

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

THE LINE-BREAK

by John Mateer

Usually we begin thinking about the form of a poem by thinking about the line, the kind of line and its rhythm or metre. A poem is, of course, composed of lines within the larger verse form, whether that is a traditional form or free-verse. Within the lines, the words are laid out in sentences according to rules of grammar and the words' music, the voice following the lines backwards and forwards across the page. This is true of all poems, from the most straight-forward rhyming verses to the most experimental writing, although in experimental poetry the norms of grammar might not be immediately apparent.

Consider the following lines from my poem 'Aftermath':

Walk into my mouth
into the head that isn't mine.
 Sit cross-legged on the crinkly, sooty ground,
on the wisps of singed hair
in the aftermath...

Do you notice how the lines each contain essentially one image or idea, while the flow of lines is not interrupted by the line-breaks, rather by the punctuation? There are two sentences segmented into units of perception by the lines.

The line - with its logic of the rhythm it contains, its images, words and the sound of the words themselves - is always in tension with its ending, the line-break. In a compositional sense, the line and its ending together are the most basic unit of the rhythmic structure of the poem. How the line moves to its conclusion and then begins again on the next line determines the dynamic of the stanzas and the over-arching form of the poem itself.

Every line has its own logic. If it contains rhythmic repetitions there will be the implication that the next line will repeat something like those rhythms. This is always the case when writing in metre. In metrical verse the line-break marks the point at which the rhythm of the first line will begin to repeat itself. In free-verse or other poetic forms which emulate either the spoken voice or create a visual play on the page, the line-break always represents a pause. The effect of that pause varies according to the kind of poetics the poet is using and according to the effect he or she wishes to achieve at that point in the poem.

When working on your poems it is important to identify first those qualities that are important to the line: Is a regularity of rhythm essential? Should the rhythm follow the spoken voice? Is it important to have one set of ideas or images leading quickly to another? Or should there be a pause to draw attention to the language or images, or to what separates them?

What is the logic and effect of the lines in this, the start of my poem on a waterfall ('Splitter Falls, Lorne')?

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