

## Postscript

Among the books that editors of literary magazines might be expected to come to an opinion about would be *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, edited by Robert Frank and Henry Sayre, The University of Illinois Press, 1988. This hardbound volume of 243 pp. including a twelve-page bibliography seems to have an agenda. The banner under which it proceeds might proclaim, “Find a margin and get yourself a Center,” a punch line overheard at the most recent MLA convention—Sandra M. Gilbert was its co-deliverer—at which over half of the primary contributors to this volume, Gilbert included, were very much in evidence. For though not in every part, in design and overall intention, this book is a product of persons bent on prescribing the future of American poetry beyond the contemporary “academic norm” of free verse.

After an introduction by its editors, the collection begins with an essay on “The Free Verse Line” by Jonathan Holden, then gives half its middle passage to essays by Gilbert, Stephen E. Henderson, and Garrett Kaoru Hongo, that is to voices steeped in minority traditions, women, African-, and Oriental-American. Since these writers hold small quarrel with free verse as the prevailing form but seek mostly to establish room for themselves, or for writers with whom they identify within it, “middle passage” is not an idle metaphor for their positioning, and they seem in only incidental conjunction with their editors. What Frank and Sayre see as true freedom is adumbrated in later essays by James Scully, Renée Riese Hubert, and Kathleen Fraser that indeed question, perhaps the editors would prefer to say “interrogate” the line as “encoded and encoding,” physically, conceptually, politically. That freedom swells, finally, in a short, concluding anthology called “L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E LINES,” edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews.

In this context, Holden’s contribution is made to represent the establishment, or worse, to captain the slave ship *Poesy*. Assuming free verse is the dominant form of literary magazines, commercial publishing, and creative writing programs in our era, and assuming Holden’s work, coming almost a decade after Charles O. Hartman’s *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton, 1980), can bring us up to date on our academy, Frank and Sayre appear to use Holden as the embodiment of conservative values

from which their collection seeks to depart. The middle section, which includes essays by Marjorie Perloff and Mary Ann Caws as well as by Gilbert, Henderson, and Hongo, then makes forays into territory that strains against the academic, or for which, at least, the editors show extra sympathy. Perloff writes of Goethe, Rimbaud, Williams, and Beckett; Caws of John Ashbery. Then by ending with the Language poets (the editors themselves so reduce the familiar graphic), we are led to a group that “disrupt[s] their own practice even as they engage it” and so “resist[s] . . . the mark of a recognizable style” (xvii). Thus we are provided with the ideal of a poetry in continuous revolution, as if, just to mention one example, Hardy’s echoes of late medieval and early renaissance English lyrics, often by that lovely poet, Anonymous, and Creeley’s echoes of Hardy (see *Mirrors*, 1983) were not.

In short, in seeking to identify a Salon des Refusés, this volume performs a function that has become exquisitely academic. The line of English and American lyric poetry from Anonymous to Dickinson, Hardy, and Williams is anything but academic however much its reading has been co-opted by the universities. Meanwhile the identification and promulgation of counter poetics, more and more radically disjunctive from preceding traditions, even from their own prior page if we take seriously the idea of anyone’s consistent disruption of his or her own practice, is the kind of act the academy falls all over itself in favoring.

But to put a friendlier construction on the matter, we have a volume here driven, in large part, by impatience with free verse in its familiar idiom, and also with the constructions of self that are partner to it. The standard reviewer’s praise that this or that poet has, with a given book of poems, come into his or her own voice and the uncritical assumption that such a voice is an “authentic,” individual achievement are signs of what Frank and Sayre strive to transcend. For it is significantly true that, as the editors begin by observing, free verse has become “the *lingua franca* of contemporary poetic discourse, practiced with more or less equal facility” in our magazines and writing programs. “Why,” they ask, “has it come to work so well for so many?” (xx). And may it not be likely that as the free verse line “has come to signify an authentic self-expression,” it degenerates, often, to merely the representation of “authenticity and sincerity” and hence to an act of “*bad faith*” (xvii)?

