

FINE LINES

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Why write the free-verse line? Why does one line end and another begin? Close to a century after Ezra Pound's Imagist manifesto, in which he declares, "As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (929), and over half a century after Charles Olson's proclamation, in "Projective Verse," that the line arises from "the breath... of the man who writes" (1054), their once radical imaginings of lineation are now firmly entrenched in the realm of convention, stock phrases to which writers and readers resort when faced with a free-verse poem in need of explication. "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave" bears little or no significance to those writing and reading many heaves later, bereft of the pressure to count syllables, track feet, or even know the word *pentameter*.

As many poets and critics have observed, the very term *free verse* lends itself well to the notion of an arbitrary approach to lineation, justified solely by the poet's subjectivity and therefore beyond perusal. The absence of accountability that springs from this notion renders the free-verse line paradoxically necessary and dispensable, figuring prominently as a convenient visual indicator that a text is to be identified and read as a poem, only to be immediately disregarded once it fulfills this task. That its prosody is "rhythmic organization by other than numerical modes" (qtd. in Perloff, "After Free Verse") hardly matters in light of this surface visual function, since, as Marjorie Perloff writes, "the majority of free-verse poems—say those one finds in any issue of *Poetry* or *American Poetry Review*—retain the justified left margin, some form of stanzaic structure, and lines of similar length, so as to produce visual columns not all that different from their metrical counterparts" ("After Free Verse"). Not that a keener attention to the aural qualities of many free-verse poems would necessarily revise the common

notion of arbitrariness in lineation, or enlarge a reader's sense of its functions. Upon advocating free verse, Pound just as quickly noted that "*vers libre* has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. . . . The actual language and phrasing is often as bad as that of our elders without even the excuse that the words are shoveled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound" (929).

Although their commentaries are many decades apart and their accusations dissimilar, Perloff and Pound both take issue with the inability of the free-verse line to *matter* in many poems that employ it. On many occasions, it is reduced to an ornament, a surface effect, a device we read past, or read through, but don't quite read. If, in some instances, the line doesn't matter at all, in other instances, it doesn't matter much. James Longenbach, in discussing William Carlos Williams's "Pastoral" ("When I was younger..."), for example, notes that its approach to lineation is, to borrow J.V. Cunningham's term, simply to *parse* syntax. "That is," Longenbach explains, "while these lines are not end-stopped, they almost always follow the normative turns of syntax rather than cutting against syntax... ["Pastoral"] parses syntax so consistently that the poem cannot generate the energy required to make its own subject matter seem sufficiently worthy of notice" ("The End of the Line" 15, 19).

Granted, each poem will foreground certain devices over others, and no single device can or should be held up as *the* indispensable ingredient on which a text's identity as a poem depends or by which a poem communicates its ideas. While Longenbach seems severe in deeming "Pastoral" barely compelling and attributing its tepid quality to its line cuts, his judgment emphasizes that the line does not have much of a stake in the way we receive and grapple with the ideas in Williams's poem and, by extension, in many poems. "The thrill of a free verse prosody lies in the ability to shape the speed and movement of a poem through the strategic use of different kinds of line endings," Longenbach writes ("The End of the Line" 21). The overall

obedience of the lineation in “Pastoral” to the pacing and pauses embedded in syntax—to the movements that exist regardless of line breaks, in other words—makes it read like prose, which inevitably diminishes the line’s participation in the poem’s meanings.

Fading into the background can make lineation so easily detachable from a poem, but so can dominating the foreground. In Sid Gomez Hildawa’s “Malchus at Gethsemane,” for example, a dramatic monologue about the slave Malchus losing and regaining his hearing during Christ’s arrest, it seems particularly appropriate for the line—the means by which a poem manages its sound—to assert its presence.

MALCHUS AT GETHSEMANE

Everything sounded off, with my right ear
 Slashed by this disciple who had snatched
 My sword when we closed in on the one
 Judas marked with a kiss. My cry seemed
 To me a garden jolted from sleep by a legion
 Of cicadas. I didn’t even worry about missing
 The rumble of chariots and centuries, just the call
 Of my mistress from her hideout in the woods
 Followed by moans and the rustle of sheets.
 The one we came to arrest picked up my ear

And restored my sense of things, so that I hear:
 The salamander teasing the moon as it serenades
 The olive trees, what the water says when a wind
 Wants to pick a fight with the stones, the harvest
 Chant of ants in chorus with the yawning of leaves,
 Riddles told by the lonely toad, tall tales of trees
 Lining the road. The symphony of space cradling
 All of creation, as it skids along the axis of time.

