Hängs therc
as if half inclined to return
this is
sink back slowly

and then by the sober scientific discourse of “thumb on outer edge of
right socket index ditto left and middle on left cheekbone.” Only when
we come to the end of the text do we realize that we have all along been
“listening”[“list” is an anagram for “still”] for a sound—a sound we can
only imagine because none has been described in the text.

Beckett’s principle of exclusion is thus rigorous: no colors, no dialogue,
no specifiers, no identifiable sounds. Perhaps for that very reason, the final
statement of desire comes across as deeply poignant:

Leave it só
all quite still
or try listening to the sounds
all quite still
head in hand
listening for a sound.

“The same sound,” in Wallace Stevens’s words, “in the same bare
place.” Isn’t Beckett’s “song,” after all, a late twentieth-century version of
Die Vögelin schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch?

Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that there is, of course, no new subject mat-
ter, only the old subject matter rendered in new ways. But to call a poem
a new “version” of an earlier one is also to admit that it has become some-
thing else. In the late twentieth century, to write, for example, a straight-
forward “Ubi sunt” poem on the medieval model is hardly an available
option, even as poets will continue to spin ironic and parodic fantasies on
this time-honored topos.

By the same token, we must realize that the choice of verse form is
not just a matter of individual preference, a personal decision to render
a particular experience as a sonnet rather than a ballad, a prose poem
rather than a free verse lyric, and so on. For the pool of verse and prose
alternatives available to the poet at any given time has already been de-
termined, at least in part, by historical and ideological considerations. “A
mythology,” as Stevens put it, “reflects its region.”

6. After Free Verse
The New Nonlinear Poetries

What is generally called free verse is now more than a century old. It was
in 1886 that Gustave Kahn’s Paris La Vogue published Rimbaud’s “Marine”
and “Mouvement” (both written in the early 1870s), translations of some
of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass by Jules Laforgue, ten of Laforgue’s own free-
verse poems, and further experiments by Jean Moréas, Paul Adam, and
Gustave Kahn himself! On the other side of the Channel, vers libre was
soon picked up by the Imagists: in the March 1913 issue of Poetry, Pound
put forward his famous Imagist manifesto, whose third principle was “As
regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not
in sequence of a metronome.”

Even as he made this pronouncement, however, Pound remarked that
“vers libre has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid vari-
eties 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
shoved in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-
sound” (LEEP 3). And his friend T. S. Eliot, who was to declare in “The
Music of Poetry” (1912) that “no verse is free for the man who wants to
do a good job,” observed in his 1917 “Reflections on Vers Libre,” that
“there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.” How to avoid the latter?
“The most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language
has been done either by taking a very simple form, like iambic pentame-
ter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and
constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse.” And in a formulation that was to become a kind of first rule in poetry manuals, Eliot declares, “the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the areas in even the ‘freest’ verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.”

Eliot’s formulation, which was, of course, based on his own practice, still governs most discussions of free verse. As recently as 1993, in a book called The Ghost of Meter, Annie Finch treats contemporary free verse as essentially a fruitful quarrel with meter, especially iambic pentameter, and tries to show how in the lyric of poets as diverse as Charles Wright and Audre Lorde, “anger at the pentameter and exhilaration at claiming its authority engender much poetic energy.” Derek Attridge’s Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction (1995) characterizes free verse by citing poems like Adrienne Rich’s “Night Watch,” which “derives its rhythmic quality from its existence on the borders of regular verse.” And in recent years the New Formalists have gone further, arguing that “free verse” has been no more than a temporary aberration, given that, in the words of Timothy Steele, “poetry was always, before the modern period, associated with meter.”

Indeed, in a 1996 review of the Library of America’s newly edited Collected Poems of Robert Frost, Helen Vendler cites approvingly Frost’s dismissal of free verse (“Let chaos storm! / Let cloud shapes swarm! / I wait for form”), and remarks:

There used to be a critical orthodoxy (still prevalent in a few backwaters) that anyone practicing rhymed and metered verse was a reactionary and no Modernist; we now understand, having seen many later writers (Merrill, Lowell) alternating metered and free verse, that both forms and free verse are neutrally available to all.

The implication of this claim for “neutral availability” is that verse forms, whether free or otherwise, are independent of history as well as of national and cultural context and that metrical choice is a question of individual predilection. And further: that free verse is some kind of end point, an instance of writing degree zero from which the only reasonable “advance” can be, as Steele suggests, a return to “normal” metrical forms. At the risk of allying myself with those “backwater” forces Vendler refers to so dismissively, I shall want to argue here that there are indeed other possibilities and that verse, like the materials used in any art medium and like the clothes we wear and the furnishings in our houses, is subject to historical change as well as cultural and political constraint. But before I consider the large-scale transformations “free verse” is now undergoing in America (and, for that matter, in the poetry of most other nations as well), some definitions and clarifications are in order.

What is free verse anyway? However varied its definitions, there is general agreement on two points: (i) the sine qua non of free verse is lineation. When the lines run all the way to the right margin, the result is prose, however “poetic.” The basic unit of free verse is thus the line. But (2), unlike metrical or strong-stress or syllabic or quantitative verse, free verse is, in Donald Wesley’s words, “distinguished . . . by the lack of a structuring grid based on counting of linguistic units and/or position of linguistic features” (EPP 425). As Derek Attridge explains:

Free verse is the introduction into the continuous flow of prose language, which has breaks determined entirely by syntax and sense, of another kind of break, shown on the page by the start of a new line, and often indicated in a reading of the poem by a slight pause. When we read prose, we ignore the fact that every now and then the line ends, and we have to shift our eyes to the beginning of the next line.

We know that if the same text were printed in a different typeface, the sentences would be broken up differently with no alteration in the meaning. But in free verse, the line on the page has an integrity and function of its own. This has important consequences for the movement and hence the meaning of the words. (DA 5, my emphasis)

The implication of free-verse writing, Attridge adds sensibly, is that poetry “need not be based on the production of controlled numbers of beats by the disposition of stressed and unstressed syllables.” A more accurate name, Attridge suggests, would be “nonmetrical verse, which, as a negative definition, has the advantage of implying that this kind of verse does not have a fixed identity of its own, whereas ‘free verse’ misleadingly suggests a single type of poetry” (DA 167–68). But the adjective nonmetrical is somewhat misleading, given that the item counted may be the number of primary stresses (no matter how many syllables per line), as in Old English and much of Middle English poetry, the number of syllables per line, regardless of the number of stresses, as in the syllabics of Marianne Moore, or the number of long vowels per line, as in classical quantitative verse, and so on. Charles O. Hartman’s definition is thus more accurate: “the prosody of free verse is rhythmic organization by other than numerical modes.”

