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**Dancing on Variable Feet:
Imagism and Arrhythmia**

The poet who fails to cultivate the craft of rhythm runs the risk of arrhythmia, that is, arbitrary sequences of beats that might be irrelevant to the thought and feeling, the diction and imagery, the true experience in the poem. Arrhythmia can be effective in poems that speak of breakdown, chaos, hysteria; effective, for example in representing the terrified flailings of a drowning man or the fragmented strands of thought and feeling in the mind of someone stricken by grief. In other contexts, arrhythmia might be seen as incompetence or negligence. If the poet disregards the rhythms of the language, the rhythms that are present in every syntactic structure and every polysyllabic word, if the rhythms of the poems lines and stanzas do not support the central experience in the poem, and if there is no rhythmic recurrence, then essential elements of the poem will be missing. The result is often an amorphous structure that defies the rhythms of the English language. Amorphous poems are typeset so that groups of words that form semantic, syntactic, or rhythmic structures are broken across two or more lines and sometimes across two or more stanzas; but no artistic purpose is served by breaking a unit across two stanzas when the stanzas are already irregular.

These tricks of typesetting compound the irregularity to produce absurdly breathless statements. As Denise Levertov writes in 'Technique And Tune-Up' (1979) in *New & Selected Essays* (1992):

If you are not consistent in your use of any device, the reader will not know if something is merely a typographical error or is meant to contribute – as everything, down to the last hyphen, should – to the poem.

A poetry that is so divorced from the naturally occurring rhythms and the standard syntax of the language is partly divorced from language itself and is as distorted and artificial a use of language as a poetry of rigid, alien metres.

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The popularity of arrhythmic and amorphous poetry in the twentieth century was made possible by the influence of some American experimenters with rhythm and form, notably William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and E.E. Cummings. Their work, in turn, owes something to the small group of American and British poets who formed the Imagist school in the second decade of the twentieth century; a few of Williams' early poems appeared in the Imagist anthology, *Des Imagistes* (1914). The Imagists associated their work with vers libre of late nineteenth-century France, even to the extent of using the French spelling, 'Imagiste', to identify their work. And T.S. Eliot detects an influence on the vers libre poets; in 'The Unity of European Culture' in *Notes Towards The Definition of Culture* (1948), Eliot writes: ...this French movement itself owed a great deal to an American of Irish extraction: Edgar Allan Poe.

In the Preface to *Some Imagist Poetry* (1916), the editors identify Imagist poetry with vers libre, and they state:

The unit in vers libre is not the foot, the number of syllables, the quantity, (duration of the sound of a syllable) or the line. The unit is the strophe, which may be the whole poem, or may be only a part. Each strophe is a complete circle: in fact, the meaning of the Greek word 'strophe' is simply that part of the poem which was recited while the chorus were making a turn around the altar set up in the centre of the theatre. The simile of the circle is more than a simile, therefore; it is a fact.

The editors are deluded or deceitful. In 1916 the principal meaning of the word 'strophe' was a number of lines forming an internal figure within the overall structure of the poem; but the editors deny that the poetic line is a unit, and so they make the ludicrous comparison of an Imagist poem and the performance of the chorus in classical Greek theatre. If the editors truly believed that the theatrical meaning of strophe was the appropriate one, then they should have referred to the antistrophe, without which the strophe is incomplete. Their conclusion, that the simile of the circle is not simile but a fact, is clearly false; no poem that uses a linear writing system, not even a poem that is typeset to look like a circle on the page, is an actual circle. A poem with a circular train of ideation, a poem, that is, that begins and ends with the same image or idea, could be described as a semantic and metaphorical circle, but that is not the editors' argument. The 1916 Preface is an attempt to give Imagist poetry an authority and a provenance that it does not have.

Other imagists deluded themselves into thinking that they had solved the mystery of poetry, or had at least mastered its essential principles. The same delusion occurs in the minds of members of Symbolist, Surrealist, Vorticist, Apocalypticist, and other ideological schools and movements of poetry. Part of the secret, claimed F.S. Flint, one of the founders of Imagism, was this:

As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Similar claims about music and poetry are made by Pound and Williams but the musical effects of poetry, based as they are in language, are different from the melodies and harmonies of music. The Imagists and their followers abandoned the natural rhythms and some of the natural musical properties of poetry in the mistaken belief that they were investing their poems with the properties of music itself.

Eliot was one of the earliest objectors to the vers libre of Imagism. In 'Reflections On Vers Libre' (1917), he writes:

If vers libre is a genuine verse form it will have a positive definition. And I can define it only in negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhythm, (3) absence of metre.

Every original poem makes its own unique impression in the mind of the reader. If a poet rejects some of the main features of poetry – rhyme and other musical effects, recurring rhythm and syntactic structures that are natural to a language – then the

poem is likely to make a narrower impression in the reader's mind. In these respects, Imagist poetry makes a lesser demand and offers a lesser reward.

The English term, 'free verse', a literal translation of *vers libre*, began to be applied to Imagist poetry. When Eliot returns to the question of free verse in 'The Music Of Poetry' (1942), he recalls his essay of 1917, and he adds:

No one has better cause to know than I, that a great deal of bad prose has been written under the name of free verse: though whether its authors wrote bad prose or bad verse, or bad verse in one style or in another, seems to me a matter of indifference. But only a bad poet would welcome free verse as a liberation from form.

