

**Technique and form are integral to a poem's expression of its particular vision. Rhythm, lineation and syntax—sometimes played off against each other—collaborate with meaning to guide the reader's inner hearing of, and response to, a poem. The author illustrates this interrelationship with references to his own poems.**

Andrew Waterman

## Soundings Along the Lines

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A poem begins not in ratiocination but in experience— with a fermenting in one's mind of something, perhaps overtly trivial, one has in some sense lived through. It may be a landscape, or an incident in a supermarket, a gesture or conversation witnessed or recalled, a personal relationship, a dream, or an attunement to some historical or geographical elsewhere; even such an abstract concept as relativity theory, which has metaphoric suggestiveness. And very often an uncalculated collision and fusion in one's imagination of more than one such detail, probably scattered in real life, triggers things off. A pressure generates, that nags one into taking out pen and paper—and only the actual writing, altering, deleting, redraftings, verbally exploring possibilities, holding yourself alert to further sleights and glints, discovers what, if anything, can be won into a poem, and what the poem needs to be. The whole process is analogous not to construction from a blueprint, but to extricating a tenuously conceived sculpture entire from the given mass which is its raw material—and at the end a rubble of discarded phrases and details litters the draft sheets.

In all this, technique and style are not things extrinsic, respectively applied like spanners and chisels to the task in hand and spread on the poetry's substance like

jam, but are integral to vision; and crucial to getting a poem under way is sensing its appropriate form, rhythms and movement, its voice—all vital determinants of its perspective and texture. One knows very early whether the particular poem needs to define itself in a regular rhymed form, or in free verse—and if the latter, its essential manner and movement. I write primarily for the printed page, and therefore for a silent reader. But as a silent reader sees with his mind's eye, so also he hears with his mind's ear, and the poem has to direct the movements, pauses and pace of his internal enactment of it. Additionally, there are poetry readings or radio broadcasts where one can deliver the thing aloud oneself, and also one's poems are on occasion read aloud by another reader, who needs the text's guidance to performance. With rhymed forms, or regular iambic blank verse, there are obvious ways in which one can play off syntax and speech-rhythms against the fixities of the given structure; but in free verse also, if indeed it is to have vitality and not be merely flaccid, such counterpointings, generations of tension or slight surprises, are essential to the poem's total expression.

Having been asked, I'll annotate what is attempted in a couple of my poems, both prompted by West of Ireland landscapes, neither in a traditional rhymed form, but differing considerably in the pace and articulation of their movement.

### *The Two Roads*

*The fork in the path  
came up before  
I was ready to choose;  
I found I had taken  
the sky road. At first  
I could glimpse through thicket  
the other lane dipping,  
escorted by water,  
between flowering banks,  
rollered lawns, white stone dwellings.  
A turn lost the view.  
And what with the rain  
closing in, the unsheltered  
climbing a stony*

*road riding blown grass,  
it was only attaining  
the ridge I could look  
down through snatches of cloud  
at the coast road whole:  
past meadows where cows  
stood in clusters it followed  
the strand to the bay's  
bluest haven, a house,  
sunlit garden, child playing  
as if who belonged there  
might have been me;  
who appearing now  
did not look up,  
would be deaf at such distance  
to the nothing I knew  
was all I could say now.*

I think the symbolic in poetry should be rooted in the actual, a kind of resonance off it, when a particular actual experience, unbidden, suddenly “blazes,” illuminating one’s imagination with awarenesses larger than just its literal self. The two roads, named and signposted as in the poem, branch from a fork outside Clifden in Connemara, both leading around a hilly peninsula. A problem in life is that over and again alternative choices, of various kinds, open before one, and before one has time to weigh-up all the pros and cons and ifs and buts, the moment arrives when one has to jump, one way or the other—and for a long time after the disused possibility remains vivid, one can almost see one’s alternative self traveling it, and what might have been, and how different.