After Free Verse
verse remains the linear turn inherent in the etymology of the word verse (Latin, *versus*), but there is no regularly recurring counted entity.¹⁰

Once we try to go beyond these basics, there is little unanimity as to the features of free verse. For Donald Weisinger, free verse has its roots in the oral forms of ancient cultures—Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Sanskrit, and Hebrew—none of which have meter (EPF 425). The speech-base of free verse is also accepted by Northrop Frye, who defines it as "the associative rhythm"—that is the rhythm of ordinary speech, with its short, repetitive, irregular, often syntactic phrasal units—"strongly influenced by verse," which is to say by by lineation.¹¹ And Robert Penn is evidence that "the line in contemporary practice seems to fall roughly into two overlapping kinds: a rhetorical indicator for the inflections of speech... and a formal principle varyingly intersecting the inflection of speech."¹²

But "inflection of speech" doesn't in fact distinguish free verse from itsmetrical counterparts. On the one hand, there are those like Derek Attridge who argue that all verse is speech-based;¹³ on the other, those who hold that free verse is distinguished primarily by its visual form, its typographical layout, and that indeed the line break creates verbal and phrasal units quite unlike those of speech.¹⁴ But the link between free verse and visual formation is by no means essential. For 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 theirmetrical counterparts.

If, then, free verse cannot be definitively distinguished, whether aurally, visually, or, for that matter, syntactically,¹⁵ from, say, blank verse, this is not to say that there isn't what we might call a free-verse culture that occupies a particular place in twentieth-century literary history. In Critique du rythme (1982), Henri Meschonnic works from the premise that "the aim of prosodic theory is not to produce a conceptual synthesis of rhythm, an abstract, universal category, an a priori form. Rather, an organized understanding of historical subjects."¹⁶ As he explains:

It is not a question of opposing form to an absence of form. Because the informe [formless] is still form. If we want to provide a proper base for the critique of rhythm, we must pass from imperious abstractions to the historicity of language. Where freedom is no more a choice than it is an absence of constraint, but the search of its own historicity.

In this sense the poet is not free. He is not free in confronting thealexandrine, any more than in confronting free verse. Not free of beingventrilocized by a tradition... One doesn't choose what one writes, nor to write. No more than one chooses to be born into one's language, there and then.¹⁷

The so-called freedom of free verse must be understood in thiscontext. When Pound declares in Cantor LXXXI, "To break the pentameter,that was the first heave," he is speaking to a particular situation in lateVictorian "genteele" verse, when meter stood for a particular collectiveattitude, a social and cultural restriction on the "freedom" of the subject. Vladimir Mayakovsky, coming out of an entirely different tradition but in the same time period, makes a similar gesture when he declares in 1926,"Trochees and iambs have never been necessary to me. I don't know them and don't want to know them. Lambs impede the forward movement ofpoetry" (cited in HMC 528).

Such statements, Meschonnic points out, are neither true nor untrue; rather, they must be understood as part of the drive toward rupturecharacteristic of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. And the form Pound's own prosody took—the "ideogrammatizing of Western verse," in Meschonnic's words—had everything to do with the revolution in massprint culture, a revolution that bred what Meschonnic calls the "theatre of the page." "If we were to talk about practices rather than intentions," he says, "every page of poetry would represent a conception of poetry" (HMC 303). Blank spaces, for example, would become just as important as the words themselves in composing a particular construct (HMC 304–9). Thus, the structuralist argument that lineation in and of itself guarantees that a text will be read and interpreted as a poem is based on two misconceptions. First, it ignores the active role that white space (silence) plays in the visual and aural reception of the poem: the line, after all, isanchored in a larger visual field, a field by no means invariable. Second, and more important, the response to lineation must itself be historicized. In a contemporary context of one-liners on the television screen and computer monitor as well as lineated ads, greeting cards, and catalog entries, the reader/viewer has become quite accustomed to reading "in lines." Indeed, surfing the Internet is largely a scanning process in which the line is rapidly replacing the paragraph as the unit to be accessed.¹⁸

How lineation as device signifies thus depends on many factors—his-
“An Echo Repeating No Sound”

In their foreword to *Naked Poetry*, Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey tell us that they had a hard time finding “a satisfactory name for the kinds of poetry we were gathering and talking about”.

Some people said “Free Verse” and others said “Organic Poetry”... and we finally came up with Open Forms, which isn’t bad but isn’t all that good either. And we took a phrase from Jiménez for a title which expresses what we feel about the qualities of this poetry as no technical label could do. But what does it matter what you call it? Here is a book of nineteen American poets whose poems don’t rhyme (usually) and don’t move on feet of more or less equal duration (usually). (NAK xi, my emphasis)

The assumption here is that there is an “it,” alternately known as free verse, organic poetry, open form, or whatever, but that this “it” cannot be defined “technically,” which is to say, materially. And indeed the editors quickly go on to add that “Everything we thought to ask about [the poets’] formal qualities has come to seem more and more irrelevant, and we find we are much more interested in what they say, in their dreams, visions, and prophecies. Their poems take shape from the shapes of their emotions, the shapes their minds make in thought, and certainly don’t need interpreters” (NAK xi). Not “form,” then, but “content” is what matters. Still, the choice of free verse is central because “We began with the firm conviction that the strongest and most alive poetry in America had abandoned or at least broken the grip of traditional meters and had set out, once again, into ‘the wilderness of unopened life’” (NAK xi).

This is a perfectly representative sixties statement about poetry. It takes off from Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” (1950), with its strong dismissal of “closed” verse and concomitant adoption of the line as coming “from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes.” It is the “line” that speaks for the “heart,” even as the syllable does for the “head”; “the line that’s the baby that gets, as the poem is getting made, the attention.” Interestingly, Berg and Mezey, who were by no means disciples of Olson, here give a curious twist to the famous Olson credo that “form is never more than the extension of content.” Whereas Olson demanded that form take its cue from the semantic structure of a given poem, Berg and Mezey take the aphorism one step further, dismissing “formal qualities” as more or less “irrelevant,” entirely secondary to “what [the poets] say, in their dreams, visions, and prophecies.” Indeed, if poems “take shape from the shapes of their emotions,” from “the wilderness of unopened life,” then “free verse” is effective insofar as it tracks the actual movement of thought and feeling, refusing to interfere with its free flow, to inhibit its natural motion. Or so, at least, the poem must appear to be doing, no matter how much “craft” has gone into it.

