

## Spillages: Openness, Closure and the Watertight Compartment

Nobody in poetry seems much in doubt that the world is a messy place. In her 1968 book *Poetic Closure*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith wrote that, in life, “many experiences are fragmentary, interrupted, [and] fortuitously connected.”<sup>1</sup> Lynn Hejninian, in her riposte *The Rejection of Closure*, described the world in near-identical terms: “vast and overwhelming... potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, such is life. But what is poetry supposed to do about it? For Smith, the answer is psychological: to fight back, or just to cope, we create or seek out ‘enclosures’, that is “structures that are highly organised, separated as if by an implicit frame from a background of relative disorder.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly, this is how the Romantics saw it. The Cambridge Companion to Blake, for example, notes that “The concept of an isolated episode or accidental occurrence seems to have been anathema to him. Whenever he found a broken connection between A and B, he read it as a defect and attempted a remedy.”<sup>4</sup> Coleridge too tried to make the chaos of events “assume to our Understandings, a circular motion — the snake with its Tail in its mouth.”<sup>5</sup>

This was a view that continued well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yeats, for example, thought that a poem came right “with a click like a closing box”<sup>6</sup>, and Dylan Thomas described his compositions as “watertight compartments.”<sup>7</sup> The metaphors vary, but in all cases, what is emphasised is a sense of enclosure and wholeness: something is kept in and something kept out. That is, the poem, in order “to maintain its identity as distinct from that of ordinary discourse”, “draw[s] an enclosing line... that marks the boundary between “art” and “reality.”<sup>8</sup>

Hejninian rejects this ‘closed text’ response as “a fiction... [and a] falsehood”<sup>9</sup>, not true to ordinary life. She proposes instead what she calls the “open text”, one which “resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product.”<sup>10</sup> As this “commodification” and “reduction” depend on a ‘pick-up-able’ text, i.e. one that is closed, we may, by exploding the artificial integrity and closedness of said text, also “challenge...our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an[y] event.”<sup>11</sup> In essence, the open text, then, attempts these two things: firstly, to destroy the text’s false closedness, and secondly, to remove the writer from her position of authority over the reader. She gives the example of Grenier’s *Cambridge M’ass*, in which fragments are scattered on a black background. The reader is allowed to choose the order of reading, and at no point does the poem ‘end’ or ‘stop’, as it can be read and re-read, in differing orders or with codas and repetitions. In practical terms, Grenier attacks the sides of the ‘enclosure’, and lets the poem leak out and real life leak in.

What then does this poetic enclosure look like? And how amenable is it to attack? Almost all poems, it will be granted, are, in essence, rectangles or squares, with a top, a bottom, a straight left side, and a coastal right side. Indeed, the metaphors bear this out: frames, boxes, containers and the like. In short, there are titles and first lines, endings, right margins, and left margins, and each of these has features – formal, thematic and otherwise – which reinforce its status as a boundary. A Shakespearean Sonnet for example, has terminal rhyme at the right margin of each line, and is ‘sewn up’ at the end, both formally with a couplet and thematically with a conclusion. You wouldn’t expect the line to carry on after the rhyme, nor for the poem to carry on after the summation.

Nevertheless, some poems do. Or, they choose to end without even a full stop, like Williams’ *Young Sycamore*, or begin *in media res* like *Poem beginning with a line by Frank Lima* by Lisa Jarnot, or dispense with the ‘inauguration’ of the left margin altogether, like *Cambridge M’ass* above. In fact, a great deal of contemporary poetry seeks either to ignore or to destroy these traditional boundaries, which separate the poem from the ‘not-poem’. I compare this distinction between ‘ignoring’ and ‘destroying’ in poetry to that between a-morality and im-morality in ethics: the former attaches (or pretends to attach) no value to the rule, nor to its transgression, whereas the latter *questions* its value and, in some case, glorifies its transgression. Dickinson’s ‘*Hope is a thing with feathers*’ has no real title; *Duck Soup* and *O Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feeling So Sad* make a mockery of the institution of the title<sup>12</sup>. Each of the four sides of the ‘frame’ may be ignored or attacked in this way, but, for reasons of space, I shall focus on the right margin.

The right margin line break is, for many, almost definitional of poetry. Marjorie Perloff wrote that it is “a truth almost universally acknowledged... that a series of words, phrases, or clauses divided into line lengths... must constitute a poem.”<sup>13</sup> Of course, as Perloff goes on to say, lineation is, in most people’s eyes, not sufficient (or even necessary) for a text to be labelled poetry. However, Jonathan Culler’s lineated newspaper reports show it is at least a question worth asking.