The hallmarks of this collection, then, are a drive for new constructions

“beyond” free verse, the isolation of the line as the “site,” it is often said, of investigation and experiment, the complicating if not contradictory awareness that prose, which is formally indifferent to the line, might be of more assistance to this work than traditional verse, a somewhat painterly interest in the page as a “canvas” or at least as a wall freshly whitewashed and inviting graffiti, or sometimes not whitewashed so that we can write over the past and still see through to it— palimpsests are sexy— and social-political signs of dissent. If it is surprising that these writers refer only incidentally to Dada and surrealism as background for their work, less so is the lack of restraint with which they belittle all that is “bourgeois.” Still, one of the poignancies of the volume is to sense the sheer amount of work required to shift a tradition, if not to establish one that is altogether new, and how much of that work requires strained, highly self-conscious discussion.

For a moment at the same MLA convention, an issue slightly dividing Professors Sayre and Bernstein came down to the viability of Burma Shave signs as both poetic message and medium when likened to the neon installations, with doggeral, of Jenny Holzer. Sayre, citing his western upbringing, alone often on the open road, I suppose, confessed his fondness for them. Bernstein found the messages banal and thought Holzer should find a poet to help with their writing. When such winds blow through our winter meetings, can spring . . . ?

But turning to individual essays, though for Frank and Sayre the suspicion of bad faith seems to render all contemporary free verse suspect, Holden ignores their categorical approach and deals with single poems by Ellen Bryant Voigt and Wendell Berry. Thus he sidesteps the issue of an assumed malaise and champions masterful practice. His method of explication is to contrast Voigt’s and Berry’s lyrics to alternative lineations, to show how the lines we have enrich themselves with the echoes of traditional metrics, and to point up the subtlety of other traditional effects, assonance and rhyme in particular, when displaced from their expected deployments. Reasoning that since “the convention requiring of verse a conspicuous verbal surface is such a powerful one, it would seem inevitable that any general decline in the use of accentual-syllabic prosody would be accompanied by a corresponding increase in some other means of foregrounding verbal surface” (7), he stresses what is conjunctive with rather

than disjunctive from earlier practice. Not only does he demonstrate this well in the poems by Voigt and Berry, but his reasoning seems assumed throughout the collection, even in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E LINES, where the effects of varying type sizes and faces, parallel columns that merge and disentangle, number rather than letter sequences, words placed on the page to suggest an ideogrammatic intention, a profusion of parentheses, points placed within the sentence which counterpoint a rhythm of utterance to conventional syntax, all these effects and more bear out Holden's contention that a poetic version of the law of conservation of energy holds for the "conspicuous verbal surface" of poems.

Perloff's epigraph is from Pound, "No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old." For her, free verse is the ground from which the poet must move to fresh effects, and in her examples—Goethe, Rimbaud, Williams, and Beckett—"the chief 'renewing' source" is prose. But she seems equally mindful of Eliot's warning, which Holden quotes, that "no verse is free" for anyone wishing "to do a good job." Put the two together and you have a vision of an avant garde dragging its deep past along with it. Thus her readings are precise, like Holden's, and conventional in much the same way, with the conjunctive aspect swelling almost in spite of itself, as in her reading of a short piece of Beckett's, stressing his thickening texture of sound. Any of her brief readings here, and especially the one on Beckett, could be a model essay for an Intro. to Poetry course, did she not also offer too glib a glossary of contemporary critical diction:

- The poet is positing the relation of . . . the 'I' to the "Other" (20)
- . . . the rhythm of recurrence is defamiliarized (20)
- . . . a created world whose 'reality' exists only in the self-sufficient language-field (22)
- . . . the verse form must be understood intertextually (23)
- . . . to escape from the anxiety of influence (24)
- . . . a poem is the site of lyric vision (25)

Those six examples, occurring within an equal number of consecutive pages, are the critical equivalent of Burma Shave signs and ought to have given pause to any editors strenuously in search of the new.

