

Enjambment: The Ragged Line

Enjambment—the continuation of a sentence or clause across a line-break—is an indispensable tool, one particularly useful for breaking lines in unexpected places to create the element of surprise or suspense:

“If a poet allows all the sentences of a poem to end in the same place as regular line-breaks, a kind of deadening can happen in the ear, and in the brain too, as all the thoughts can end up being the same length. Enjambment is one way of creating audible interest...” (*The Poetry Archive*, paragraph 1.)

It is not only the interest created by enjambment that leads a writer of poems toward this device. For free verse, both enjambment and the caesura are two methods of variation one can employ without turning toward formal methods. As Robert Frost famously noted, it is difficult to play tennis without a net. Yet it takes only remarkably simple changes in style to create a framework on which to “hang” one’s words. As an added bonus, quite often writer’s block may give way to a simple change in style.

So if you have just a few lines of material, or a bare bones idea, writing in a form that could be called “The Ragged Line” may help you to round your subject matter out. Think of it as play. After a few drafts, if you let the lines break such that there is a more structural form to the

piece, and you may discover your poem hiding beneath its words.

A few examples of poems using enjambment follow. Certainly it's not an overstatement to say that enjambment can become indispensable to the poet working in free or open verse. It's also a tool formal poets use to good effect.

The Dark That in the Hemlock Hides

Turns
 its clock-face
 toward me.
 Wrapped in the cloak
 of its night
 hunt,
 the barred
 feathers
 disappear
 against bark.
 In its own
 time, black-lit chars
 of eyes
 see what they see,
 say what they
 say.
 For years,
 I have sought to pry from
 the disguise
 of different species
 some
 portent, passion,
 Psalm.

The calm
face stays
closed. Today,
below the cove
of red-twigged
dogwood
a spotted
bellied towhee
sighs
its two-note
—Not now.

—Pamela Gross

Man Staggering, Bronze

Giacometti

Now this tipped
off-kilter figure, head
thrown back, arm
thrust out to catch himself.
A futile gesture. Barely attached
to the base, his form
a metaphor for falling, he is—
not captured—flung
into being at the moment
before all is lost, the moment
all will certainly be lost, I think,
a brave moment.
How does he not
clang to the floor, his ropy length

and metal weight not
bring him down, not finish
but suspend his tilt
toward the absence
his arabesque embraces.

—Anne Pitkin

The Caesura

The term “caesura” means a complete pause in a line of poetry, or in music. The plural form of *caesura* is *caesurae*. Another way to define this term is a pause in a line determined by the natural rhythm of the diction. In Frost’s famous poem “The Road Not Taken,” the line “Two roads diverged // in a yellow wood” holds a natural caesura. Finally, it can be said that a caesura is a mid-line stop, for example:

MACBETH

If it were done when ‘tis done; then twere well
It were done quickly. If that assassination
Could trammel up the consequence...

The caesura occurs between “quickly” and “if—” note the full stop in the middle, rather than at the end of the line. These full stops can be found throughout

Shakespeare, Gilgamesh, early Anglo-Saxon poetry and verse sagas (e.g. Beowulf). Because contemporary poets likewise seek music and meaning, the caesura functions to give a reader, or a listener, time to absorb words and images.

Equally important, adding some breathing room to a line slows the reader down. Because the goal of a poem is to compress and heighten language, white space can hardly be over-rated. The use of a form such as the caesura may not necessarily come into play during first drafts or free-writes, when structure on the page is not nearly as important as content. But breaking a line in half can be used to the poet's advantage during subsequent revisions. In the piece below by Roberta Feins, it highlights verbs unique to weaving:

The River Tarn at Albi

Wind threshes beats the clouds
with bladed shingle.

Combs of church steeples hackle streams
of rain drawn plied spun

on the Mother-of-All wheel of the old bridge
her piers a loom heddle separating warp

of gray waters turning the ratchet.
Shafts of plumed herons

treadle the reedy bank great carp
 with pinecone scales fluttering,

 shoot through the shed of braided silver
 weave a splendid brocade tapestry.

—Roberta Feins

Finally, to show that play is always “at play” in poetry, Lynn Emanuel goes so far as to use triple caesuras per line in her poem “She,” which is typeset horizontally on the page in her award-winning book *Then, Suddenly*.

An Interview with Jeremy Voigt

Jeremy Voigt: The natural world seems to play a major role in your writing. Do you see yourself as a nature poet, a regional poet, or a poet of any particular place?

Judith Skillman: I guess I would prefer not to be labeled as any particular kind of poet, other than, perhaps, someone who loves to write about what happens inside and outside the self. Nothing seems too small to be worth writing about, or too big. I do love nature