The Galilean had said something about dying
By the sword. I left it dumbstruck on the ground.

The poem achieves this through relentless enjambment. All but three lines in “Malchus at Gethsemane” resist, rather than confirm, the movement of syntax. If consistent adherence causes the line to disappear in Williams’s poem, consistent resistance to it, in Hildawa’s case at least, causes the line to divert attention to itself in a solo performance, and not in conjunction with the poem’s flow of thought. While the choppiness of the first stanza, which dwells on the moment Malchus’s ear is chopped off, enacts the disorientation ushered in by his disability, the choppiness that recurs in the second stanza, which describes the spectacular restoration—and more importantly—improvement of his hearing, contradicts the epiphany Malchus proudly brandishes.

In divorcing sound from sense, the enjambments insinuate skepticism over Malchus’s heightened sense of sound, which seems out of place when considered in tandem with the spontaneous overflow of romantic imagery that can only be indicative of Malchus’s sincerity, his complete belief in the magic of his restored hearing. That the second stanza is visually the mirror image of the first—both stanzas have ten lines of roughly the same length, with the rhyme of “ear” (line 10) and “hear” (line 11) skillfully creating a swivel—would have been more seductively disconcerting if the second stanza sounded radically different from the first. But instead, this mirroring, when combined with other manifestations of symmetry such as the consistent enjambment as well as the repetition of ways by which enjambment is achieved (“snatched/My sword” and “seemed/to me a garden”; “a legion/Of cicadas” and “the call/Of my mistress”), generates a stasis that is also incompatible with Malchus’s thrill in the revelation of his changed hearing. Because it resists the sincerity of the utterance and the drama of discovery in the poem, the lineation of “Malchus at Gethsemane” registers as an ill-fitting exoskeleton from which the poem is aching to disengage.

“I believe a poem differs from routine or normal discourse (like this statement, for instance) by being the art form that foregrounds language, in its complexity, intensity, and, especially, relatedness,” Perloff writes. “‘Language charged with meaning’ suggests that poetry can never be a matter of ‘lovely’ or ‘elegant’ language but that it must be meaning-ful; on the other hand, ‘meaning’ that is external to or prior to language, as in much of contemporary writing that passes for ‘poetry’ is not poetry either” (“Dialogue”). In speaking of free verse that leaves him unsatisfied, Paul Fussell notes, “what is lamentably missing is the art that makes poems re-readable once we have fathomed what they ‘say’” (88). With these statements in mind, a poem, I think, becomes most fiercely intact—that is, most resistant to paraphrase, or to the fictional divide between form and content that we sometimes employ to navigate a poem—when the relationship between the rhythmical unit (the line) and the syntactical unit (the grammatical phrase) (Pinsky 34) is so integral to our reading of it that we cannot detach one from the other without compromising the depth to which we can engage with the poem. We read line after line of printed text all the time—in newspaper articles, in manuals, in menus—but the line is of no consequence to what they convey. Only poetry—and I should say, only certain poems—deploy the line as a crucial agent of meaning.

Consider Williams’s famous syllabic poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” which avails of the same methods of symmetry found in “Malchus at Gethsemane.”

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.

The four couplets which make up the poem are practically mirror images of each other: there are four syllables in the first lines of the “bookend stanzas” (stanzas 1 and 4) and three in the first lines of stanzas 2 and 3; there are three words in the first line of each stanza and one two-syllable word in the second line of each. Enjambment is also its favored method of lineation.

What spells the difference is the crucial role of enjambment in the poem’s communication. How “The Red Wheelbarrow” unfolds *is* what it says. The stanzas are experiences in mutability, facilitated precisely by lineation, as is the case in stanza 2, where the image in the first line (“the red wheel”), transforms into another image with the attachment of the second line (“wheel/barrow”). The mind then bridges the two words, and when they merge, the image resolves (“wheelbarrow”). Stanza 3, in elaborating on the earlier image, replays the experience: the first line of the stanza (“glazed in rain”) suggests rain in action, introducing movement to the picture, but the addition of the second (“rain/water”) and the conversion of the two words into one (“rainwater”), causes the scene to stand still. Finally, the separation via enjambment of “white” and “chickens” in stanza 4 allows color a split-second to be its own amorphous image before assuming the shape of chickens.