*Naked Poetry* includes nineteen American poets, born between 1905 and 1935, the largest cluster of them born between 1926 and 1930. In chronological order, they are: Kenneth Rexroth, Theodore Roethke, Kenneth Parchen, William Stafford, Weldon Kees, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Denise Levertov, Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, James Wright, Philip Levine, Sylvia Plath, Gary Snyder, Stephen Berg, and Robert Mezey. Despite the paucity of women (two out of the nineteen) and the absence (characteristic for 1969) of minority poets as well as poets writing outside the United States, the editors have clearly made an effort to transcend schools and regional affiliations by including representatives of Beat (Ginsberg, Snyder), Black Mountain (Creeley, Levertov), Deep Image (Bly, Kinnell, Wright), Northwest (Roethke, Stafford), and East Coast Establishment (Lowell, Berryman, Merwin, Plath) poetry.

So what do the poems in this anthology look and sound like? Consider the following five poems (or parts of poems), for which I have supplied scansion:
A headless squirrel, some blood —
oozing from the unevenly —
chewed-off neck
lies in rainsweat grass
near the woodshed door.
Down the driveway
the first irises —
have opened since dawn,
ethereal, their mauve —
almost a transparent gray,
their dark veins
bruise-blue.

(De/ni/ce Le/ver/te/v, “A Day Begins,” NAK 140)

3. The sun sets in the cold without friends
Without reproaches after all it has done for us
It goes down believing in nothing
When it has gone I hear the stream running after it
It has brought its flute; it is a long way

(W. S. Merwin, “Dusk in Winter,” NAK 255)

3. In the depths of the Greyhound Terminal
sitting dumbly on a baggage truck looking at the sky waiting for
the Los Angeles Express to depart
worrying about eternity over the Post Office roof in the night-time
red downtown heaven,

staring through my eyeglasses I realized shuddering these thoughts
were not eternity, nor the poverty of our lives, irritable
baggage clerks,
nor the millions of weeping relatives surrounding the buses waving
goodbye,
nor other millions of the poor rushing around from city to city to
see their loved ones. . . .

(from Allen Ginsberg, “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound,”
NAK 194–95)

4. Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.

(Gary Snyder, “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout,”
NAK 330)

5. The ice ticks seaward like a clock.
A Negro toasts —
wheat-seeds over the coke-fumes —
of a punctured barrel.
Chemical air —

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But despite all these differences—and who would mistake the sound and look of a Ginsberg poem for that of a Lowell or Leverett original?—there is a period style, a dominant rhythmic-visual contour that distinguishes the lyric of Naked Poetry from that of a recent anthology like Out of Everywhere. Consider the following features:

(i) The free verse, in its variability (both of stress and of syllable count) and its avoidance of the patterned recurrence, tracks the speaking voice (in conjunction with the moving eye) of a perceptive, feeling subject, trying to come to terms with what seems to be an alien, or at least incomprehensible, world. Thus Leverett's "A Day Begins" follows the motion of the eye, taking in the frightening sight of the bloody headless squirrel, its location being specified only in the second tercet and in turn juxtaposed to the next thing seen, "the first iris" [that] "have opened since dawn," the poem moving, in the final line, to the "brune-blue" conjunction between these seeming dissimilars. The same temporal tracking characterizes Merwin's "Dusk in Winter": in line 1, the sun is seen setting; in lines 2–3, the poet responds to the resulting "cold"; in lines 4–5, the sense of loss gives way to renewal as the stream is metaphorically perceived as "running after" the sun, its sound like flute song. In Ginsberg's "In the Baggage Room," the first line sets the scene "in the depths of the Greyhound Terminal," and each subsequent stanza adds an element of perception or cognition. In Snyder's "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout," the patient description of the valley in the first stanza triggers the step-by-step withdrawal into the self in the second. And Lowell's eleven-line conclusion to "The Mouth of the Hudson" focuses on the bleakest and ugliest items in sight as representation of the interior "unforgivable landscape" which is the poet's own.

(ii) Free verse is organized by the power of the image, by a construct of images as concrete and specific as possible, that serve as objective correlates for inner states of mind. Surely it is not coincidental that the origins of free verse coincide with French symbolism and Anglo-American imagism. From William Carlos Williams's "Good Night" (see essay 5) and "As the cat" to Snyder's "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" and Leverett's "A Day Begins," the free-verse line presents what are often unmediated images, as they appear in the mind's eye of the poet: "A headless squirrel, some blood / oozing from the unevenly / chewed-off neck" (Leverett); "The sun sets in the cold without friend" (Merwin); "In the depths of the Greyhound Terminal / sitting dumbly on a baggage truck looking at the sky" (Ginsberg); "Down valley a smoke haze" (Snyder);
“The ice ticks seaward like a clock” (Lowell). Perception, discovery, reaction: free-verse is the form par excellence that strives toward mimesis of individual feeling, as that feeling is generated by sights, sounds, smells, and memories.

(3) Although free verse is speech-based, although it tracks the movement of the breath itself, syntax is regulated, which is to say that the free-verse “I” generally speaks in complete sentences: “the first irises / have opened since dawn.” “When it has gone I hear the stream running after it.” “Staring through my eyeglasses I realized shuddering these thoughts were not eternity,” “I cannot remember things I once read,” “Chemical air / sweeps in from New Jersey, / and smells of coffee.” If, these poems seem to say, there is no metrical recurrence, no rhyme or stanzaic structure, syntax must act as clarifier and binder, bringing units together and establishing their relationships.

(4) A corollary of regulated syntax is that the free-verse poem flows; it is, in more ways than one, linear. Again, the stage for this linear movement was already set in a poem like Williams’s “As the cat,” which moves, slowly but surely, “into the pit / of the empty / flowerpot.” Even Ginsberg’s complicated patterns of repetition (of word, phrase, clause) move toward the closure of “Farewell ye Greyhound where I suffered so much, / hurt my knee and scraped my hand and built my pectoral muscles big as vagina.” In Levertov’s “A Day Begins” the perception of death (the view of the blood-soaked squirrel) modulates into one of renewal (the opening irises), the epiphany coming in the final line with the compound “bruiseful-blue,” tying the two together. Merwin’s “Dusk in Winter” moves from its quiet, anapestic opening, “The sun sets in the cold without friends,” to the markedly divided final line with its two “it” clauses (“It has,” “It is”) and concluding spondees, “long way.” In Lowell’s “The Mouth of the Hudson” every image from the ticking ice to the “sulphur-yellow sun” sets the stage for the reference to the “unforgivable landscape” of the last line. And even Snyder’s “Mid-August,” which does not push toward such neat closure, moves fluidly from line to line, culminating in the three strong stresses of “high still air.”