Hier sur la Nationale sept  
Une automobile  
Roulant à cent à l'heure s'est jetée  
Sur un platane  
Ses quatres occupants ont été  
Tués.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, almost all texts have right (or, to be more precise, ‘terminal’) margins, but the *poetic* right margin has to be non-arbitrary, and therefore both meaningful and demarcated. Indeed, if – as the consensus seems to be – poetry *does* predate prose and even literacy itself, this type of

margin may actually be older than the arbitrary (though whether an oral text can have ‘margins’ in any real sense is debatable, and will be discussed later).

Right margin demarcation takes many forms. It may be strong, as in the full rhymes and end-stops of Pope or Dryden’s heroic couplets, or weaker, as in the enjambed blank verse of, say, Tennyson’s *Ulysses*. But even in the least structured free verse, the right margin is almost always demarcated thematically with a ‘strong’ or ‘meaningful’ word, that is, it is rare, even today, to end a line with ‘of’ or ‘the’, unless the meaning word is going to crash in at the left margin of the next line (of which more later.) Attempts *have* been made, however, to subvert or ignore these boundary markers and, therefore, to smash out the right side of the box.

Into the im- or ‘destroying’ camp, we may place those poets and poems which mock or question the conventional boundary markers of the right margin. Sharon Olds, for example, typically ends her lines with “little phrases...like tips of twigs” with the nouns “down the left-hand margin, like a trunk.”<sup>15</sup>

standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks with the  
wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its  
sword-tips black in the May air<sup>16</sup>

Avoiding the traditional line-ending punch, Olds allows a more natural trailing off at the end of the breath — one which is more necessary for the lack of breathing space within the lines. The natural pause in the first line, for example, would be between ‘pillar’ and ‘made’ but the sense won’t allow it: an oral ‘comma’ there makes the *speaker* “made of tiny bricks”! By listening more closely to the natural breath, she avoids the triumphalism of more traditional, pat end words. Indeed, the stressed – in two cases spondaic – line beginnings manage to retain the ‘meaning word’ emphases, and, if anything, make them *more* pronounced, coming, as they do, early to the eye and breath. (Of course, an unfortunate side-effect of this is to reinforce the *left* margin as a boundary: it is cutting off the bottom of the blanket and sewing it to the top.)

In her interviews, Olds makes it clear not only that the intention of her lineation is to go against the rules (“There’s a brat in me who likes doing it my own way”<sup>17</sup>) but also to open up the text: “[I do it to] try to imitate what it feels like to be alive, which is, for me, not end-stopped.”<sup>18</sup>

As Carol Rumens points out in her *Poem of the Week* column, Ahren Warner’s *Engram* “flirts”<sup>19</sup> with the possibility of end rhymes in its first two couplets, but settles instead on a weak half-rhyme.

As the wrinkled skin of milk over-boiled  
conjures the sludge of moistening bath balls,  
  
the pucker of wet paper – graphite’s aquaplane –

summons up bubble bath, its faux-clementine<sup>20</sup>

By the final couplet, however, he has settled on a rejection, more complete for the fact that the rhyme is there – and so obviously there – for the taking.

To a smutch or shadow. I remember this.  
I cannot remember my first kiss's name.<sup>21</sup>

Robert Creeley, in *I Know a Man*, doesn't even dignify the right margin with a whole word.

sd, which was not his  
name, the darkness sur-  
rounds us, what<sup>22</sup>

Of course, we cannot be certain of the intentions of all these poets: they may not intend to 'mock' the conventions of the right margin, but only (ab)use them. Rebecca Hazelton, for example, sees Creeley's line breaks as an attempt to "violat[e] the readers' sense of order."<sup>23</sup> But what *is* certain is that these strategies *question* the boundary conventions, and therein lies the problem: in questioning the conventions of the right margin, they call attention to it as a boundary — a place to stop. The reader of Creeley's *I Know a Man* might stop, for example, to question why the word 'sur-rounds' is broken: is it to lengthen the word? To emphasise that the darkness is 'everywhere', at the beginning *and* end of the line? Is it to present us with the word 'rounds', as in 'he rounded on me'? Whatever the answer, attention is focussed there, and the situation becomes something of a catch-22. Noting the same problem with William Carlos Williams' titling, Anne Ferry laments that his 'abstract titles' "call attention even more aggressively than his absent titles to what is not said, and in doing so impose a theoretical frame on the poem."<sup>24</sup>

It is unfortunate then that this "theoretical frame" is precisely what must be avoided for a text truly to be open: the reader is *told* to question the right margin. Naturally, this is both quite likely the intention of the poet, and also a necessary step towards an open text; a boundary cannot disappear unless it is first questioned. But, though poets may, in this way, invite readers to question boundaries, they cannot make them disappear. For that, we must turn to those poetries which have attempted just that.