Whether the movement from line to line in “The Red Wheelbarrow” specifically corrects, alters, distorts, transforms, or completes the image, and why so much depends on it is up for

speculation. Suffice it to say that these possibilities and nuances are brought to the fore because the poem engages in process rather than resolution, opting not to “leap too quickly from the *choice* to the *chosen*, from what is *findable* to what is *found*” (Longenbach, “The Other Hand” 80). Considering Williams’s objectivism and his famous slogan “no ideas but in things,” this poem fascinates for putting to the test the capacity of the isolated image to withstand connotations, only to emphasize that “to look at one thing is to think of another thing; to utter one word is inevitably to be distracted by its relationship to other words... [and] the effect of the words we use is always to a degree out of our control” (Longenbach, “Untidy Activity” 52). “The Red Wheelbarrow” demonstrates “the sound of thinking in poetry—not the sound of finished thought but the sound of a mind alive in the syntactical process of discovering what it might be thinking” (“The Other Hand” 73-74), and so much depends upon the way Williams divides a single sentence into lines for this to be achieved. To disregard the lineation is to miss the experience of mutability altogether.

The perennial slipperiness of perception is similarly made explicit in Simeon Dum Dum Jr.’s “Epithalamion,” where a single sentence is divided into eleven lines of loose blank verse.

EPITHALAMION

Certainly, there was hatred in her eyes,
 But this was just because the wind had kept
 The white dove of her veil nervously flapping,
 As though aghast at the fragile white rose
 Being blown away from its perch above
 Her groom’s breast pocket, while we were all posing
 For the photographer, who was unduly
 Concerned about my height, and had assigned
 Me next to the groom, but was quick enough

To manage a shot of the groom and me,
When we both reached down to pick up the rose.

The lineation reflects the finished quality of a formal wedding photograph, the kind about to be taken by the photographer in the poem. But when the measured verse is undermined by the syntactical twists and turns of the single sentence, it creates an experience of the mind in pursuit of coherence—that is, the coherence of a complete sentence, which the meandering syntax resists, and the coherence of a formal photograph, which remains elusive, given the enactment of the untidy process of composition—the flurry of moments before bride, groom, and guests strike a pose.

The sheer length of the sentence in “Epithalamion” already seems to favor process over resolution. It keeps the destination of a complete thought at bay through a series of conjunctions meant to establish the relatedness of various instances of disarray. The connectives may promise coherence, but the disorientation caused by the arrangement of details subverts this by further emphasizing the primacy of the act of perceiving over the perceived. Dumdum introduces the event to which all the moments are tethered (“we were all posing/For the photographer”) only when we are halfway through the poem; this delay downplays the function of the occasion as anchor, discouraging us from leaping immediately to the stability of the perceived, where details succumb to hierarchy and position themselves according to foreground and background, center and periphery, as in the composed photograph of bride and groom, with male and female friends on either side. Instead, though loosely oriented toward each other, the details are kept afloat, the multiple subjects and predicates exerting equal pressure on the mind, so that we are made—at least in initial readings—to devote the same attention or inattention to “the hatred in her eyes,” “the wind,” “the white dove of her veil,” “the fragile white rose,” etc. The artificial compartmentalization of the measured line also delays coherence by releasing information in

equal increments, refusing to comment on the wayward syntax by highlighting certain portions and subduing others. Tension arises when this is set against the many enjambments in the poem, as well as the caesuras in lines 7-10, creating charged gaps in the mind which urgently need to be filled. The conflict between the speed provoked by the enjambments and the composure of the measured line intensifies the itch to cohere.

It takes a couple of readings for the sentence in “Epithalamion” to reveal its arrangement, for the chronology of moments and the complete picture to stabilize in the mind. What this foregrounds is the activity of constantly revising perception, the process of arriving at an image rather than the image itself, with the line as a crucial participant in clarifying and defining the pace of such movement. When a photograph is finally taken at the end of Dumdum’s poem, it is a candid shot of the speaker and the groom picking up the wayward rose, which suggests movement rather than the posed photograph’s non-activity and stopped time, just as the tandem of syntax and line in the poem enacts a mind at work rather than a mind made up.