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When I wrote the poem, some time after the event, the form and movement, the continuing pulse of two-stress lines each also containing varying numbers of un-stressed syllables, was there from the start. It perhaps suggests the rhythm of the walking that is the poem’s physical action. But decisions which came later, as I put it through successive drafts, and which shape the way it reads, had to do with punctuation and notably the very unequal length of the sentences within the poem’s thirty-one lines.

The opening sentence states the triggering occurrence, the taking of a direction, an option, when the alterna-

tives happen upon one with an immediacy which preempts or precludes any adequate consideration of them. That the rhythm here puts heavy stresses on “ready,” “choose” and “found” is no accident. The next sentence describes what can be literally seen for a while after that, looking across to the untraveled coast road. The lines end in commas, the pace is leisurely. Then comes the deliberately clipped and laconic one-liner, “A turn lost the view.” This functions as a sort of launch pad from which the reader is catapulted into a very long twenty-line sentence concluding only with the poem as a whole, wherein moreover only five lines are in any sense end-stopped, and which draws the reader, aloud or within his head, through certain modulations of tone. The aim is to create an effect of urgent ongoing, an acceleration not through space at the poem’s literal level of action—the protagonist isn’t breaking into a run—but rather through time, at the metaphoric level where journeying along a road, and what it brings, images life’s quest, a level of meaning disclosing itself at the point where, from a height half-veiled by cloud, the coast road comes back into view, but now remote and transfigured, a landscape no longer merely actual.

The sentence pauses there at the colon for the protagonist to take in what he now envisions, as from much further along his own life, as what he might have arrived at had he chanced the other way at that early fork, a contrastingly sunlit landscape wherein the house by blue sea embodies what his own life might have been, blessed with the child he has never had. The next pause, at the semi-colon, marks another turn in the sense where his doppelgänger appears from the house, not reciprocating the gaze; then the comma closing line twenty-eight ushers in the poem’s final bleak recognition that the divergence between the two lives, the one lived and the one once possible, has become too vast for any meaningful contact between them. Again, I’d hope the alliteration accentuates the stressed words “deaf” and “distance,” and “nothing,” “knew” and “now”.

By way of a footnote to an obviously autobiographical poem, which leaves its protagonist *in media res* rather than at the end of his road, I’d remark the fact that in 1981, nine years after I wrote “The Two Roads,” I became a parent: but then, the distinction between art’s world of being and life’s of becoming is fundamental.

In the following poem again in a fairly straightforward way a physical scene and experience, visiting an island off the coast of Kerry, generate feelings and insight about life.

### *Great Blasket*

*From land's extremity the island  
entices, delectable with shadow.*

*The landing-place is clefted between rock,  
and a green road loops up*

*around what have been dwellings: roofless,  
foundering into blown grass set*

*with flower-constellations I have no name for.  
Elemental enough: some sheep, the sea*

*they rode in curraghs casting nets;  
the long winters of inbred storytelling*

*in the Irish; the young drifting to mainland  
jobs and marriages. Till all were taken off.*

*And if this twenty-year dereliction harboured  
ghosts, there'd be nothing to be said*

*except agreement how across the water  
always looked more alluring.*

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*The boat collects us. From the stern  
I see, before a shower cuts off, the broken*

*walls still marking each frail holding,  
a longer stay than mine, and not romantic.*

Richard Bradford has invited me, as its perpetrator, to respond to his suggestion that the poem's lineation "cuts into the syntax in a way that might prompt a typically pretentious theorist of poetic form... to lots of ingenious readings, and broader speculations on the ways in which the visual format of poems can change and intensify the ordinary continuities of language."

Theorizing thus, upon such lines as one might say, would of course be neither amiss nor original. In "Great Blasket" I wanted a slow, contemplative and reflective pace, also a sort of sparseness to the poem's shape and movement appropriate to the dereliction of the scene described. The lines have no regular number of stresses, but recurrently aspire towards iambic pentameters, always however faltering away, collapsing back, like the "broken walls" in the poem.