Into the a- , or ignoring, camp may be placed those poetries which either do away with – or appear to do away with – the line break altogether, as well as those which ignore the meaningfulness of the line break, that is to say, prose poetries.

The former may be designated, not lineated, but *linear*. The most common such form is performance poetry, but other experiments have been tried, including poems written in

boustrophedon – where the line turns ‘as the ox ploughs’, from left to right, and then back from right to left, often with the letters reversed.

Of course, if one defines poetry as simply text with non-arbitrary line breaks, these poetries are immediately excluded. But any definition of poetry that rules out its oldest, spoken form is clearly wanting. And more than this, we intuitively feel there is something more to a definition than just lineation. As Perloff states, “Becket with line breaks is better poetry than CK Williams.”<sup>25</sup> The essential break is not between line end and line beginning but between the sonic and the semantic. If prose is concerned with meaning, and music with sound (and sound-conscious prose is ‘poetic’ and meaning-conscious music ‘tells a story’), then poetry can bring together the sonic and semantic and, more importantly, break them apart again. This pause – this gap – between the sonic and semantic is the defining mark of poetry, that “province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent to patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely.”<sup>26</sup>

In the case of performance poetry, this ‘gap’ creation cannot be achieved through the line break, that is, the physical act of moving one’s eyes from the right margin to the left, so other methods have to be used. Below is an excerpt from Kate Tempest’s *Circles*, which I have lineated.

I’m in a mess, I can’t help it  
I just go round and round  
I’m paranoid, I’m selfish  
Push me, I clam up, I’m shellfish  
We had a dream, I shelved it  
That eats me up, that’s Elvis  
Las Vegas era  
I’m half bag lady, half Bagheera<sup>27</sup>

In this, as in so much performance poetry, the rhyme and rhythm are emphasised to a much greater degree than in contemporary page poetry. Of the eight lines, five share the same end rhyme and all but one (“Elvis / Las Vegas Era”) is end-stopped. It is this line, though, that shows most effectively the disconnect between the sonic and semantic. The multisyllabic rhyme on ‘Elvis’ calls attention to it as the end of the thought. It is, or seems to be, a brag, albeit one that seems slightly out of context. However, the heavy rhyme disguises the enjambed undercut. It is *Las Vegas era* Elvis, the fat, sad parody of his former self. Undercutting in this way isn’t often employed in page poetry, but it is a staple of playground skipping rhymes, another oral poetry.

O, operator,  
please give me number nine  
and if you disconnect me

I'll chop off your be—

'hind the 'frigerator,  
there was a piece of glass

Here and above, the right margin is marked as the place where meaning changes. This could not occur without the sonic and semantic senses working separately, but in tandem. Consequently, despite the lack of a formal 'right margin' we are rarely left in any doubt as to where each line ends. This can be seen more clearly if we compare *Circles* to a poem from her page collection, *Hold Your Own*.

Shuffling, lonesome, sipping black lager,  
Park-drunk. Spouting maniacal laughter.  
Hard up. Head down. Scarf, gloves, parka.<sup>28</sup>

Here we see not only the same repeated end rhymes (this time four of them) and the same end-stopped lines, but also that Tempest herself has lineated in the way suggested by the sounds, that is to say in a very traditional way. It is rare to hear a performance poet who does not do the same, perhaps because without its trademark end rhyme and mannered patterning, it might not be recognised as poetry at all.

We see, then, that shorn of the contemporary line break, performance poetry is forced into a trap. It must either use the strong right margin demarcation of an earlier time or refuse and run the risk of leaving the realms of poetry altogether. This being the case, it invariably chooses the former. This is just one of the factors that makes performance poetry, to a very great extent, closed. The other is that the pauses and end stops that are employed so effectively here are entirely in the control of the poet. The 'reader' cannot continue until the 'writer' allows her. Compared with a paper right margin, the reader controls less and the writer more.