(5) As a corollary of (4), the rhythm of continuity of which I have been speaking depends on the unobtrusiveness of sound structure in free verse, as if to say that what is said must not be obscured by the actual saying. In this sense, free verse is the antithesis of such of its precursors as Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sprung rhythm, with its highly figured lines like “I caught this morning morning’s minion, king/ of domes of daylight’s dau- phin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding.” Not that the free-verse passages cited above aren’t very much “worked,” organized as they are by internal sound patterning, repetition of stress groups, and the counterpoint that arises from the isolation-by-line of units that otherwise form part of a larger sequence. In Levertov’s poem, for example, “oozing from the unevenly / chewed-off neck,” produces a sonic disturbance by means of the “uneven” line break and the jagged rhythm (only two full stresses in eight syllables) of the line “oozing from the unevenly.” Or again, end stopping and strong stressing on monosyllabic units produces special effects as in Snyder’s “Pitch glows on the fit-cones,” where “cones” picks up the long o sound of “glows” and has an eye rhyme with “on.” At the same time, Snyder is wary of the sound taking over; hence the casual quiet lines like “I cannot remember things I once read.”

(6) Finally—and this accords with the unobtrusiveness of sound—the free-verse lyric of the fifties and sixties subordinates the visual to the semantic.26 Levertov’s open tercets, Snyder’s five-line stanzas, Ginsberg’s strophes, Merwin’s minimal linear units, and Lowell’s loose verse paragraphs—none of these do much to exploit the white space of the page or to utilize the material aspects of typography. Except for Ginsberg’s Whitmanesque long lines, all the examples above have columns of verse centered on the page, with justified left margins, and only minimally jagged right margins, line lengths being variable only within limits.27 The look of the poem is thus neither more nor less prominent than in metrical verse.

Interestingly, the six features I have discussed here—all of them, of course, closely related—turn up in the poets’ own statements of poetics included in Naked Poetry. “The responsibility of the writer,” says William Stafford, “is not restricted to intermittent requirements of sound repetition or variation: the writer or speaker enters a constant, never-ending flow and variation of gloriously seething changes of sound” (NAK 82). “Page arrangement,” Ginsberg observes of “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” “notates the thought-stops, breath-stops, runs of inspiration, changes of mind, startings and stoppages of the car” (NAK 122). “Organic poetry,” writes Levertov in her well-known “Some Notes on Organic Form,” “is a method of apperception”: “first there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him [sic] their equivalence in words: he is brought to speech” (NAK 141). And Merwin seems to speak for all the poets in the anthology when he says:
In an age when time and technique encroach hour by hour, or appear to, on the source itself of poetry, it seems as though what is needed for any particular nebulous unwritten hope that may become a poem is not a manipulable, more or less predictably recurring pattern, but an unduplicatable resonance, something that would be like an echo except that it is repeating no sound. Something that always belonged to it: its sense and its information before it entered words. (NAK 270-71, my emphasis)

An unduplicatable resonance: from its inception, this is what most free verse has striven to be. "For me," says Snyder, "every poem is unique... A scary chaos fills the heart as 'spiritual breath—in'spiration—and is breathed out into the thing-world as a poem" (NAK 357).

But there is one (and I think only one) exception to this poetics in the Mesey-Berg anthology, and it marks a useful transition to the poetry in Out of Everywhere. That exception is the poetry of Robert Creeley. Although Creeley's own "Notes apropos 'Free Verse'" make much of Olson's field composition and the use of breath, it also contains the following statement:

I am myself hopeful that linguistic studies will bring to contemporary criticism a vocabulary and method more sensitive to the basic activity of poetry... Too, I would like to see a more viable attention paid to syntactic environment, to what I can call crudely "grammato-

ology." (NAK 183)

And he talks about his own interest in "a balance of four, a four-square circumstance, be it walls of a room or legs of a table... an intensive variation on 'foursquare' patterns such as [Charlie Parker's] "I've Got Rhythm" (NAK 186-87).

The "foursquare" jazz-based pattern Creeley talks of here may turn up as a four-line stanza (e.g., "A Form of Women," "A Sight") but also as the number of words per line, as in part 4 of the sequence called "Anger":

Face me, →
in the dark,
my face. See me.
It is the cry →
I hear all →
my life, my own →

voice, my →
eye locked in →
self sight, not →

the world what →
ever it is →
but the close →
breathing beside →
me I reach out →
for, feel as →

warmth in →
my hands then →
returned. The rage →
is what I →
want, what →
I cannot give →
to myself, of →
myself, in →
the world.

(NAK 182-83)

To call such poetry "free verse" is not quite accurate, for something is certainly being counted in these little blocklike stanzas, even if it is neither stress nor syllable but word. The pattern is 2-3-4, 4-3-4, 2-3-3, 3-3-3, 4-4-3, 2-3-4, 3-2-4, 4-3-2, the final stanza reversing the word count of the first. So short are the line unites and so heavily enjambed (twenty of twenty-four lines) as well as broken by caesuras (see lines 3, 18), so basic the vocabulary, made up as it is of prepositions, pronouns, and function words, that each word takes on its own aura and receives its own stress, as in:

voice, my
/ eye locked in
/ self sight, not

And the stresses are further emphasized by the internal rhyme ("my / eye", also echoing "cry" "my" in the preceding tercet), overriding the line break,
and the pulling of “sight” in two directions: one toward “self” via alliteration and the second toward “not” via consonance.

Indeed, although Creeley’s tercets superficially resemble Levertoff’s, the features of free verse I listed above hardly apply. This poem does not present us with a mimesis of speech, tracking the process of perception. The first-person pronoun (“I” / “my” / “me” / “myself”) is used twelve times in the space of seventy-five words, and yet that “I” is less speaking voice than a particle that passively submits to external manipulation:

is what I
want, what
I cannot give

where “want” and “what,” separated by a single phoneme, occlude the “I”s’ halting presence. Again, monosyllabic lines like “is what I” refer neither to sun and stream, as in Merwin’s poem, or to rocks and meadows, as in Snyder’s. There is no image complex to control the flow of speech; indeed the shift from line to line is by no means linear: “See me,” does not follow from “Face me.” The normal syntagmatic chain is broken, the first tercet, for example, calling attention to the play of signifiers in “Face me” / “my face” rather than to that which is signified. And when we come to line 4, “It is the cry,” the normal flow of free verse is impeded because the unspecified pronoun “It” returns us to the previous tercet as we try to make out what “It” might refer to. Or again, in line 7, “voice, my” means differently within the line than in the larger structure of “my own / voice, my eye looked in / self sight.”

The syntactic ambiguity of lines like “for, feel as” and “want, what,” coupled with the insistent word-stress, produces a rhythm of extreme weight and fragmentation—a kind of aphasic stutter—that is both heard and seen on the page. Each word, to cite Gertrude Stein, is as important as every other word. Sound becomes obtrusive (“me I reach our”) as does the creation of paragraphs, formed by cutting up complete sentences or clauses. Thus, although at first glance, the look of Creeley’s poem on the page is not all that different from, say, the Snyder counterpart, the consistent detachment of words from their larger phrasal or clausal environment—a practice that goes way beyond what is known as enjambment—creates a very different physical image.

