THE VOICES

(49 poems with prefatory essays)

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An Introduction to My Introduction

In lieu of a tedious and possibly harmful essay on my developement as a writer, I offer the following introduction to my work-in-progress. In these three essays and the curtain-fall polemical affirmation of the English language (spured by my reading of dire prophecies of imminent linguistic collapse), I have tried to treat some of the ideas, beliefs, and hopes which are connected to my work. I hope the reader finds both the introduction and body of poems to his taste.

A note: I have kept the poems in their rough chronological order, since the sense of their developement might be interesting.

Carl Phillips

The Scattergun

Poetry today ranges from the sonnet, written by both Berryman and little old ladies, to concrete verse. One of the more interesting types is scattergun free verse, which claims usually to be the result of an acute organic inside-self-outgrowing of the true form of the individual poem. Technically then, how can those of us who are interested in the discussion of poetry discuss these poems? The product of a painful sense of the poem ordering itself en route, they resist attempts at generalization and/or analysis. Is the poem at hand a "musical score," made up of "phrasal units," "breath units," or "rhythmic groupings?" All these tags have been used to explain, and sometimes to excuse, variations of the scattergun poem. Sometimes a manifesto, such as Olson's (who calls his verse "field verse," in turn called "projectivist" by M.L.Rosenthal, critic), does as much to hinder as to help. Olson in particular has vague and contradictory elements in his discussion of "field verse." A-mazed in this, what are we to do?

First, we must try to close in on the feeling of this convention as opposed to the convention of meter/line organization. (Confusing and difficult as it is, scattergun is, of course, a convention.) Extreme scattergun is extremely jerky, as if the author were trying to rest on word or short phrase. Thus you sense a hammering or rachet effect, perhaps a stutter effect. The various positions of the lines or line fragments, presumably significant, force one to continuously interpret little bundles or photon-packets of the poem. There are definite advantages here--necessary concentration on the work being the most obvious. In addition, I think that this opens up new possibilities of tone or emotion which ordinary typography

disallows. A good example of this, actually from a novel, are the chapter endings of Donleavy's Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B. Chapter seventeen, for example, ends thus:

> Something born nudges you gently to go and die. It all could be a flower you lifted once. Looked at. Held the stem. And then you turned your head away.
>
> To
> Weep
> The night
> Till
> Day.

This typography gains, I think, a poignancy which could not have been obtained otherwise. The main increase of the emotion is caused by the unusual amount of attention to the words, just the sort of hyper-interest the scatter-gun method demands. It is interesting to note, though, that this unusual intensity of emotion is gained by playing off against normal prose typography. The following excerpt by Rochelle Owens, from Strawberries Mit Cream, utilizes a similar breakup of language into small parts, and scatters it much more than Donleavy's bob and wheel, yet the complete absorption in the technique weakens the work, since in itself the technique has many faults:

they began producing
blessed
berries
chicken &
cattle
animal domestication
3000 b.c.
out of the maglemosian
bog
come fish-hooks

Even in this short fragment we can see the monotony which is the core of this technique. This is indeed out of the meter/line tradition, but it seems to me to be a trivial and spurious innovation when used thus, exclusively as the basis of organization. As a poetic possibility, the scattergun mode can't and shouldn't be ignored, yet as used in the Owens poem, I find it anti-rhythmic, noisy, and much too obtrusive. A convention should be a tool, but scattergun is a case of dynamite, with all the uncertainties and difficulties of explosives, and all the boredom of continual bombardment. Similarly, Robert Creeley has taken the trick of ending on prepositions and conjunctions, and elevated this trick to a central place in his poetic. His trick is a trick, and a boring trick. In general scattergun is a trick, and a boring trick. What I expect and hope will happen is that the important writers will recognize it as such and add it to their bag of tricks, using it when it can add to a work, otherwise declining. There will always be those who think the scattergun mode the proper, probably the only true lyric convention, just as there will always be those who try to whip ungainly English into Haikus, yet these have the moon's light, borrowed of the sun, the central English verse. They build their house on a single stone, and that stone sandstone. Build on bedrock, die deep, sleep against the many years, I pray you, please.

Beowulf 1970

In a century where anything goes technically, I think one of the stronger contenders is verse based on the number of stresses in a line. This mode of writing resurfaced with Hopkins and has been solidly redeveloped since, with one especially interesting branch being imitations or re-creations of Anglo-Saxon verse, some very strict, some loose. A number of people have written well-known works utilizing Anglo-Saxon formal requirements, among them Pound, Auden, and Richard Wilbur. Even these three authors have a wide range of usage. Pound's justly famous Anglo-Saxon poem is his first canto, which retells part of the Aeneid in four stress lines, with considerable alliteration and frequent medial caesura. This handling, albeit an unusual mix of Old English and Classical elements, is very successful, partly I think, because the subject matter is distant in time and place. Given a subject of this kind, the conscious archaism seems appropriate, even desirable, and Pound does an excellent job, putting most of the textural allusion on the rhythm, with less but definitely some on alliteration and caesura. Observe the first seven lines:

> And then went down to the ship,
> Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
> We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
> Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
> Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
> Bore us outward with bellying canvas,
> Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.