Mary Ann Caws's essay on Ashbery, the next but one along this middle passage, is a study of boundaries and oppositions, public and private, light

and shade, stable and less stable, with architecture and painting as model and background for Ashbery's "strong-line poetry," a term for its difficulty that Caws takes from Helen Gardner's introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets* (Penguin, 1957). Whether or not Caws's is a helpful essay depends on a reader's comfort with assertions like this that lead into its discussion:

Ashbery's sense of the stopped moment pervades his poems with a painterly sense all the more acute for the ironic self-reflection of its strong line. (51)

There follow seven lines from "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat" in which neither the painterly sense, nor the ironic self-reflection is apparent to me, though the difficulty of the lines is clear enough. I would not wish to say that one cannot find either of these qualities or even a "stopped moment," only that I have to guess about what Caws hears or sees.

Ashbery's poems seem to challenge the notion of a "conspicuous verbal surface" that Holden takes for granted and even to strive for a surface blandness so that, for example, I am hard-pressed to remember just where in a poem lines I have chosen to extract for one purpose or another come from. To me, at least, there is often startling originality and difficulty in that feature, and ample reward in struggling with it. But what I found myself puzzling over in this essay was how Caws's assertion of his "strong lines" remained at some unexplained distance from Gardner's use of that term. Gardner derives it from Dryden's sally that Donne "perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy." But Donne's images, his "stiffe twin compasses" and the like, are memorable and exact; on second reading one is seldom uncertain of what is being described. My assumption, then, would be that Ashbery's lines are "strong" in ironic relation to Donne's, and maybe that is what Caws means by "the ironic self-reflection of its strong line." But of that, I cannot be certain.

Gilbert, Henderson, and Hongo, provide welcome relief through the middle section of this book. Not a one of them has any hesitation in principle to the free verse line. Instead, each takes it for granted as the most likely medium for poets he or she favors. Gilbert, like Holden, delights in showing convention alive and at play in "free verse" lines. What she sees is "allusion to the shape and stress of precursor lines" (42). Her examples

come from H.D. and Sylvia Plath. In Plath's lines she senses "a ghost text" sounding simultaneously in blank and free verse (47).

Free verse, after all, retained "verse" in its formulation and drew on the accumulated lore of verse in all that has ensued. Our critical tradition has been enriched by all that lore as we have said again and again, in the classroom as on the page, about Williams's "Poem," for example, "look at the play of 'p' as that cat steps down into the pit of the empty flowerpot." Holden, Perloff, Gilbert and most of the other contributors here make the same kind of observation repeatedly, drawing upon our rich conjunction with the past, even as their editors seem almost bent on leaving "verse" behind.

One of the more helpful essays, for me, was Henderson's "Worrying the Line: Notes on Black American Poetry." Henderson comes bearing a generous sense of tradition in the relation of Black American poetry to jazz. It is a connection we hear of all the time. It is an excuse, if one seeks an excuse, for so much of the verbal and visual play, some of it embarrassingly naked to quiet, bookish minds, much of it playing shamelessly to a crowd, to its own crowd, and a lot of it looking like fun. Henderson summarizes the background, provides a few connections with white poetry, with the interest in speech rhythms found in Sandburg and Frost, for example (64)—conjunction once again—and then dwells on his title phrase:

Worrying the line is essentially a kind of analytical play on words, on parts of words on qualities of words. . . . Originally, it referred to the personal practice of altering the pitch of notes in a given passage, or to other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the black tradition. (69)

He goes on to stress the interplay of performance and craft in the work of Yusef Rahman and Bob Kaufman, their craft depending as much on delivering as on writing their lines (80). Some instances verge on scat singing:

DEGET, SKLOKO, KURRITE, PLOG, MANGI, PLOG MANGI  
CLOPO JAGO BREE, BREE, ASLOOPERED, AKINGO LABY  
ENGGPOP, ENGGPOP, BOP, PLOLO, PLOLO, BOP, BOP  
—Kaufman, 81

Writing more personally than others in this collection, Hongo reflects on his own discovery of “a method and style in free verse” (85). He traces a descent for himself from the great modernists through the emergence of free verse in the sixties as “the normative practice of our day” (83). He cites Williams, Wright, and Roethke. His ease with ideas that the editors distrust makes his presence in the volume suspect. In any case, Hongo’s heritage skews the story, and he details how he looked also to translations from the Chinese by Rexroth and Pound to guide his own writing.