“To cast syntax into lines is to provide choices,” Longenbach writes, “to place precision in the service of equivocation by making us consider the implications of reading the syntax in one way rather than another” (“The End of the Line” 24). In Mabi David’s “Allegory,” for example, the child’s game and the dilemma that arises from it are provocative enough, yet the lineation exposes further nuances, drawing to the surface what would otherwise be deep-seated implications.

ALLEGORY

In the meantime

the child enters the scene

a mirror to his chest
like so: a serving tray,

silver up. The self up
to the trick: *the ceiling's the floor!*

There are things:
there aren't things.

The child ventures steadily forth
per ceiling frame, slow

chart and grid work; the mind
trundling tile after tile,

after fact. He will keep on &
keep on in the room,

stubbing a toe or straight into a chair
back, straight into numerous incongruities

bruising himself in this procedure
till the child finally makes it

past the old door, into the porch—
See the vee of the roof that inverts into

the stern of a boat. Surely
what follows is the predictable

jump into lawn, *this is sky*.
Disconcerted, the child

loses his balance; the porch

boards squeak like a boat

(Imagine it dipping deeper into the silver-backed skyfull.

Imagine its side angling acutely into clouds—O, sea foam!—)

that's fastened, still, back into upright or
real, as when a rope tugs the tilting back

so that this child won't fall in,

O that this child might fall in—

Easiest perhaps to access is the use of couplets, which, in slowing down the pace of the poem, approximates the hesitation (the stanzas like small, tentative steps) and calculation (“per ceiling frame, slow//chart and grid work”) of the child as he navigates the now unfamiliar space of his home—at least, according to the alternative map provided by the mirror held against his chest. The sixteen couplets also repeatedly visually impress upon the reader’s mind not only the dualism at work in allegory—the simultaneous existence of the one and the other to which it refers—but also, as literally demarcated by the mirror the boy holds, the division of the self, into two parts: the mind and the body.

The “numerous incongruities” encountered by the boy as a result of a seemingly inconsequential gesture constitute the fascinating and disconcerting dilemma played out throughout the poem. If, indeed, “*the ceiling’s the floor!*”—that is, they are the same, or, one is now the other—then why the discrepancy between what he sees in the mirror and what he feels with his legs and feet? Why the discrepancy between the experience of the upper portion of the self—which may go by the terms *mind* and *imagination*—and the lower portion—which may go by the terms *body* and *material reality*? If a mirror is a tool capable of accurate representation, then why the inconsistency between what the mirror reflects and what the self experiences?

What these questions illustrate, “the mind/trundling tile after tile, // after fact... bruising himself in the procedure”, is the child’s disorientation over his fluctuating sense of “fact”: “stubbing a toe or straight into a chair/back” aligns him with the material, while “See the vee of the roof that inverts into/the stern of a boat” with the imagined. Nothing stays true, nothing settles, and the credibility of every perception, when set against another, quickly comes into question. In teetering between the world according to his mind and the world according to his body, the boy inhabits the experience of equivocation, which, considering the unsettling quality of the provisional, he struggles to find his way out of. The dilemma becomes more pressing because it allows space for anticipating reconciliation; the mind often finds itself on the brink of conflation and its corresponding coherence. The terms of the game, however, ultimately make arrival at stability impossible. To hold a mirror to his chest is to reside in the dilemma of incongruities, and one can only hope, as the speaker does in the end, for resolution, however brief and prone to being shattered.

By exposing the boy to incongruities, the mirror in “Allegory” brings into question its own capacity for accurate representation. Instead of precision, what it achieves is distortion; it discards the ideal of a mirror image and becomes an agent of fracture, of error. The stanzas of the poem may be seen as illustrations of this; the lines are of roughly the same length in each couplet, yet the second lines are always indented, imperfectly mirroring the first, rupturing what would otherwise be symmetrical. The lineation also exposes many patterns in the construction of thought which play on the slipperiness of mirroring, most explicit of which is the repetition of the same statement within a couplet—but not quite. Consider stanza 4: There are things;/there aren’t things. The lines are practically mirror images, and a haphazard reading might mistake them for one and the same, only one is *not* the other. The migration of the accented syllable from “There are THINGS” to “there AREN’T things” also emphasizes the discrepancy. Consider too the final

stanza: “so that this child won’t fall in,/O that this child might fall in—”. The distortion in what would otherwise be the same line comes in the form of a single letter: “s”, but the change in word it produces radically changes the sense of the statement, from an explanation of the mechanism of the real to a reaching for the realm of the imagined.