Fine work.

Wilbur, by comparison, does a very clumsy job in his Anglo-Saxon imitation Junk. The point of the poem is an ironic contrast between craftsmanship, as exemplified in and suggested by the carefully conventional Anglo-Saxon mode, and the junk which the poem talks about. A nifty idea, as we said in the 4th grade, but he handles it like

a beginning wrestler. The poem is devoid of technical subtlety in the use of the Anglo-Saxon convention. Caesuras are even indicated by spaces and staggered lines (see below), while the alliteration is maddenly regular. Thus, while it has some appropriateness because of subject matter, the poem is essentially a conceived poem, and dies in the desert of mere conception. Below a few lines:

An axe angles
from my neighbor's ashcan;
It is hell's handiwork,
the wood not hickory,
The flow of the grain
not faithfully followed.
The shivered shaft
rises from a shellheap
Of plastic playthings,
paper plates,
And the sheer shards
of shattered tumblers
That were not annealed
for the time needful.

Auden, I think, has shown a remarkable development in his use of Anglo-Saxon conventions. In his Age of Anxiety, it was very like Wilbur's, crude as a granite axe, and twice as painful. It even lacked much of the conceptual appropriateness of Pound's and Wilbur's poems. In his new book, however, City Without Walls, in the poem City Without Walls, Auden uses Anglo-Saxon conventions quite subtly. In the first stanza he indicates with heavier alliteration and caesuras what he is doing, but after that he carefully weakens both caesura and alliteration, keeping them noticable but subdued. Although I find the poem as a whole only fair, I think it demonstrates great technical

virtuosity, and deserves careful study. Again, below some lines:

"Those fantastic forms, fang-sharp,
bone bare, that in Byzantine painting
were a shorthand for the Unbounded
beyond the pale, unpolicied spaces
where dragons dwelt and demons roamed,

"colonized only by ex-worldlings,
penitant sophists and sodomites,
are visual facts in the foreground now,
real structures in steel and glass:
hermits, perforce, are all today,

"with numbered caves in enormous jails,
hotels designed to deteriorate
their glum already-corrupted guests,
factories in which the functional
Hobbesian Man is mass-produced."

Most of the above commentary is a preface to a somewhat more extended discussion of one of my own poems, the poem entitled For My Grandfather. A copy is provided at the end of this essay, with stresses marked where I find they fall. (There is also, of course, a copy in the main body of the book.)

Starting this poem, I had no particular formal requirements in mind. Normally I write free verse, often with a vague relationship to an iambic pentameter line as reference point. What happened, I think, was that line two was metrically somewhat ambiguous. It exhibits the phenomenon of possible double foot groupings, i.e., it could be easily stressed in two ways, given below:

October headed north into the winter,

October headed north into the winter

Thus there was an ambiguity: it could be read either as primarilly iambic, or given a doubling up of the feet, as a more loose, more relaxed meter, with a sort of anapestic feel. This ambiguity matured in the next line, where cold and the first syllable of crying were heavily stressed. It was at this point that I really modulated into a modified form of Anglo-Saxon formal requirements. The strong alliteration of line three was paralleled in line four in back and bedrooms. When I finished out line four with two more stressed words, the main pattern of the poem was set. Line four had four stresses, a medial caesura, and strong alliteration. I was writing modified Anglo-Saxon. In line five I consolidated my realization, adding to it my further realization that though based on a four stressed line, the poem also had a very strong anapestic cast which would be useful for more unity. At this point the main problem technically became one of variation. Though anapestical, the poem must not be truly anapestic, for I was sure that would result in very annoying sing-song monotony. There had to be much, but not too much substitution. Most of this substitution is iambic, though there is occasional use of three unstressed syllables instead of the normal two. Besides substitution, the first foot often was shortened to merely a stress, much as an iambic pentameter line will drop the initial unstressed syllable. The final word of a line was often made feminine, adding to the relaxed, almost rambling feel of the metric. I also used some alliteration, but sparingly, since I think the modern ear much more easily bothered by strong alliteration. I kept caesura infrequent, weak, and avoided medial caesura, for the same reason. Finally, I tied the poem together as much as I could with repetition of key words, those words being "dust," "grandfather," "winter," "water," "north," "mother," (many "r" words) and others. This was a technique which

I had never consciously used before, but I think it works here. In general it gives a feeling of stasis, I think, since it generates the feeling that all the poem is always present. My final comment about the poem is simply that it taught me a lot, about anapests, the four-stress line, alliteration, and key-word repetition.

