## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY



## THE LINE-BREAK

by John Mateer

Usually we begin thinking about the form of a poem by thinking about the line, the kind of line and its rhythm or metre. A poem is, of course, composed of lines within the larger verse form, whether that is a traditional form or free-verse. Within the lines, the words are laid out in sentences according to rules of grammar and the words' music, the voice following the lines backwards and forwards across the page. This is true of all poems, from the most straight-forward rhyming verses to the most experimental writing, although in experimental poetry the norms of grammar might not be immediately apparent.

Consider the following lines from my poem 'Aftermath':

Walk into my mouth into the head that isn't mine.
Sit cross-legged on the crinkly, sooty ground, on the wisps of singed hair in the aftermath...

Do you notice how the lines each contain essentially one image or idea, while the flow of lines is not interrupted by the line-breaks, rather by the punctuation? There are two sentences segmented into units of perception by the lines.

The line - with its logic of the rhythm it contains, its images, words and the sound of the words themselves - is always in tension with its ending, the line-break. In a compositional sense, the line and its ending together are the most basic unit of the rhythmic structure of the poem. How the line moves to its conclusion and then begins again on the next line determines the dynamic of the stanzas and the over-arching form of the poem itself.

Every line has its own logic. If it contains rhythmic repetitions there will be the implication that the next line will repeat something like those rhythms. This is always the case when writing in metre. In metrical verse the line-break marks the point at which the rhythm of the first line will begin to repeat itself. In free-verse or other poetic forms which emulate either the spoken voice or create a visual play on the page, the line-break always represents a pause. The effect of that pause varies according to the kind of poetics the poet is using and according to the effect he or she wishes to achieve at that point in the poem.

When working on your poems it is important to identify first those qualities that are important to the line: Is a regularity of rhythm essential? Should the rhythm follow the spoken voice? Is it important to have one set of ideas or images leading quickly to another? Or should there be a pause to draw attention to the language or images, or to what separates them?

What is the logic and effect of the lines in this, the start of my poem on a waterfall ('Splitter Falls, Lorne')?

## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY



This footpath flowing along the ledge raises me against the cliff face over a gorge whose rapids aren't seen behind the trees. Morning thick with the qualia of foliage, the unreflecting white waters that chug like blood past shut ears.

Largely, the last word on each line concludes one 'unit' of image, with the exception of the line 'over a gorge whose'. The effect of that, I hope, is that the reader is simultaneously forced to pause, as if teetering, and be forced along with the pace of the lines. With the exception of that line, the other lines all retain a relative regularity of rhythm, with an attendant serious tone.

What you decide regarding the qualities important to the lines of your poems will determine how the lines relate to one another, how the stanzas fit together and what the entire form of the poem will be. Always begin by looking at the best line, ask yourself about its qualities, then consider where you might end that line. All this has different implications if you want to write rhyming poems!

One of the most interesting aspects of the line-ending, aside from its necessity as a turning-point determining the rhythm and segmentation of the verses, is the way that through the pace of voicing it can produce expectation and surprise. Like the caesura, that pause in the middle of a line in traditional verse, which is not always obviously present and sometimes shifts its position from line to line, providing counter-point to the end of the line, and like punctuation which parses the syntax, the line-break itself is a rhythmic variable, sometimes signifying a pause, sometimes not, sometimes meaning various kinds of pauses, sometimes, in extreme cases, only existing due to the limited width of the page.

In these, the first lines from my poem 'One Year' there is a noticeable caesura in the first line, while the second and third lines were actually broken at the point where the caesura would occur to enable me to fit it on the page in my latest book without the messiness of lines being 'dropped down' at the time of typesetting:

In the summer where every terrace house seemed to welcome escaped refugees, while the War Against Terror was being fought in my name in the mountains of Afghanistan,

I wandered the night streets under the eyes of quartz-white Anzacs and invisible neurotic possums...

It is this variability played in relation to the phrase and sentence that allows the poet to create a range of performative tensions. Tension created by the line-ending is effectively that which exists between all three aspects of the poem – the line, the sentence and the form – and so it is a part of the structure of the poem that, though so obvious it can seem to 'break-off' and disappear, always requires careful consideration.

All quotes are from poems contained in The West: Australian Poems 1989-2009 (Fremantle Press).

More ideas to inspire your writing at www.poetryschool.com - download, online and face-to-face

All material is © The Poetry School and the Author. Please do not reproduce, distribute or transmit this material without permission from The Poetry School.