdochically. These will be more fully discussed in a later chapter.)

The contest between active and passive is both syntactic and strategic and continues to structure the poem as a whole. Only the swan is given an active verb—"he holds her helpless breast against his breast"; while the girl's powerlessness is also expressed in her passive grammatical treatment. In general, the girl remains the grammatical subject but in ways that make her the passive object of the swan. That she continues to be named by body parts—"vague fingers," "body laid"—emphasizes her reduction. She is the mere "body" of the god's desire, and not a free subject at all. The futility of her position, and of any resistance to it, is intensified through the question form. Questions reflect the terrible uncertainty of Leda's position. Moreover, the questions are rhetorical—that is, they answer themselves, so that they aren't even really questions at all. "How can the fingers push?" Well, they cannot. Even the seeming activity of the verb "push" disguises helplessness—the inability to push away a power much greater than herself. She is merely "laid in that white rush" and can only "feel" actions she in no way is able to influence or prevent.

In the concluding sestet, Leda as paradoxically passive subject becomes no more than a site—a "there"—suspended in enjambement at the end of the first line. She is nothing but a point of transition between the god's momentary "shudder" and its incalculable results in the "broken wall" and "burning roof and tower" of Troy. Greeks and Trojans will destroy each other over Helen, the here unnamed and unforeseen offspring of Leda's rape by Zeus. The break between sentences returns us to the main action, suspending us in the passive voice of Leda's experience: "Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air." These phrases take form as a question, re-emphasizing the limits of Leda's understanding (she has no answers). And the poem concludes with an ultimate expression of her passive place in the action. It lets her drop.

This analysis has been somewhat technical, as syntactic analyses of texts tend to be. But it was meant to show some of the avenues of approach into the syntax of a poem, always with the poetic *function* of the grammatical patterns in mind. Here we see the importance of following the sentence units, but also of placing the phrases, noting the tenses of the verbs; of the word order of subject, verb, object; of exchanges between parts of speech, such as when verbs may serve as adjectives; and of passive and active constructions.

Yeats's "Leda" is a poem whose syntax is extraordinarily complex. William Blake (1757–1827), in contrast, wrote poems with a syntax painstakingly simple:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
 In what distant deeps or skies
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
 On what wings dare he aspire?
 What the hand dare seize the fire?
 And what shoulder, and what art,
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
 And when thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand? and what dread feet?
 What the hammer? What the chain?
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? What dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
 When the stars threw down their spears,
 And water'd heaven with their tears,
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
 Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye,
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

"Tyger, Tyger" is a poem with essentially no enjambment. Phrase and line end together, often punctuated as a sentence or a question, following on the whole a straightforward word order. When there are connectors between phrases or lines, these tend to be in the most simple form of addition, using the conjunction "and": "And what shoulder, and what art, / Could twist the sinews of thy heart? / And when thy heart began to beat, / What dread hand? and what dread feet?" This sort of additive or coordinating

grammar is called *paratactic* syntax, in opposition to a more complex grammar where phrases are subordinated to each other in a complex logic and through the use of subordinating conjunctions, called *hypotactic* syntax.

Blake often uses this simplified syntax in his *Songs of Innocence*, which is one way he creates an illusion of innocence. He similarly tends to use very simple diction, words that even a child could understand. But, needless to say, the poems are not nearly so simple as they seem. This is not to accuse Blake of using his syntax dishonestly. The poem demands that the reader think through the fuller implications of the relationships between phrases that are connected by the weak and unassertive “and” or that are simply juxtaposed. Making such connections is the specific challenge of this poem. In one sense, this is a poem of and about creation. It addresses—indeed, traces—how immortal (and mortal) hands and eyes construct something: the Tyger, for example. On this level, the “and,” “and,” “and” construction pursues, records, in fact enacts the process of creation, part by part, so that by the poem’s end the whole Tyger has been put together: eyes, sinews, heart, hand, feet, brain. This Tyger is, according to the poem, the work of some creator. But the creator himself is constructed in the process as well. Each stanza names and places not only parts of the Tyger, but also the hand, eye, grasp and smile of the creator.

But the poem is about not only creation, but also destruction. The Tyger emerges as a quite violent figure: burning and fearsome. And the creator-artist is so no less, with his own dread grasp, daring, seizing, twisting. The poem does not offer this duality as incidental, but rather insists on it. “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” We finally realize that the challenge of putting together “and,” “and,” “and” involves an awesome and profoundly troubling problem. What is the relationship between creation and destruction, good and evil, horror and beauty? The lack of clear relationship between the named activities in this paratactic syntax is the poem’s pressing question. Within this syntactic string lurks the religious and philosophical problem of theodicy, how to explain God’s goodness despite the existence of evil. As the poem suggests, the mere co-existence of creation and violence does not explain or justify evil, but rather intensifies the need to do so.

Poets use syntax to various ends and effects. The extent to which a poet can also break the rules of syntax for his or her own purposes

can be seen in Emily Dickinson (1830–1886). Wordsworth might be called a poet with no diction: no word was so low as to be excluded from his poetry. One might similarly say of Dickinson that she is a poet with no syntax—a poet who so transgresses against the norms of syntax as to almost eliminate them. Indeed, her first reviewers saw little in her work beyond bad grammar. “Four Trees” is a Dickinson poem whose language is so fragmentary as to almost defy normal syntax altogether:

Four Trees—upon a solitary Acre—
 Without Design
 Or Order, or Apparent Action—
 Maintain—
 The Sun—upon a Morning meets them—
 The Wind—
 No nearer Neighbor—have they—
 But God—
 The Acre gives them—Place—
 They—Him—Attention of Passer by—
 Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply—
 Or Boy—
 What Deed is Their’s unto the General Nature—
 What Plan
 They severally—retard—or further—
 Unknown—