For My Grandfather

When my grandfather went away,
October headed north into the winter,
and I was cold of the crying
in back bedrooms, restless at the whispers,
at the fussing of leaves in the mouths of the house.
Away myself from the cooling house,
from the dusting of my mother, away,
far as grandfather, who left me there,
who left with his German into the north,
away at the creek, rock-walking the granite,
I was quiet as Sunday in an autumn town,
may game strange with the haze of the burning leaves
as they lost their small summer to winter.
Even then, though my coat wore out that day,
thinner as the wind blew back from the winter,
though the water hurt as it wet the rocks,
even then I was childish and able to play,
only quiet in my stepping from rock to rock,
wishing the dusting would stop, and the whispers,
and that my grandfather were there.
Now, in the drought in the middle of winter,
one of my impermanent winters
only of weather and my gradual age.
as the sun swings down in a dead-end month,
with water dust in its dunes of snow,
twenty more years have lengthened the thought
of a playing child in smoky October.
My mother that day couldn't dust enough
to stop the burning up by breath
of all our combustible selves, but grandfather,
guttural tongue stiff with the winter,
left us seventy years when he left,
and proved by the sudden north of the house
that human fire is our first house,
and we are the waste which makes increase.

The Iambic Foot

Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Keats, Browning, Frost, Yeats: this list is at once a list of my favorite writers and a list of writers who have used the iambic pentameter line. One of the reasons I am in favor of metered poetry, and particularly metered iambic poetry, is the impressive work done by these writers. It would be at least foolishness, and probably madness, to condemn unmetered poetry, not to mention the loss of the fine work done in the mode. It would in fact be condemning myself, for I have done, and expect to do, unmetered work. Yet as a practicing writer I find that meter is personally more than one of the possibilities. To me it is much more. For one thing, it links me to the writers listed above. Just as the child, while a separate biological entity, is one of a family, neighborhood, state, country, culture, and race, I, in the separateness of my now time, live as a writer in relation to them, my literary fathers.

My affection for metered iambic poetry is buttressed by certain beliefs. First of all, English is a language based on stress. Second, rising rhythm is the characteristic of the spoken language. Third, there is a good reason for organization in lines. The reason, I think, is mainly that dividing a work into lines makes the work easier to handle, both in composition and appreciation. This might sound silly until we consider the position of a writer and reader with none of these conventional helps. The writer especially is in a mess. While the iambic pentameter may be a frail bark, still it can mean survival in the wide ocean of English when the seas are heavy. A writer who has to invent his own mode of writing at the level of metrical organization must spend half his energy in the mere creation of the machine tools to make to tools to make the work. A writer, however, who has at least the tools at hand needn't spend so much time just getting to

the starting line. Suppose Shakespeare had to invent blank verse and all the conventions of Elizabethan drama on which his work so heavily rests? Absurd. For all these reasons I think it's silly to run away from metered poetry, as silly as it is to cling to worn modes of operation inside the convention of meter.

Given that we have a convention, the iambic pentameter line, what is the variant which will be most useful today? I am here, of course, searching for a theoretical base for both lyric poems and perhaps a longer poem. I don't do this in a completely abstract way, naturally. In fact the answer to my question is one which I have drawn from my own practice. I hope by verbalizing it and talking about it to define my own attitude toward the use of iambic metered verse such that, in the future, my own practice might be better. In passing I might note that I make no claim that my answer to the problem is the only answer or even a correct answer, except for myself.

I think that the form of iambic metered poetry in this time is a compromise between iambic tetrameter or pentameter and free verse. I call this compromise free verse with an iambic base. What I mean by this phrase is this: The poem at first glance may well look like a free verse poem. (Though not like a field verse poem. My free verse poem is margined to the left, one line under another.) In fact, however, the poem is based on the iambic foot, and here and there in the poem there will be rest lines that are plainly iambic, though these rest lines may be dimeter or fourteeners or more. These rest lines need not be many or obtrusive. Like all matters of technique they are subsumed by the poem as a whole. The long tradition in English of the iambic foot will help ensure that the poem is read with a consciousness of its iambic base. The result of this kind of writing is at once that pleasing sense of being in the open which is characteris-

tic of free verse and the sense of security and ongoing resolution which you get with metered verse. This kind of technique is not my own invention, naturally. Arnold wrote very much as I describe, albeit more regularly than what I have in mind. Work very much like this is common in the twentieth century, although I find most of it lacks the feeling of tension in the lines which free verse with an iambic base can achieve. Eliot, perhaps, is the best example of a well-known writer who writes in this mode.