Separating the poem into little two-line “stanzas” also felt right—seen as white space on the page they enact in the mind’s ear the recurrent slight pause one would insert if reading the poem aloud, slowing the pace, contributing an effect of hesitancy, adding to the intended starkness with each mini-stanza a “frail holding.” However, as the islanders’ perilous nets could never contain the eternal amorphous sea, neither could their walls lastingly mesh the land, and correspondingly the syntax of the poem overflows and breaks, largely ignores, the poem’s lineation and stanza-division—although the full stop after “alluring” to close the eighth stanza makes a break prior to physical return from the island. And the way the formal breaks repeatedly cut into the utterance generates a certain tension, perhaps mimetic of the poem’s struggle to apprehend imaginatively the contradictory scene it contemplates. For the dereliction is also beautiful, superficially to the day-visitor as “romantic” as his final realization insists the lives constrained by hardship to give up trying to inhabit it were not.

In the poem, certain specific line breaks are calculated, by imposing delay, to generate anticipation which may then be mildly surprised. Thus “island”/“entices” defers, as if until it has crystallized from among various possible alternatives, the initial effect of the island when first seen from the mainland. “Harboured”/“ghosts” keeps the reader momentarily guessing until the noun arrives, itself to tilt the verb to its larger meaning rather than that denoting, say, the “landing-place” described earlier in the poem. And on the page, the stanza-break

*and a green road loops up  
around what have been dwellings...*

makes the eye enact such a loop around to enclose the dwellings.

In general, I’ll only conclude that whilst when writing poems one does the sort of things I have described wittingly, they start from intuitions about the particular poem’s needs; and whatever the poet’s intentions, the success of his effects depends upon whether they convey what feels right—the judging of which is the reader’s prerogative.

Having one's editor along the corridor of one's workplace is a mixed blessing—in this case easing Richard Bradford's path, now he has read the foregoing, to waylay me with a request to comment further on "performance and effect." He asks me: "When you read your poem aloud do you recapture the original experience? Or, to put it even more naively, when you hear yourself read them do you feel that you're putting together the original sense of timing, mood, intonation, which brought the poem together in the first place?" And, referring to poems I would "choose for a public reading," he asks: "Say why, or to be more specific, say which poems are intended to give the most striking effect to the hearer rather than the silent reader." I can be straightforward on these matters. As my paragraph opening this piece indicates, a poem doesn't necessarily have its origin in any single unified actual "experience"; and even where it does, the experience of writing it is something else, with other dimensions and considerations. As Donald Davie has put it,

*The practice of an art  
is to convert all terms  
into the terms of art.  
By the end of the third stanza  
Death is a smell no longer;  
it is a problem of style.*

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—Likewise love, suffering, joy, satirical contempt and the rest of the emotional gang. One may fall upon the thorns of life and bleed, or walk a Connemara road intuiting larger resonances, but the poem gets written elsewhere, perhaps much later, hard-headedly, in a chair or at a desk, where one's critical mind, like an old-timer panning for gold, sifts the "given" material for glinting riches. That said, there is of course a sense in which the process of writing re-inhabits the original experience, whether single and literal, or scattered in actuality, or purely imaginary, which has prompted the poem. Wordsworth, when one restores his often-quoted phrase "emotion recollected in tranquillity" to its full context in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* showing that "tranquility" is precisely *not* the state he attributes to actual composition, puts the matter well: "Poetry", he wrote,

takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually

produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment.

The attendant pleasures, even where the theme is heartfelt loss or suchlike, are of aesthetic and technical achievement in mediating experience through language.