Subtler repetitions magnified by the line also produce the experience of equivocation, as in the erratic mirroring in line 5 (“silver up. The self up”), where the fact that “silver” and “self” use several of the same letters and they are both set beside “up” make them seem like mirror images—except they are not. Lineation also highlights the preponderance of alliterations and the linking of words through a network of sounds, as in the abundance of *s* and *t* sounds in “stubbing a toe or straight into a chair/back, straight into numerous incongruities”; *s*, *v*, and *t* sounds in “See the vee of the roof that inverts into//the stern of a boat”; or *d*, *p*, and *s* sounds in “dipping deeper into the silver-backed skyfull”. While infuse utterances with such smoothness, drawing us further into the poem, they, more significantly, heighten our awareness of each moment’s revision—the repetition is inexact, the same sounds are couched in other words, and the sense is inevitably transformed. Like the boy negotiating his way through incongruities, the poem itself engages the mind in constantly revising perception, triggering “a visceral awareness of the contemporary moment slipping forever away. Second by second, the incremental passage of time alters the sense of every preceding second, leaving this mind with a menu of more-or-less useful accounts. In addition, this mind is itself in motion, aware that one moment’s version of events will not necessarily satisfy as time moves forward” (Longenbach, “The Other Hand” 76-77).

In describing the poems in *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms* (1969), a groundbreaking anthology of poetry in the fifties and sixties in which the practice of free verse counts as a central criterion, Perloff identifies the following dominant characteristics: “the free-verse “I” generally speaks in complete sentences”; “the free-verse poem *flows*; it is, in

more ways than one, *linear*”; “the rhythm of continuity.... depends upon the unobtrusiveness of sound structure in free verse, as if to say that what is said must not be obscured by the actual saying”; and “the free-verse lyric... subordinates the visual to the semantic.” The poems by Filipinos I have discussed so far, all recently published, subscribe to the same parameters, and may therefore be received with the same dissatisfaction by Perloff, who aligns herself with Charles Bernstein in perceiving the line as “a boundary, a confining border, a form of packaging,” and instead celebrates “a poetics of non-linearity or post-linearity,” proclaiming “the ‘free verse’ aesthetic, which has dominated our century... no longer operative.” Speaking of enjambment, Perloff notes, “To run over a line means that the line is a limit, even as the caesura can only exist within line-limits. To do away with that limit is to reorganize sound configurations according to different principles.” Using poems from the 1996 anthology *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* as examples, Perloff praises what she considers radical—“poems [that] are first and foremost page-based: they are *designed* for the eye rather than merely reproduced and reproducible”; “they must be *seen* as well as heard... Poetry, in this scheme of things, becomes... ‘an experience in language rather than a representation by it’” (“After Free Verse”).

I don’t find Perloff’s statements against the free-verse line completely convincing, given how the line, when used skillfully, can yield and yield; nor do I derive enduring pleasure in the typographical effects, spatial designs, and explicit materiality of language in the poems she favors; nor do I think “an experience in language” is exclusive to poetry she considers non- or post-linear, where linearity pertains to the combination of conventional syntax and lineation as well as the absence or mere suggestion of reflexivity in their use; but I do find much value in her disdain for complacency and her imagining of a given in free verse—lineation—as not simply an option, but perhaps even a limitation. Ellen Bryant Voigt writes, “Every English poem is linear,

read (or heard) left to right, top to bottom, and similarly processed” (135), to which Perloff says no.

Having placed much premium in process over resolution, it seems only apt for me to use as a final poem in this discussion one that engages Perloff’s lack of faith (to put it mildly) in the line, in poems which exhibit the dominant characteristics of the free-verse poem aesthetic she has identified. Marc Gaba’s “Study of Linearity” (“He tasted his tear”) is one of five poems of the same title in his collection, and one of two which do not fragment.

STUDY OF LINEARITY

He tasted his tear, tiny orchestra, it fled
 itself down his face to the tongue which could not
 hold that rapid taste, the lives that quote each other
 streamed below his placard, all day and later
 the sun pulled out like an ending, it pointed
 away from its answers, at us whom it missed,
 word by word, the holes in the net we make.

While falling well within Voigt’s claim, “Study of Linearity,” as the title suggests, comments on it, informed by the restlessness articulated by Perloff. If the line plays a crucial role in “determin[ing] our experience of a poem’s temporal unfolding” (Longenbach, “The End of the Line” 21), engaging us in the process of thinking and the instability of perceiving, it is ultimately an agent of coherence, rendering a poem fiercely intact, as in the case of Dumdum and David.