In a curious way that I doubt was intentional, Hongo’s essay crystalizes both the strengths and weaknesses of this volume. With some traces of worry but without obvious skepticism, Hongo adopts most of the attitudes one readily associates with free verse in our time: the pursuit of authenticity and a personal voice, the influence of prose rhythms, in this case derived almost equally from earlier free verse and from translations from the Chinese, the sense of free verse as “the last holdover from traditional prosody” (94), the idea of writing “a poem which not only divulges something but which, in the language of the workshop, makes a ‘discovery’” (87)—another Burma Shave sign—and the example of blues, gospel, and jazz idioms as the equivalent, more or less, of what Lorca called “*duende*”: “not form,” Lorca said, “but the marrow of form—pure music spare enough to keep itself in air” (*The Poet’s Work*, ed., Reginald Gibbons, 32). The mix of these values is hardly unfamiliar. Their normalcy justifies to some extent the editors’ notion that representations of authenticity amount to a form of “bad faith.” But the editors only generalize, and we are left with Hongo himself, not an original thinker about poetics but a writer of poems for whom the line has become “an intuited thing that provides a pace for my written speech” (95), as in the following passage, Li Po by way of James Wright, which is to say, Garrett Hongo—

. . . I cough too much, can’t smoke or drink  
or tend to things. Mornings I roll  
myself off the damp bed, wrap  
a blanket on, slip into wooden clogs,  
and take a walk around my pond and gardens . . .

After Hongo’s essay, this collection pivots on the work of Scully, Hubert, and Fraser so as to bring us to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E LINES.

Of these essays, I find Fraser's most sympathetic—clear, unforced, generous minded, committed. She touches on, without reading intensely, a number of poets with whom she aligns herself, a tradition in fact, consisting in Dickinson, H.D., Hannah Weiner, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lorine Niedecker, Susan Howe, Barbara Guest, Frances Jaffer, Beverly Dahlen, Ntozake Shange, Maureen Owen, and herself, and six others she names but lacks the space to write of. She does not use these writers to set herself up, but only touches on her own work in their context. Her poets differ sufficiently amongst themselves—each seems really a case to herself, and it's as a series of brief introductions that Fraser's essay has the most value—that Fraser avoids prescribing a form. For example, she contrasts “the discrete, wary, measuring eye of Lorine Niedecker” to Weiner and Blau DuPlessis, where the page is busy from margin to margin and so much is “bubbling up, crowding and urgent in its pressure on the line”; and she resists favoring either (159). Meanwhile, her larger context partakes of the editors' skepticism about the free verse line though she expresses that skepticism more sharply and naturally than anyone else in this volume:

The line, for a poet, locates the gesture of longing brought into language. It is the visual enactment of perspective and difference.

The line reveals a great deal—intentionally so, when it is visibly notating the moving path of a poet's discovering intelligence or, unintentionally, when it is merely repeating or echoing agreed-upon codes of “right” music, “serious” subjects, or “well-crafted” metric constraints.

A poet whose line breaks adhere to these comfortably established systems can hope for easier access to the literary community.

There are very few great poets who have not taken chances with the line.

For this reason, the frame of the page, the measure of the line, has provided for many contemporary women poets the difficult pleasure of reinventing the givens of poetry. (152–53)

Hubert's “The Postmodern Line and the Postmodern Page” is, literally, the best illustrated of the collection, with reproductions of Cy Twombly, Sol LeWitt, and Jasper Johns. “I shall,” she says, “not so much dwell on the writer's transformation of textual space as on the painter's displace-



ment from canvas to page” (133). She is most interested in artists who are not “in search of meaning” (148) and art that, quoting Sarah Kofman, makes a “decision to stop ‘expressing,’ ‘representing,’ ‘imitating’ anything that might encourage spontaneous identification and lead to some discursive equivalent, anything whereby a painting might be made or even allowed to speak” (140). Her study is of work in complementary relation to the ideals of this collection, but we can afford to leave it, now, as if to the side of Frank and Sayre’s book’s main interests.