One of the most striking—if not also distracting—features of Dickinson’s verse is its lack of punctuation. She omits commas, semicolons, periods. In their stead, she introduces dashes. This lack of punctuation has to do with a general lack of grammatical mediation between her words and phrases. Dickinson, that is, refuses to an extraordinary degree to allow the rules of grammar to regulate and order her language. And this extends beyond punctuation. In “Four Trees,” the first stanza tries as hard as it can to avoid a verb. When the verb “Maintain” does at last appear at the end, it is as inactive as a verb can be; and it is made more inactive still by having no object (what, after all, is maintained here?). Throughout the poem the verbs are few in number and prevented from activity. The sun “meets” the wind in the place the acre “gives” them. Verbs,

instead of articulating action in time, seem only to register place. In this, they seem to function almost as prepositions—a part of speech Dickinson strongly favors in this poem. She offers locations frozen in space rather than actions unfolding in progressive time.

What is left is a set of almost unconnected nouns: trees, sun, wind; acre, place, passer by, shadow, squirrel, boy; deed, plan. But the disconnection between things is just what the poem is about: objects which simply appear one beside or after the other, but whose relationships remain utterly unclear. There is no obvious order; no clear design; no clear action; no clear plan. A scene is given, in its stark presence. The sun rises and sets over it, an eye glances at it. But there is no hint as to its place in a wider scheme. And God, who is named in the second stanza, really does very little to tie the different items together. He appears instead as just another object, another noun, and not as an overarching, organizing figure in terms of whom all the other things fall into meaningful place. If God is present, he does not unite the scene. This remains a collection of isolated objects that do not cohere. And if at the end, the poem still seems to be seeking such order and design, this too proves to be an illusion, both in event and in syntax. “What Deed,” the poem seems to ask, “what plan.” But despite the interrogative “What,” the final stanza turns out not really to be a question at all. The answer provided is no answer: “Unknown.” At the end, what looks like a question turns out to be only a flat statement of lack of knowledge.

In this poem, then, the syntax actively expresses and even structures the radical doubt and disorder which the poem is about. The short, cut-off lines, the lack of verbs, or of punctuation, or of clear connectives, take place in both grammar and understanding. In her refusal to fulfill it, Dickinson particularly brings to view what normative grammar in fact accomplishes. Prepositions locate. Verbs project action and, above all, mediate time. Conjunctions connect, expressing relationships of logic and sequence. Dickinson helps us appreciate how much our sense of order (and not only in poetry) has to do with the kind of connections—in time, in place, in cause and effect, in logic—that the grammar of our language realizes and asserts.

The disjunctions of Dickinson’s grammar reinforces and is reinforced by the sense of rupture in her whole poetic format, including line breaks. Lineation is very much a matter of syntax, organiz-

ing the poem's grammar across its lines in ways significant and central to the poem's meaning:

Between Walls
 the back wings
 of the
 hospital where
 nothing
 will grow lie
 cinders
 in which shine
 the broken
 pieces of a green
 bottle

In this poem by William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), lineation—that is, line distribution—is almost everything. It is worth noting that the poem is a grammatical fragment. It is missing an opening preposition which would situate the scene it presents—“[At] the back wings.” But this is consistent with the whole sense of fragmentation the poem cultivates, as dramatized and constructed through its line breaks.

The way the lines are broken up becomes an active part of the images they are presenting. When we see “the back wings,” we think of insects, or perhaps birds, but not of the wings of a hospital which the poem then proposes. It does so, however, after a line of delay (“of the” does nothing except make you wait to find out: of what?). “Hospital where” again leaves you waiting, which is to say leaves you imagining things that ordinarily do happen in hospitals. This is to imagine the wrong things, the things this poem will not be about. “Where / nothing.” Well, that doesn't tell very much. “Where / nothing // will grow lie.” This is peculiar. There is growth in hospital; and there is “lying in,” for hospitals are a place of birth (Williams himself delivered babies as a practicing gynecologist and obstetrician). But not here (or is that right?). “Lie / cinders.” Now we have a better sense of where we are. We are not in the hospital, but behind it, between the wall of its back wings. And what is back there is nothing but—cinders, things thrown away and burnt out. Hospi-

tals are also places of decay, of discard, of death. "Lie / cinders // in which shine." At last, something bright, something hopeful! "Shine // the broken." Uh oh: something discarded, something defeated, something ruined. "Pieces of a green." Again, something alive, a plant perhaps, or some grass, or maybe just a leaf . . . and then: "A green / bottle."

Where, then, does this poem leave us? The way in which Williams breaks up the poem's lines is central to our experience of it. This dramatizes how much reading a poem is indeed a process, a sequence, an event through time. Syntax is, finally, integral also to the experience of reading the poem. Syntactic forms not only direct the reader through the poem's word patterns. They underscore how the process of reading itself is part of the poetic experience. Piecing words together, working through patterns, suspending understanding and directing attention, are experiences mediated by the syntax.

In this particular poem, the reading process is one of mistake and correction, and mistake again, and correction again. We go back and forth between things that are alive and organic, as against things that are dead and inorganic: insects (perhaps a butterfly) and buildings; growth and cinders; green plants and bottles. Yet there is an overall effect. We discover as we go that a place that seems doomed only to rubbish and broken objects can become a scene of beauty; that even an old broken bottle, given the proper attention, seen the right way, can shine green, alive, lovely, for a moment, for a fragment of a moment.

Syntax is inevitably a technical and dry subject: dry as bones. But, like bones, syntax remains the understructure holding together the poem as its more enticing imagery or logic or composition or melodious language unfolds. In ordering and mediating both the structure and the reading experience of the poem, syntax, like dry bones, can awaken and rise to new and exciting poetic life.