Postlinear and “Multi-Mentionals”

If the unit of free verse is, as all theorists agree, the line, then the unit of Creeley’s poem might more properly be described as what the Russian futurists called “the word as such.” Indeed, just as early free-verse poets called metrical form into question (“To break the pentameter, that was the first heave”), what is now being called into question is the line itself. As Bruce Andrews puts it in his and Charles Bernstein’s symposium “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines”:

1. Lines linear outline, clear boundaries’ effect, notice the package from its perimeter, consistency, evenness, seemingly internal contours which end up packaging the insides so they can react or point or be subordinated to a homogenized unit, to what’s outside . . . Boundary as dividing—“you step over that line & you’re asking for trouble.” . . . Territorial markers and confinements, ghost towns, congested metropolises

1. Better, constant crease & flux, a radical discontinuity as a lack, jeopardizes before & after, stop & start, a dynamic in fragments, suggesting an unmappable space, no coordinates, troubling us to locate ourselves in formal terms. (LJP 177)

Who would have thought that less than forty years after Olson celebrated the “line” as the embodiment of the breath, the signifier of the heart, the line would be perceived as a boundary, a confining border, a form of packaging? “When making a line,” writes Bernstein in the mock-romantic blank verse poem “Of Time and the Line” that concludes the symposium, “better be double sure / what you’re lining in & what you’re lining / out & which side of the line you’re on” (LJP 216). Similarly, Johanna Drucker talks of “Refusing to stay ‘in line,’ creating instead, a visual field in which all lines are tangential to the whole” (LJP 188). Peter Inman refers to Olson’s sense of the line as unit of poet’s breath “too anthropomorphized.” “The general organizational push to my stuff,” says Inman, “becomes page-specific I tend to write in pages . . . not in stories or poems” (LJP 204). And Susan Howe remarks that in The Liberties, she wanted to “abstract” the “ghosts” of Stella and Cordelia from “masculine” linguistic configuration. “First,” says Howe, “I was a painter, so for me, words shimmer. Each has an aura” (LJP 209). And as an example of a “splintered sketch of sound,” Howe produces a page from The Liberties (LJP 210).
Laud Charles I Fairfax

in which even the number “I” (as in Charles the First) is given a full stress.

According to conventional criteria, the material forms used by the thirty poets in Out of Everywhere can be classified as “verse” (e.g., Rae Armantrout, Nicole Brossard, Wendy Mulford, Melanie Neilson, Marjorie Welish), “prose” (e.g., Tina Darragh, Carla Harryman, Leslie Scalapino, Rosmarie Waldrop), or some variant on concrete poetry (e.g., Paula Claire, Kathleen Fraser, Susan Howe, Maggie O’Sullivan, Joan Retallack, Diane Ward). The collection also contains short plays or scenes by Lyn Hejinian, Caroline Bergvall, and Fiona Templeton. But such classifications obscure what is also a common impulse. Consider the following examples:

Although you are thin you always seemed to be in front of my eyes, putting back in the body the roads my thoughts might have taken. As if forward and backward meant no more than right and left, and the earth could just as easily reverse its spin. So that we made each other the present of a stage where time would not pass, and only space would age, encompassing all 200,000 dramatic situations, but over the rest of the proceedings, the increase of entropy and unemployment. Meanwhile we juggled details of our feelings into an exaggeration which took the place of explanation, and consequences remained in the kind of repose that, like a dancer’s, already holds the leap toward inside turning out.

In Rational Geomancy, Steve McCaffery and bpNichol remind us that in standard prose as well as in the visually continuous poem (Milton’s Paradise Lost for instance) the page has no optical significance. . . . Being to a large extent a working out of information through duration, prose structures tend to be temporal rather than visual. . . . In extended prose or poetry the page becomes an obstacle to be overcome. [Whereas in poetry] the left-hand margin is always a starting point, the right-hand margin a terminal, neither of which is determined by the randomness of page size but rather by the inner necessity of the compositional process. (RGE 61)

It is this “inner necessity” that may be noted in the four examples. Whether ostensibly “prose” (Rosmarie Waldrop) or “verse” (Karen Mac

Figure 1. Susan Howe, from A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike.

Howe’s own long verbal-visual sequence Eikon Basilike (see figure 1), which is the opening selection in Maggie O’Sullivan’s new anthology Out of Everywhere, forms an interesting bridge to what Wendy Mulford calls, in her “After Word,” the “multi- and non-linear” writing of younger women poets in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. Howe’s use of cut-ups and found text (or invention of a found text, since her version of the Bibliography of the King’s Book or Eikon Basilike is a complex refiguring of the ostensible forgery of Charles I’s own writings) come out of the concrete poetry movement, but her typographical devices (mirror images of lines, overprints, broken fonts) are designed to question the authority of the historical document, even as she selects certain passages and, so to speak, overstates them, as in the lined text “ENGELANDTS MEMO- RIAEL,” where every word has the “aura” Howe speaks of in her statement on the line:

Figure 2. Rosmarie Waldrop, from Lawn of Excluded Middle.
Multi-Mentional

That line's running-board basics
  sidereal on all fours
  preen
  exploitation of perfect timing
  renew
  maximum syncopation
  temperature tantrums clever yes
  but mongrel
  statistics are with us.

Head up in arms
pieces of time at regular intervals
if the ring fits answer the phone
non-committal background
indications assume no one's perfect
telepathy
soft patience or landslide afloat
the birds not flying pinpoint
  a simile swerving away.

Figure 3. Karen Mac Cormack, "Multi-Mentional," from Marine Snow.

Cormack), these poems are first and foremost page-based: they are designed for the eye rather than merely reproduced and reproducible, as I found when I tried to type them up leaving the original spacing and layout intact. In these visual constructs, the flow of the text as the individual's breath as well as of the simulation of the eye's movement from image to image, observation to observation, is inhibited by any number

POPPIE THANE, PENDLE DUST, BOLDO SACHET GAUDLE
  GIVE GINGER, GIVE INK, SMUDGE JEEDELA LEAVINGS,
  TWITCH JULCE, WORSEN, WREST DIP SSINDA, JANDLE.
  UDDER DIADEMS INTERLUCE.
  ICYCLE OPALINE RONDA.
  CRAB RATTLES ON THE LUTE.
  BLINDLINGLY RAZOR-CUT.
  SHOOKER — GREENEN CRIMSON
  NEAPITIDE COMMON PEAKS IN THE
  SWIFT PULLERY, TWAIL.
  HOYA METHODS: SAXA ANGLAISE
  SKIERED SKULL INULA.