To illustrate what I mean by free verse with an iambic base in my own writing, observe the poem To One Skeleton in One Indian Mound, at the end of this essay. I have marked where I find the stresses fall. As you can see, I think, the poem fulfills my criteria. The shortest line is line eight, iambic dimeter, one of the rest lines. There are a couple of lines which are ten syllables, but neither are rest lines. An obvious rest line is line three, iambic tetrameter. Yet even though the poem constantly strays from an iambic ideal, it constantly returns, Antaeus, to the earth. Perhaps a better metaphor of my sense of this poem is that of ropes stretched tight over a very jagged rock, touching it only in places, but enabled to be taut only by the resistance of the rock. I hope to stretch many more lines over that rock.

To One Skeleton in One Indian Mound

Yesterday the sun like one more engine
roared overhead,
and all we amateurs at spades
crossed our broad blades in the heat
in the hurry to dig up and hoard,
but today...all your awry bones
and a round skull full of cobwebbed thought
unclock my day,
and the dig's quarrel of shovels
disappears. Let the others save and save
their bones against the dozers
bulling their way here and there tomorrow
to the tick. My thin friend,
I could outsit America, spinning
a headful of those subtle threads,
and in a jumble in the next time's mound
crook my head-house a thousand years
around the nebulae of webs,
thinking on the spider's work of stars.

On the Degeneration of the English Tongue

In the beginning was St. John and the gospel thereof was good, and good were his words of the Word. But here and there I now hear, ear to the ground, against the humming talk, to the thrumming book, English dead, dead, dead, no way out, rotten on the vine, on the tree, foul in the mouth, ptomaine in the belly, dead. Yes, yes, I said, dead, yes; I've walked down Main and the mouths fuzzed round my tongue, my English, and dead were the walker-talkers, my English dead. Shakespeare trumpet-tongued, Keats honey-tongued, but on Main the bad fruit, the numb food, flat, dead. O Christ, stretched out in the hollow mount, why we, this Twentieth Century, why the civil men of the Civil Service, plodding the wreck of our Germanic Frenchified, our criss-cross-pollinated many-nationed crumbling tongue? Milton in his might loosed Latin, Englished in our ears, we have nothing shoring even American, not the inflection 'gainst our ruins, not the Bible for backbone. With T.V. hath no man made good speech. Not by commercials' eloquence, and radio halteth the Word in the womb. Oh throw me down four hundred years, break, bend, and send me back to Elizabeth when we were young! Chaucer had a chance, I none. My tears, my only English, must drown merchant ships and wash from my eye sight, that's how strong my cry is. Call out the names, my muse, ashamed of 1970. Pope: who now holds his chromium edge? Browning: Grrr! Where one as he! And yet there is that last Romantic Yeats: did he have a dispensation that he wrote at all in this amiss one hundred years, in the dead-end of English, in the final Götterdämmerung of our unraveling tongue? None know. We but know it dies, we die, O stone, leaf, why?

But. Still--yet, yesterday I heard one say "it's costing me uphill," and I, half-knowing what he meant, heard these four words in a strange way, and I don't know. No. At the weed's edge, in the ebb, I remember four.

Standing in the kneedeep, marsh, and swamp of the bad bon mot, the grammarians grave, the wild ducks wheel about me AND I think there's hope. The shack and tenement still has a solid skeleton. Hamlet knew lawyer-talk and the cant of the hawk-hunt. Still today the lawyer lies, logic-chops and wheedles his way into metaphor. Where be your assizes now? On Wall Street, kicking like a kid. And those technical terms, beloved of the Dane, we've got 'em. For every municipality of local talk of 1610, we've got ten today, flashflooded by new trades. Gunshot, pitstop, read-out, out-put, real-time, spondees enough to stock any blasted pond. And Metaphor? There's more than ever, or atleast an equal infinite. Let wide America be your Harvard and your Yale, writers, and you'll not want for words. Ask and you will find you have. Tell me, did the race die when my grandfather became grave for good, immune to bad puns? Not as long as I'm here, himself remade new man. Is water lost forever down the river? So it seems, away, away and meanwhile it rains out of the sky on your head. Why there's no end to it, just as no end to folly and the tax. Why? I want to tell you, our language is no thing. Nothing. The tissue of the race, live and dead as they, today as all days, coming hither and going hence, alway. HCE ALP In the end as in the beginning, now and forever, All Men. St. John, lay the Word on me.

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