Which leaves us with Scully’s “Line Break,” the longest and most intensely (and tiresomely) argued piece here. A few of his sentences have an aphoristic ring, and a list of them, as sayings, while not summarizing an argument, will provide a sense of his leanings:

To write is to resist the inclination to slip into cruise control.

Writing is a struggle against stylistics. (98)

A piece of versified writing is not a poem but an aging, historically weathered and weathering occasion for one. The poem is what that writing, as text, is doing. (99)

Suppose the poet abandoned his or her nonfunctional line breaks. . . . The de-versified writings might pass muster as prose poems. (100–01)

Most contemporary prose poems are more ‘poetic’ than poems in verse are. (103)

The line break is the most volatile, productive punctuation in free verse. (109)

Literature becomes, then, a site [yes, once again] of ideological struggle, at least when it’s writing, a practice, rather than an exercise in stylistics. (112)

A fully realized poetry will also be a kind of anti-poetry. (122)

Not all of this is irritating, but some of it is, especially the first and last remarks, not for their lack of truthfulness, for they are truthful enough, nor even, then, for their degree of banality. I take them to be remarks that most readers would apply to whatever poets they favor. What is irritating is an air, maybe little more than that, but an air nevertheless, about Scully and others, some in this volume, some elsewhere, that they alone are in possession of the distinctions. Whom shall I nominate against their

values? Hardy, Williams, Bishop, Cavafy, a few of my favorite poets of the century. Anti-poets all, anti-some poets, anti-some poetries, though only two are ever mentioned in this volume and only one of those with much favor, as should be no surprise, given the cliches of counterstatement. Still in writing their poems and achieving a style, each resisted styles readily before her or him, and then resisted, often enough, his or her own increasing ease with that. For each, writing was practice and the poem an account of “what that writing, as text, is *doing*.”

Which does bring us, at last, to L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E LINES. May the reader pardon me for not trying to digest them. The contributors are several, increasingly familiar to many of you, varied, variously engaging and, often enough, visually absorbing. Several selections begin or incorporate attention to the line as is by now familiar:

The sole comment which I could hope to make concerning my own use of the line is that I try not to use it in the same fashion twice. —Ron Silliman, 183

It’s true that I think about the line more than about any other formal element in writing. —Lyn Hejinian, 191

In its entire history prose has never petitioned the line as a sign of value. —Steve McCaffery, 198

My assumption would be, following Stein’s lead, that the paragraph/stanza structure is more than just a see-through container (≠ neutral). —P. Inman

There is much here for browsing and several pages, according to my eye, worth savoring. But instead of trying to describe those pages further, I’ll take you to the last word in this collection, a poem (or piece) called “Of Time and the Line,” a charmer of a page and a third by Charles Bernstein. I hope he’ll pardon my not quoting it all—

George Burns likes to insist that he always  
takes the straight lines; the cigar in his mouth  
is a way of leaving space between the  
lines for a laugh. . . .

My father pushed a  
line of ladies's dresses—not down the street  
in a pushcart but upstairs in a fact'ry  
office. My mother has been more concerned  
with her hemline. Chairman Mao put forward  
Maoist lines. . . .

The prestige  
of the iambic line has recently  
suffered decline, since it's no longer so  
clear who "I" am. . . .  
Nowadays, you can often spot a work  
of poetry by whether it's in lines  
or no; if it's in prose, there's a good chance  
it's a poem. . . .

Or, as  
they say in math, it takes two lines to make  
an angle but only one line to make  
a Margarita. (215–16)

And that is the last word, save bibliography and index, of the volume.

But it's not my last word, for it occurs to me that Bernstein might have  
upped the ante slightly had he justified both margins and made it prose,  
but narrow, like poetry, like, say, this—

George Burns likes to insist that he always takes the straight  
lines; the cigar in his mouth is a way of leaving space  
between the lines for a laugh. . . . My father pushed a line

Or like this—

. . . . . The prestige of the iambic line has  
recently suffered decline, since it's no longer  
so clear who "I" am. . . . Nowadays, you can  
often spot a work of poetry by whether it's in  
lines or no; if it's in prose, there's a good  
chance it's a poem. . . .

Or like—

But you don't need more. —*D.H.*