Figure 4. Maggie O'Sullivan, "A Lesson from the Cockrel," from Unofficial Word.

of “Stop” signs. This is the case even in Waldrop's prose passage, which opens with the sentence: "Although you are thin you always seemed to be in front of my eyes, putting back in the body the roads my thoughts might have taken." Syntactically, this sentence is normal enough, but the reader/listener must stop to consider what the conditional clause can possibly mean here. What does being "thin" have to do with inhibiting one's partner's "thoughts," except that the two words alliterate? And does one really "put" those "thoughts" back into the body, as if one is stuffing an envelope? Robert Frost's famous "The Road Not Taken," which is alluded to in Waldrop's sentence, moralizes its landscape, turning the two divergent, but quite similar, roads into emblems of the futility of the choice-making process. But in Waldrop's Laun of the Excluded Middle, paysage moralise gives way to a curious collapsing of the distinctions between mind and body, space and time, inside and outside. On this new "stage," "only space would age" (notice the rhyme) and "exaggeration . . . took the place of explanation." What looks like prose is in fact highly figured: take the "increase of entropy and unemployment" which characterizes these proceedings. Denotatively, the words are unrelated, although both refer to states of negativity. But visually and aurally, the second is almost anagram of the first, the only unshared letters being r, u, and m. The dancer's "leap toward inside turning out" of the last line thus enacts the verbal play we have been witnessing—a play in which "you" and "I," "jugg[ing] the
Virginia said she liked the word breach
whydon'tfisdieLikeflies
[......To speke of wo that is in mariage.........
Men may devyne and glasen up and down
But we I woot expres without e he

142

......} all this I see
......}plainly} now

at this point Paul
mentioned that
sunbeams are
extracted from
cucumbers in
Gulliver's Travels

......} all th
oint p

Figure 5. Joan Retallack, from “Afterimages,” in Afterimages.

details of our feelings,” find momentary text as the voiced stop (k) culminates in the silence of the blank space.

If Waldrop’s “sentences” are thus more properly “nonsense,” the lines in Karen Mac Cormack’s “Multi-Mentional” open like an accordion and close down again, putting pressure on isolated centered words like “preen,” “renew,” and “telepathy.” The relation of space to time, which is central to Waldrop’s text, is intricately reconceived here. “Multi-Mentional” signifies “multi-dimensional” but also the “multi” things “mentioned” or worth mentioning in discourse about space-time. On the one hand, we have the “line’s running-board basics,” those reliable “straight-line” ledges beneath the car door that help the passengers to “get out.” What with “perfect timing,” “maximum syncopation,” and “pieces of time at regular intervals,” linear motion should not be impeded. But the “line’s running-board basics” are countered by a motion that is “sideral on all fours.” Does planetary influence control our ordinary moves, and why are they on “all fours”? And why are the statistics we should rely on “mongrel”? No use, in any case “preen[ing]” in this situation, a situation in which tantrums are ominously “temperature tantrums” (is something going to explode?) even as being “up in arms,” gives way to a case of “Head up in arms,” which sounds like a military or calisthenic routine. How, Mac Cormack asks, delimit word meanings? “If the ring fits answer the phone,” initially sounds absurd only because we are looking for a finger, but the adage actually makes good sense. If the ring fits (if you recognize the ring as being that of your phone), answer it. Or has the caller already been recognized by “telepathy”? In Mac Cormack’s “multi-mentional” world, “patience” is “soft” (which implies there’s a hard patience as well), landslides “float,” and the location of birds in flight can never be “pinpoint[ed],” any more than “similes” (a is like b) can measure the “multi-mentional.”

The progress from line to line here is thus reversed and spatialized (another “multi-mentional”); “renew,” for example, points back to “preen,” which has all its letters except the w. The heavily endstopped “temperature tantrums cléver yés” jumps ahead to “telepathy.” Indeed, going into reverse seems to be the mode of operation in Mac Cormack’s poem. Secondary stressing, so central to the poetry of Ginsberg or Snyder (e.g., “Pitch glorés on the fir-cônes”), as the representation of an actual voice contour, the flow of speech, is avoided as is ellision so that each morpheme receives attention, as in the guttural “That line’s running-board’s basics,” which is almost a tongue-twister. Sounds cannot coalesce into
rhythmic units, as they do in Snyder’s “Sourdough Mountain,” for then their “multi-mentional” quality would be lost. Which is to say that in the ear as on the page, the language act becomes central. “Word order = world order” (RGEO 99).

Maggie O’Sullivan’s medievalizing moral tale “A Lesson from the Cock-eel” performs similar operations on the catalog poem. From Pound to Zukofsky to Ginsberg, cataloging has been a popular poetic device, but here the list is, so to speak, blown apart by spatial design: the first three lines in capital letters are followed by a rectangular box containing, in a row, the words “CRIMINAL” and “CONSTITUENTS,” with a word column along the right margin, and the line “SKEWERED SKULL INULA” (reminiscent of Pound’s “Spring / Too long / Gongula”), placed beneath the bottom border. The cataloged items, many of them archaic or obscure, like “BOLD” and “INULA,” both of them bitter alkaloid plant extracts used as drugs, and the many neologisms like “JUICE” and “SHEEKER,” are part of an elaborate roll-call of exotic narcotics, a kind of postmodern “Ode on Melancholy,” in which the address to the “POPPY THANE” or opium lord becomes a drum call heightened by its Anglo-Saxon and pseudo-Anglo-Saxon (“SAXA ANGLAISE”) word particles—“PENDLE DUST,” “WRIST DRIP,” “NEAPTIDE COMMON PEAKS,” “SWIFT PULLERY, TWAL.” Lines like “GIVE GINGER,|| GIVE INK,|| SMUDGE JEDERA LEAVINGS” exploit the rhythm, alliteration, and assonance of the football cheer or political chant, but the captions inside the empty box mark all this chanting as “CRIMINAL / CONSTITUENTS,” and label the frame as so much “SKEWERED SKULL.”

Is “A Lesson from the Cock-eel” free verse? Yes, if we mean by free verse the absence of meter, stress, syllable count, or quantity. But, strictly speaking, O’Sullivan’s verse units are closer to the Old English alliterative line, as in

POPPY THANE, PENDLE DUST

or to such Poundian variations on that line as “lions loggy ll with Circe’s tisane” (Canto XXXIX), than to nonmetrical linear verse, and, in any case, the visual layout calls attention to itself as what looks like a computer printout, a set of headlines, a sheet of advertising copy coming through the fax machine. As in Mac Cormack’s poem, secondary sound features (rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration) take precedence over the recurrence of stresses. Phrases like “UNDER DIAMONDS INTERLUCE” or “CRAB BATTLE ON THE LUTE” perform at a sonic level before their semantics are fully grasped. The visual/vocal dimension of the words is more prominent than their actual referents. And this too is a time-honored tradition in poetry, however far free-verse poetry, the poetry of the voice and the image, has gotten away from it.