If in these ways the work of writing to an extent reenters the original experience behind the poem, so also, much more transiently and less intensively, must reading it, whether silently or aloud. But if, as his own gloss suggests, by “original experience” Bradford primarily means the original experience of *composing* the poem, then I am unable to differentiate between the manner in which one reenters and recreates the original “timing, mood, intonation” when reading silently to one’s mind’s ear, or when reading aloud. In both, one is reenacting the poem’s movement, play of natural speech utterance and syntax against lineation and the rest. Of course, reading aloud presents also a physical challenge: one is trying to *perform* such effects so that they register upon listeners, to figure which line breaks or syntactical stops in a long complex sentence—such as the final twenty lines of “The Two Roads”—one should best use to take breath so the poem does not run one out of it.

And, writing as I do for the page and for the silent reader whose eye and inner ear can dwell on the words and rhythms as much as he or she wishes, I have never written a poem intended to give, in Bradford’s words, a more “striking effect to the hearer rather than the silent reader”: such aural effects as “strike” a listener will, I trust, register comparably upon the silent reader. In choosing among my poems for public readings I am guided by, in addition to my own notions of which of my poems seem best or most interesting to me at present, the variety principle; and I am constrained by my inability to utter aloud, although I can hear them in my mind and see them on the page, accents other than my own, which excludes from public readings certain poems with Irish or regional English dialogue in them.

Form is always part of meaning, a factor defining content. Of course, there are poems using formal effects which are purely visual, such as the typographical tricks of e.e. cummings, which cannot survive into oral rendition. Nor indeed can Geoffrey Hill’s use of brackets, often very telling on the page, for these

cannot really, even allowing for virtuoso pause-and-sotto-voce shots at enactment, be uttered aloud in a way that definitively distinguishes them and their significance from other parentheses enclosed by dashes or commas. Occasionally however a poem makes overt allusion to and use of its own form; and since sound waves are not white paper it may seem that in such cases a sharp distinction may emerge between silent reading and oral performance. Here is one such poem I have written and published recently:

### *Frohe Weihnachten*

*My son, in Lincolnshire, reads back your card's  
German, asks its meaning. I explain.  
We count fünf, vier, drei, zwei, eins—down our phones...  
Outside my window, aqueous monotones  
of greyness: sky, roofs, coal-smoke, windswept yards.  
Aglow in red this morning in Coleraine  
you and your children, as we pranced among  
dour shoppers, tinselled windows, twitched balloons  
under a drizzle of loudspeaked tunes,  
beercans rattling. Then you were gone again.  
So, Christmas nears. I picture your home hung  
with green sprays...Well, TV extravaganzas,  
crass ritual boozing, all such I can skip,  
to dwell on what redeems man's fellowship,  
gracing, I'll know, your family rites. Your tongue  
confirms, love, how our meetings link like stanzas,  
loose ends picked up, transfigured to a chime.  
In peace mere geography can't wrench untrue  
I'll ring my son, and wait to hear from you.  
Trusting our rhythms to intuit answers  
as they gather to the final rhyme.*

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The analogy between the spaced-apart stanzas and separated human meetings is explicit; and the way an unfellowed second line in each stanza is picked up with a harmonizing rhyme only after a gulf, at the start of the following stanza, is obviously mimetic of the experience described, enacting a sequence of tensioned waitings always completed by accord, a recurring emotional rhythm finally binding together the stanzas/meetings.

All this is apparent on the page. Returning to Richard Bradford's questions in relation to this poem and these of its effects, I ask myself what differences emerge between it being read on the page, and aloud—which I have only, so far, experimented with just now, in the solitude of my home. Orally, the white spaces separating the stanzas and by extension the meetings with the woman, disappear; but are replaced by pauses which seem their equivalent. The overt figurative use of “stanzas,” “rhythms,” “rhyme,” surely registers identically whether aloud or on the page. One might argue that the listener might be less apt than a silent reader to notice the “loose” yet finally interlinking second lines of each stanza; yet I would not necessarily expect the silent reader with the page before him to notice this trick consciously, at any rate on a first reading, but would still like to think that the effect, the emotional pulse I intend, would nevertheless register as part of the experience of the poem for both types of audience.

So again, I can detect no essential difference between literally hearing and silently reading the poem.