What is interesting about Gaba’s poem is its simultaneous employment and deconstruction of syntax and line; in making this activity its very subject, it reveals not only the slipperiness of perception, but more specifically, the slipperiness of the mechanisms in poetry by which we

perceive. It calls into question the overall coherence offered by poems as experiences constructed via the tandem of rhythmical and grammatical units as materialized on the page.

Unlike the poems previously discussed, which are informed by narrative—the arrest of Jesus, a wedding, a child’s game—“Study of Linearity” provides no definite context, yet it is initially accessible enough, opening with an image and action. Its title raises a conceptual dilemma, of which a gesture, the poem’s sole event, is an illustration. The poem engages us in tunnel vision, following the track of a tear. We are made attentive to the singular path of its movement; the phrases “fled itself down” and “streamed below” keep our eyes on its downward motion, which is further sustained by a reference to the passage of time, as in the phrase “all day and later”.

But the linearity of movement asserted by these phrases falters when, roughly halfway through the poem, the tunnel vision ceases. In line 5, the appearance of the sun, said to be “like an ending”, does not fulfill the task of capping and illuminating the orderly journey of the tear from one point to another. Instead, it dissolves the focus, and the stability of the line of vision is revealed to be shaky, insufficient, and perhaps, even illusory, as what ought to be a conclusion is instead a distraction from it (“an ending, it pointed/away from its answers”), and what ought to be a medium of knowing—that is, language—is instead an obstacle to it (“at us whom it missed/word by word, the holes in the net we make”). Longenbach writes, “More damaging than the strategic deferral of choice is the romance of conviction—the assumption that we are free to be single-minded” (75). In shattering the stronghold of linearity, the poem, conceptually, word by word, eliminates itself, and to read it is undertake the task of its undoing. What “Study of Linearity” makes in the end is its own absence.

Ann Lauterbach writes,

The consolation of a distilled or stabilized ‘reality’ is nothing if not an
 illusion of
 syntax, where syntax stands for any logic of recognition. I have a love for
 this construct of
 a normalizing stability, but I recognize its habit of formulating, at the least
 impulse,
 categorical imperatives that obscure and resist the actual conditions,
 possibilities, and
 complexities in which we find ourselves. (“As (It) Is” 42)

In Gaba’s poem, the fragility not only of syntax, but also the lines in which it is housed, as mechanisms that hold a poem together are subtly revealed. That it opts for subdued rather than aggressive exposure is crucial. In employing both mechanisms, the poem still honors syntax and line as agents of coherence and stability. But it damages syntax by using the run-on sentence, loosening the integrity of the sentence as a coherent unit. While the individual clauses within it can easily be deduced, the commas within and between clauses act as the most unstable of connectives, going only so far as to indicate, and not define, connections. Without strong tethers, gaps between the thought-units widen, and one becomes more prone to disappearance in the face of the other that succeeds it. The gentle enjambments that string one line to the next as well as the uniform line lengths create an aura of wholeness, but overall, the lineation emerges as artifice, unable to prevent the collapse of linearity to which the ideas in the poem succumb.

“If a line determines the way a sentence becomes meaningful to us in a poem,” says Longenbach, “it also makes us aware of how artfully a sentence may resist itself, courting the opposite of what it says—or, more typically, something just slightly different from what it says” (“The End of the Line” 24-25). “Study of Linearity” contributes another option to Longenbach’s

pool of alternatives; while simultaneously engaging in conventional syntax and lineation, it contemplates and questions the ability of the sentence and line to say, unraveling them as they are made.

Ann Lauterbach writes, “All artworks are, at the most basic level, simply an accrual of relationships that are the result of choices: *this, not that*.... When we are moved by an aesthetic object, a poem or a piece of music or a painting, we experience a dual gladness: that the artist has made these choices and, by extension and analogy, that we, too, are capable of making choices” (“Introduction” 7). I find it most empowering to view art as, above all else, the exercise of will. When used merely as a convenient indicator of the poetic, the line loses its integrity as an outcome of choice. But when the line is directly implicated in the reading of a poem—whether as a means to expose the slipperiness of perception, to enact the persistent delay of coherence, or to reveal itself as a fragile mechanism from which a poem derives stability—it becomes most fiercely demonstrative of will in the act of making.

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