The same problem of 'gap' demarcation faces the other linear form mentioned. Boustrophedon poetry creates the non-semantic slow-down and stop at the 'turn' — the point at which the text stops and goes the other way. However, this only occurs to a modern reader because it is a novelty. This, for example, is an excerpt from Gregg J. Gormley's *Farming with Boustrophedon*:

In chisled gyri the songs of farmer-poets who sing  
planters seed of audience an and blackbirds winged-red Of  
Sharing the fugal feast of farmer, beasts, plow and dirt<sup>29</sup>

Aside from the visual effect of working across the lines in the same manner as the poem's farmers, the boustrophedon also allows a slow-down at the 'turn' as we work out how to read

the text coming back the other way. We know the farmer-poets sing, but have to wait for what they sing of. As the text isn't reversed, we are forced to read the second line in jumps: we read 'Of' left to right, then the eye travels right to left to find the beginning of 'winged' whereupon we resume reading left to right and so on. In effect, each word in the backwards lines is read twice, possibly more so in the case of 'blackbirds' and 'winged-red' as, of the two compound words, only one ("winged-red") has its component words reversed. The hard work of reading these lines – stopping and picking up the meaning, pushing through the sense then turning round and doing it again – mimics the labour of the farmer-poets in their "chisled gyri".

However, in a naturally boustrophedon script, and to established boustrophedon readers, these pauses would shrink and perhaps even disappear, and it is dubious to what extent poetry could be created without other 'gaps' being manufactured in their place.

Linear poetry does, however, have a saving grace. In *And Only Fortune Shines* J.H. Prynne uses forward slashes to break up the line, and to create additional semantic-sonic gaps.

We are not the person for this as we  
do make away / over to the / side I  
tell you oh love the ones<sup>30</sup>

These, as before, are pauses of novelty. They are also reader-dependent, again like Gormley's boustrophedon. The difference, however, is that pausing at the forward slashes is a reader's *choice*. The 'gaps' in *Farming with Boustrophedon* are dependent on the reader, but dependent on that over which she has no control. In contrast, it takes only a matter of seconds to learn to read over Prynne's slashes (or over other, non-typographical mid-line gaps) if one decides to do so. The right margin line break, the performance poet's end-stop, and the backwards text of a boustrophedon piece are all *obligate* gaps, and it is precisely this writer-direction which is the mark of the closed text. Reader-direction, on the other hand, is a mark of the open text — it is "generative rather than directive."<sup>31</sup>

We may therefore sum up that: poets (or potential poets) who attempt to escape the strictures of the right boundary by ignoring it may either be forced backwards – to mark 'gaps' in a more traditional way – or, by removing the gaps, be forced out of poetry altogether, but those who ignore it and replace *obligate* gaps with *reader-choice* gaps may succeed in creating a more open text.

The prose poem shows another way of doing this. It must, of course, have a terminal margin, but it is an arbitrary one, or at least it should be. Adjusting the font-size of my kindle on C.K. Williams' *Wind*<sup>32</sup> can yield end words for the first line of "year", "there", "were" and many others, but none changes the meaning of the poem in any particular way. Any so-called prose-poem that does not treat the end word as arbitrary is not prose-poetry proper, merely poetry with

very precise line lengths. If we leave these cases aside, though, we are faced with the same question as before, namely, how the necessary ‘gaps’ can be created. Rosmarie Waldrop calls this problem “the greatest challenge of the prose poem”<sup>33</sup>.

Her solution is what she calls “gap-gardening”: an attempt to “compensate for the absence of the margin...[by] try[ing] to place the margin, the emptiness, in the text.”<sup>34</sup>

Even a slight curvature in the path of the light will produce dim shapes of possibles.  
Night minus tears. Or where. The shared adventure. Or amaranth, love-lies-ableeding.  
Who sings this song? Who talks desire? And she for use as long as. High in the air. Or  
clouds.<sup>35</sup>

Here, Waldrop cuts up the second line with semi-optional ‘gaps’: the fragments “Or where” and “Or amaranth”, for example, beg for pauses but do not force them, whilst the use of full-stops slows the reader into considering whether she is reading questions or statements, especially in the light of the questions proper that follow.

Again, the success of this gambit depends almost entirely upon the reader. There is no physical force with which Waldrop can compel the pause, but the constructions are sufficiently arresting to suspect this piece would be difficult for anyone to skim as prose. The prose-poem therefore treads a narrow road. If it claims to ignore the right margin, but fails to do so, it becomes *just* a poem; if it succeeds in doing so, but does not replace the gaps somewhere else, it becomes *just* prose. However, if it suggests gaps, but does not force them, it becomes not only a prose-poem proper, but an open text.

We may see, then, that those poetries which *attack* the conventions of the right margin succeed only in reifying them; those that seem to ignore them often simply mark them in a different, usually older and more bounded, way; and those that succeed in ignoring them, without replacing the gaps they create, wander out of poetry altogether. But those poetries which ignore the conventions of the right margin, and *replace the closed, writer-choice line break with an in-line reader-choice gap*, transcend right margin demarcation, yet still remain poetry — and open poetry at that.

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