For a few of the original Imagists and for most of their followers, the attraction of free verse is exactly that: it invites an evasion from form. Eliot regards the free-verse poet as a bad poet not only because of his technical incompetence, whether that incompetence is wilful or the result of a lack of craftsmanship, but also because the incompetence prevents him from writing a well made poem; and a poem that is not well made, a poem that does not respect the properties of the language in which it is written, cannot be honest or truthful. Indeed, as an earlier paragraph has suggested, a poetry that rejects the real properties of language is not entirely of that language. Edwin Muir, like Eliot, deplores the abandonment of form in free verse; in 'Poetry And The Poet' in *The Estate of Poetry* (1962), Muir writes:

The main defect of free verse is monotony; it can be used apparently for any subject and mood; there is no escape for the writer of free verse except into free verse. The whole world of forms, the whole variety of poetic expression, lie outside. The poet, it seems to me, attains his freedom through some given form or set of forms.

The importance of form lies, of course, not only in the rhythmic and visual patterns it produces but also in the ways in which it shapes and structures, that is, gives form to, the thought and emotion in the poem. The formless expression of thought and emotion, along with the rejection of the genuine rhythmic and musical properties of the English language, inevitably results in amorphous poetry. W.H. Auden makes a more robust and colourful rejection of free verse, but his objection is essentially the same as Eliot's and Muir's: an absence of the order created by artistry and craftsmanship. In 'Writing' in *The Dyer's Hand* (1962), Auden states:

The poet who writes 'free verse' is like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island: he must do all his cooking, laundry and darning for himself. In a few exceptional cases, this manly independence produces something original and impressive, but more often the result is squalor – dirty sheets on the unmade bed and empty bottles on the unswept floor.

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Auden's 'few exceptional cases' might have included William Carlos Williams. Williams is an original, daringly innovative poet whose daring and innovation sometimes threaten his originality, possibly because his attitude to language is highly idiosyncratic. Like his contemporary, Marianne Moore, he tries to establish a poetic

identity not only through poetic voice and vision, but also through the visual pattern of the poem on the page; and like F.S. Flint, he believed that he could replace some linguistic features of poetry with the features of music. In a letter written in 1954 to his fellow-poet, Richard Eberhart, and published as 'A New Measure' in *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (1966), Williams says:

By its music shall the best of modern verse be known and the resources of music. The refinement of the poem, its subtlety, is not to be known by the elevation of words but – the words don't so much matter – by the resources of the music.

But the resources of music are not available to the poet. Much of Williams' poetry is a fascinating but sometimes mistaken attempt to escape from the natural rhythms and music of the English language, in his case, American English. The attempt is mistaken because, as this article has emphasised, a poetry that rejects the natural properties of a language is not entirely of that language. And a poetry that rejects the properties of language also rejects the resources of language. No poet is cleverer or wiser than the language in which he writes. A few poets – Chaucer and Shakespeare, certainly, and Wordsworth and Eliot to a lesser extent – can influence the language and the modes of thought that are possible in the language; but no writer is greater than the language.

Two of Williams' collections, *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955), are typeset in such a way – the second line indented by six to ten ems from the first, and the third line indented from the second by the same amount of space – that the visual rhythm is stepped like a staircase. For example, in 'To Daphne And Virginia' in *The Desert Music*, Williams writes of poetry:

The mind
 lives there. It is uncertain,
 can trick and leave us
agonized. But for resources
 what can equal it?
 There is nothing. We
should be lost
 without its wings to
 fly off upon.

Williams presents the reader with the dilemma: to follow the rhythm of the typesetting, or to follow the meanings that emerge from the linguistic rhythms of the stressed and unstressed syllables of the words, from the syntax and the punctuation, and from the semantics. The typesetting produces linguistic novelty; the more natural way of reading reveals eloquent and impassioned speech. In the title sequence of his late collection, *Pictures from Brueghel*, published in 1962, a year before Williams' death, the effect of the short lines, the broken syntax, and the absence of punctuation is to give a fragmented quality to all sections of the sequence, including sections that speak not of fragmentation but of wholeness.

Denise Levertov in 'On Williams' Triadic Line, Or How To Dance On Variable Feet' in *New & Selected Essays*, discusses rhythm in Williams' poetry:

But whether or not Williams' concept and practice of the variable foot are of vital

importance for modern poets and poetry in general, their significance is not 'spatial' (and thus visual) but temporal and auditory.

All poetry is auditory because it is directly related to speech, and it follows that, whether the poetry is written in stress-timed or syllable-timed units, all poetry is temporal. But Levertov is surely mistaken in denying significance to the spatial and visual features of Williams' poetry; we may question the value of these features, but they are clearly designed to create rhythmic visual patterns. The linear nature of our writing system gives all printed poems a spatial and visual quality; Williams sometimes tries to defy that linearity. Levertov's implicit point is that if we read a poem by Williams as a sequence of syntactic and semantic units, which is our normal way of reading any text, then we learn to see and yet ignore the idiosyncratic typesetting and enjoy the experience in the poem.

Received opinion states that the poet hears, sometimes subconsciously, the appropriate rhythm as he composes the poem, and that the rhythm evolves with the evolving poem. In fact, the creation of rhythm is often a conscious exercise in which the poet adapts the rhythm to suit the words or changes the wording of a phrase, a line, or even several lines in order to suit the rhythm. If the resulting rhythmic patterns seem natural and inevitable, that effect is as likely to have been achieved through deliberate craftsmanship as through intuition.