Not images, but “afterimages,” as Joan Retallack’s sequence by that title makes clear. “We tend to think,” says Retallack in the frontispiece of her book, “of afterimages as aberrations. In fact all images are after. That is the terror they hold for us.” “I do not know which to prefer,” writes Wallace Stevens in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / the blackbird whistling / or just after.” In Retallack’s scheme of things, this becomes “After whistling or just _______”: in our fin-de-siècle world, every image, event, speech, or citation can be construed as an “afterthought” or “aftershock” of something that has always already occurred.

One form of “afterimage” Retallack uses is found text: the poem before us draws on Chaucer (the opening of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”) and Swift (book 3 of Gulliver’s Travels) among other “literary” sources; it begins in medias res with someone’s advice that there is a “need to give latitude which is often silence,” followed by the typographical convention of “and/or.” In keeping with this choice, no given line follows from the preceding one, at least not in any normal sequence, the text incorporating reportage, question, number, iambic pentameter citation (lines 4–6), and narrative fragment. The last six lines recall Creeley’s strategy of counting words rather than feet, stresses, or syllables. The pattern is 4 (at center), 2-2 (left and lowered right), and then a 2-2-2-2 tercet. And now come the “afterimages,” chosen, Retallack tells us, by chance operation: thirteen characters or spaces from line 8, six from line 10, two from line 12. These tiny morphemic particles are living proof of what a difference a single letter can make. The ellipsis preceding “all this I see” becomes the mere stutter of all th; “point” loses its p, only to regain it from the capital P of “Paul” that follows; the loss opens up the text so that we think of “joint” or “aoint,” the latter certainly being appropriate for Saint Paul. And the afterimage of “sunbeams,” the meaningless vocalization nb, is a witty comment on the activities of Swift’s Laputa. Not only, the poem implies, can sunbeams not be extracted from cucumbers, the word “sunbeams” doesn’t break down neatly into sun + beams or even into neatly arranged vowels and consonants, but into the difficult-to-pronounce nb, followed by an exhalation of breath, or visual blank which is so to speak, “silence and/or.”

The final stop (b) is the voiced equivalent of the preceding p. Retallack’s is
thus an artifactual, wholly composed meditation on what can and cannot be "extracted from" language.

Susan Howe, I noted above, has referred to her typographical experiments as "abstractions" from "masculine linguistic formations," and many of the poets in Out of Everywhere would concur that such deconstruction has been central to their work. But it is also the case that their poems have many counterparts in the work of Clark Coolidge and Steve McCaffery, Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, Bruce Andrews and Christian Bök, and my own sense is that the transformation that has taken place in verse may well be more generational than it is gendered. We have, in any case, a poetics of nonlinearity or postlinearity that marks not a return to the "old forms," because there is never a complete return, no matter how strongly one period style looks back to another, but a kind of "afterimage" of earlier soundings, whether Anglo-Saxon keenings, formally balanced eighteenth-century prose, or Wittgensteinian aphoristic fragment. The new poems are, in most cases, as visual as they are verbal; they must be seen as well as heard, which means that at poetry readings, their scores must be performed, activated. Poetry, in this scheme of things, becomes what McCaffery has called "an experience in language rather than a representation by it." 39

I have no name for this new form of sounding and perhaps its namelessness goes with the territory: the new exploratory poetry (which is, after all, frequently "prose") does not want to be labeled or categorized. What can be said, however, is that the "free verse" aesthetic, which has dominated our century, is no longer operative. Take a seemingly minor feature of free verse like enjambment. 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. I conclude with a passage from Caroline Bergvall's "Of Boundaries and Emblems"

By Evening We're Inconsolable. Having Reached This Far, Bent Over Tables Of Effervescence Within The Claustrophobic Bounds Of The Yellow Foreground: Art Has Kept Us High And Separate, Hard In Pointed Isolation, Forever Moved By The Gestures Of Its Positions And The Looseness Of Even That: Now Vexed And Irritated, Still Plotting Endless Similitudes: We Trip Over Things: Strain To Extricate Ourselves From Closing Borders:

(OOE 206)
Since the minor orthographic changes (an apostrophe after "Ruh" in line 2 to indicate the elision of the "e" of "Rube" and the substitution of an exclamation point for a comma in line 5) don't affect the poem's metrical form, I have preferred to use the earlier, more familiar version.


11. SBAR 273. The translation used is Edward J. Ahearn's; see RV 312 as well as the interesting commentary on 323.


17. The essay was submitted to Poetry in 1915, but Harriet Monroe returned it as incomprehensible. The text is cited in Mike Weaver, William Carlos Williams: The American Background (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 82-83.


20. Allen Ginsberg, "Williams in a World of Objects," in William Carlos Wil-


4. Eliot, “Reflections on ‘Vers Libre’” (1917), To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1962), 183–89. The citations are from 183, 185, 187 respectively, but the whole essay should be read carefully.


verse—from the Indo-European root “wert”: to turn, from this root derives the medieval Latin “versus” literally to turn, in subsequent usage the turnrow became the written line by analogy. . .

prose—deriving from the same Indo-European root—is a contraction of the Latin “proversus” contracted thru “prosumus” to “prosum,” literally the term forward, as adjectivally in “prosa oratio”—a speech going straight ahead without turns. (106) Subsequently cited in the text as RGEO.


13. Derek Attridge, e.g., defines rhythm as “the continuous motion that pushes spoken language forward in more or less regular waves, as the musculature of the speech organs tightens and relaxes, as energy pulsates through the words we speak and hear, as the brain marshals multiple stimuli into ordered patterns” (DA 1).

14. A classic account of this position is Eleanor Berry’s “Visual Form in Free Verse,” Visible Language 23, no. 1 (winter 1989): 89–111. I have discussed the visual form of Williams’s and Oppen’s lyric in The Dance of the Intelligents (1985); rpt. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), chaps. 4 and 5. For statements by poets who stress the visual component, see, e.g., Margaret Arwood, EPOCH 172: “The line, then, is a visual indication of an aural unit and serves to mark the cadence of the poem.” Cf. Allen Ginsberg, EPOCH 189; George MacBeth 201, Josephine Miles 207. In their introduction to their collection The Line in Poetry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), Robert Frank and Henry Sayre state that “the line—its status as a ‘unit of measure,’ what determines its length, the effects which can be achieved at its ‘turn’—has come to be the focus of . . . concern” (ix). But the portfolio called “Le=Al=N=U=A=G=E=Lines,” edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, that concludes The Line in Poetry (see 177–216) actually calls this statement into question, as does my essay 5 here, “Laurent and Inescapable Rhythms: Metrical Choice and Historical Formation.” I shall come back to the Language essays below. The Frank-Sayre collection is subsequently cited as LIP.


