The Invention of Free Verse · *Donald Justice*

I MEAN BY THE INVENTION of free verse only its invention in the twentieth century and in English. It had been invented in the nineteenth century in English by Whitman, in French by Laforgue (I would argue), and here and there even earlier in Western culture by apparent accident. But before our time free verse had not taken hold and swept the world before it.

The invention deserves commemoration. We must put up our plaque, however, not anywhere in New York or London, not even in Boston or Dublin, but in—unlikeliest of places—Crawfordsville, Indiana, somewhere in the environs of Wabash College. The year was 1907. The poet was more or less improvising, we may suppose, in the character of one of the old poets whom he had recently studied with such fondness and aptitude.

> Bah! I have sung women in three cities,
> But it is all the same,
> And I will sing of the sun.

Free verse has perhaps already been invented in these opening lines, but it is hard to be certain. Whatever is happening remains as yet undefined and indefinite. And it is at just this point that the poet, still in the assumed character of Cino, contrives an unmistakable little rhythmical motif, scarcely if ever heard before in English verse. [See End Note]

> Lips, words, and you snare them.

Note the two stresses brought together. This is the main point of the motif, after which comes the pair of slack syllables, as contrast perhaps or balance. What this arrangement of stressed and slack syllables resembles is the so-called ionic or double foot, as described by Ransom, among others, but it is not really quite the same, as Pound will prove only a moment later by way of variations played upon this base, variations extraordinarily difficult or impossible to arrange for in traditional practice, in anything outside of Hopkins' sprung rhythm, for that matter—and Hopkins' manuscripts were not to be published for yet another decade. No

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doubt that a cadence has here been found, beyond Tennyson, beyond Henley and Symons and Dowson, beyond Yeats. It may be taken as a test case of sorts. The proof will lie in whether the effect can be produced again, thus demonstrating that what has just taken place was not by chance.

> Lips, words, and you snare them,
> Dreams, words, and they are as jewels.

In theory it could be done; in practice it now has been done. The rest is mere elaboration and confirmation. For Pound himself the experience must have been like what the scientist feels in his laboratory, not altogether sure yet what he has or whether he has anything at all. The retorts, in any case, are bubbling. What joy in continuing, quite rapidly now, I imagine.

> Lips, words, and you snare them,
> Dreams, words, and they are as jewels,
> Strange spells of old deity,
> Ravens, nights, allurement:
> And they are not,
> Having become the souls of song.

And if two stresses could be brought together, why not three? From "Ravens, nights, allurement" only let the slack syllables be dropped.

> Eyes, dreams, lips, and the night goes.
> Being upon the road once more,
> They are not.

The extension of "Lips, words" into "Eyes, dreams, lips" comes as the final confirmation that something has indeed happened.

After the brilliance of this passage the poem lapses into a more typical early Pound pastiche, mannered and just barely post-Nineties. The moment is finished. On the other hand, as we can see now, it was only a beginning.

Little of the free verse that was to follow has, it is true, anything much

to do with this exact rhythmical motif, but I would maintain, even so, that here the iamb was first broken in a way decisive for twentieth century poetry, decisive in large part of course because of Pound's own future development of the possibilities opened by this small first stroke of his. And even after the passing of so many decades there is still on these nine lines from "Cino" the shine of *the first time.*

End Note: other passages for comparison.

> Break, break, break,
> On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!
> —Tennyson, "Break, Break, Break," c. 1833.

Hush, the Dead March wails in the people's ears:
The dark crowd moves, and there are sobs and tears:
The black earth yawns; the mortal disappears;
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust;
He is gone who seem'd so great.
> —Tennyson, "Ode on the Death of the
> Duke of Wellington," 1852.

The sour scythe cringe, and the blear share come.
> —Hopkins, "The Wreck of the
> Deutschland," 1876 [published 1918].

> Shoulders and loins
> Ache---!
> Ache, and the mattress,
> Run into bolders and hummocks,
> Glows like a kiln, while the bedclothes—
> Tumbling, importunate, daft—
> Ramble and roll. . . .
> > —Henley, "In Hospital," 1888.

Wilt thóu glíde on the blue Pacific, and rest.
> —Bridges, "A Passer-by," 1890.
> [The accent marks are the poet's.]

A song of collisions and cries,
Rumbling wheels, hoof-beats, bells,
Welcomes, farewells, love-calls, final moans,
Voices of joy, idiocy, warning, despair.

                                               —S. Crane, 1899.

It has been said of the Tennyson passages that they echo the funeral march from Handel's *Saul,* and it is certainly possible that the source of the cadence in Tennyson is somehow musical. It appears to connect for him with emotions associated with death and loss. For Pound, too, a specific musical source is at least possible, though less likely, I think, and any local emotional associations are clearly different for him than for Tennyson. Music is worth mentioning in this connection because of Auden's suggestion that keeping to the rhythms of specific musical texts can lead to metrical freshness and innovation. And it may be worth speculating about the emotional associations of a particular rhythmical motif, since links between emotion and rhythm often come up in theory. ["I believe in an 'absolute rhythm,' a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed."—Pound.]

The Henley passage is for one instant virtually identical in movement to the Pound motif (lines 2 and 3 above), and is the closest parallel I have been able to turn up. It hardly seems a serious source, all the same, for Pound's invention.

As for Stephen Crane's poems, they would probably be printed now as prose poems. So far as I can see, they have no bearing on the history of versification except for standing outside it.