17. HMC, 593, 595, my emphasis. A similar argument is made by Anthony Easthope in Poetry as Discourse (London: Methuen, 1983). For Easthope, all verse forms—from the feudal medieval ballad to the courtly sonnet to the transparency of the “ordered” eighteenth-century heroic couplet—are ideally charged: blank verse, for instance, has to serve as the bourgeois subjective verse form for the romantic period, that form that gives way to free verse when the transcendental ego is replaced by the dispersal of the subject and the dominance of signifier over signified. Easthope’s analysis is overly schematic and he seems to accept the common wisdom that free verse is the end point of prosody. But his basic premise—that verse forms are not just arbitrary or “neutrally available” to everyone at any time—is important.

18. See, on this point, Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 161–64. Culler borrows from Gerard Genette the example of a lineated version of “banal journalistic prose” (“Yesterday / on the A 7 / an automobile / travelling at sixty miles per hour / crashed into a plane tree. / Its four occupants were / killed”) to show that lineation transforms reader expectation and interpretation.

19. Consider, e.g., the airline menu on “easy sabār” that gives commands like “Return to the first line.” Or again, consider the following protest poem by Wilma
Elizabeth McDaniels, the so-called Gravy Poet of the San Joaquin Valley, cited in
an article by Peter H. King in the Los Angeles Times (18 August 1966, A1): “You can
put your trust in gravy / the way it stretches out / the sausage / the way it stretches
out / the dreams.” Earlier in the century, such versifying would have demanded
meter and rhyme, now even polemic jingles are as likely to be in free verse.

20. I discuss Williams as a representative free-verse poet in essay 5. Pound’s
“visualized” page, especially in those Cantos that make frequent use of Chinese and
other ideographs, has been a key source for concrete post-concrete poetry and
contemporary experiments with visual poetics.

21. Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms, ed. Stephen Berg and
Robert Mezey (New York and Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1969) is subsequently
cited in the text as NAK. Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by
Women in North America and the U.K., ed. Maggie O’Sullivan (London: Reality
Street Studios, 1996), which has an afterword by Wendy Mulford, is subsequently
cited in the text as OOE.

(New York: New Directions, 1966), 18–19. Subsequently cited as COSW. Donald
Allen, who reprints “Projective Verse” in his The New American Poetry (New York:
Grove Press, 1960), obviously has Olson’s rejection of “closed verse” in mind when
he writes that the poets in his anthology “have shown one common characteristic:
a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi), the most
obvious of those “qualities” being, of course, metrical form.

23. COSW 36. Here and elsewhere, Olson attributes this aphorism to Robert
Creeley, and the attribution has stuck, although Creeley never gave a systematic
account of the proposition.

24. The editors do claim that they had wanted to include LeRoi Jones and
Michael Harper but were constrained “because of cost and space” (xii). As for
the U.S. focus, “We decided to keep it American because we knew nothing much
new has happened in English poetry since Lawrence laid down his pen and died”
(xii). It is true that English and American poetics were probably furthest apart
in the fifties and sixties when “The Movement” dominated in Britain. But note
that it never even occurs to the editors to include Canadian poets or poets of
other English-speaking countries; their chauvinism is characteristic of the U.S.-
centered imperialist ethos of the sixties.

25. The notation used here is the standard one adopted by George Trager and
Henry Lee Smith Jr. in An Outline of English Structure (Washington, DC: Ameri-
can Council of Learned Societies, 1957). Trager and Smith identify four degrees
of stress in English: primary (.), secondary (•) as in a compound noun like “black-
bird,” tertiary (‘), as in the first syllable of “elevator”; and weak or unstressed
( ), as in the second syllable of “elevator.” A double bar (‖) is used to indicate a
cesura, and I use a right arrow (→) to indicate that the line is runover.

26. In this regard, it differs from its free-verse predecessors in Williams’s lyric,
as we have seen in essay 5, line break was brilliantly used for visual effect.

27. The count of syllables per line here is: Leverrov 2–8, Merwin 9–13, Sny-
der 4–10, Lowell 3–10. Ginsberg’s strophes are visually even more unified because
of the dropped indented lines.


29. See Susan Howe, “Making the Ghost Walk about Again and Again.” A
Bibliography of the King’s Book or Elkon Basilike (Providence, RI: Paradigm Press,
1989), unpaginated. This preface is reproduced in Susan Howe, The Nonconform-
follows (51–81) but the page design is not quite that of the original, largely be-
cause of page size.

30. In Poetic Rhythm (171), Derek Attridge describes an extract from Howe’s
Pythagorean Silence, part 3, as follows:

Susan Howe’s poetry illustrates the potential that free verse possesses to frag-
ment and dislocate the normal sequentiality of language, beyond even the
techniques deployed by Pound and Williams. This extract . . . uses the dis-
position of words on the page in combination with disruptions of syntax to
suggest bursts of utterance interspersed with silences. The morsels of language
demand maximal attention . . . [These lines] indicate some of the reso-
rating power phrases can have when the connectivity provided by syntax,
phrasing, rhythm, and visual linearity is partly—though only partly—broken.

It is interesting that although Attridge puts his finger on exactly what makes
Howe’s verse quite unlike the earlier model, he still categorizes it as “free verse,”
as if there could be no other name for Howe’s obviously very “different” page layout.

31. They are in order of appearance (but not chronology or nationality) Susan
Howe, Joan Retallack, Tina Darragh, Paula Claire, Diane Ward, Carla Harry-
man, Lyn Hejinian, Maggie O’Sullivan, Melanie Neilson, Denise Riley, Rae
Armantrout, Catriona Strang, Nicole Brossard, Wendy Mulford, Rosmarie Wals-
drop, Deanna Ferguson, Hannah Weiner, Carlyle Reedy, Geraldine Monk, Karen
Mac Cormack, Kathleen Fraser, Lisa Robertson, Marjorie Welish, Barbara Guest,
Grace Lake, Carolinel Bergvall, Fiona Temptor, Fanny Howe, Bernadette Mayer,
Leslie Scalapino.

Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 111.

33. Steve McCaffery, “Diminished Reference and the Model Reader,” North of
fery’s discussion of the Klein worm (20–21) as emblem of a poetry “without
walls,” in which “milieu and constellation replace syntax,” is also very helpful.