
The Prosody of Open Verse

bpNichol, Frank Davey

OUR INTENT IN THIS ESSAY IS TO DESCRIBE THE NOTATION THAT WE TAKE for granted in both our writing and reading of contemporary open form poetry. This is not to say that all contemporary poets use this notation, but most of them use some element of it, along with more traditional ideas of notation. All the notational ideas we will be discussing presuppose a familiarity in both writer and reader with certain fundamental linguistic concepts, specifically with *stress*, *pitch*, *terminal*, *phonological phrase*, and *sign*. There is nothing particularly esoteric about these concepts; they became current in linguistics several decades ago and could probably be inferred by any perceptive reader who took the time to figure out how certain writers have structured the language of their poems. Indeed, these concepts have become, at this point in time, the invisible underpinnings of open form verse notation. However, neither the role of these linguistic concepts in shaping the notational system nor the system itself have been thoroughly described.

1. Some Definitions:

STRESS. Linguists call this feature of language the prominence given to a syllable by its being pronounced more loudly or vigorously than other syllables in its environment. All syllables receive stress – contrary to the old system of ‘stress-unstress’ scansion of poetry many of us were subjected to in grade school – and can receive it in infinitely variable amounts. Four degrees of stress, however, usually suffice to describe a single clause or phrase: in descending order *primary*, *secondary*, *tertiary*, and *weak*. The stress we most need to attend to in poetry is not too surprisingly the *primary*; it is here that many of the other important features of the poem will occur.

PITCH. All musical sounds have pitch; the human voice is such a sound, being produced through the vibration of a column of air by the vocal cords. In music pitch is an absolute value but in speech, and hence in the notating of poems, it is relative. Normal pitch contours use four relative levels: extra high, high, normal, and low. There may be slight variances in each level but not enough to become confusing to the hearer.

TERMINALS. At the separations between words pauses can occur – sometimes a mere slowing of tempo, sometimes a clear pause accompanied by a

pitch change in the preceding syllable. The former is normally unpunctuated when it occurs in prose. For instance, in the sentence 'I'll do it when I have time.' there is a terminal between 'it' and 'when'. Linguists call this a 'level terminal,' to distinguish it from the second group of terminals, 'rising' terminals that occur at the end of questions, and the third group, the 'falling' terminals that occur at the ends of affirmations.

PHONOLOGICAL PHRASE. Also called a phonemic clause, this cluster of syllables is the smallest phonological construction that can appear as a complete element in speech. It consists of one or more syllables, bounded by terminals, and marked by a single primary stress. Examples would include both 'I'll do it' and 'when I have time' in the sentence above, single units such as 'Wow' or 'Damn' or longer ones such as 'In the cool cool cool of the evening.' Primary stress in these examples falls on the syllables 'do', 'time', 'wow', 'damn', and 'eve'.

SIGN. Although all phonological features of speech are also 'signs', here we mean by 'sign' the various visual elements that constitute the written language. These include not only the letters of the alphabet which imperfectly act as signs for speech phonemes, and the various conventions of punctuation and capitalization, but also such spatial devices as paragraph, stanza, isolation of phrases, words, and letters, variations in typographical size, and the length of a verse line.

2. *The Line and the Line-break:*

The line in contemporary open verse consists of one or more phonological phrases, and ends on a terminal. There are no enjambed lines; unlike in traditional or 'closed' notation (sonnets, blank verse, etc.) every line-end signals a pause or terminal. The contemporary line is not necessarily a simple graphing of the poet's speech pattern but can be a deliberate enforcing of primary stresses to create a particular content and/or rhythmic effect. That is, the sentence 'I'll do it when I have time.' in poetry might occur in the following ways

I'll do it
when I have time.

This would be a graphing of normal speech pattern.

I'll do it when
I have time.

This relocation of the terminal shifts the primary stress in the first line from 'do' to 'when', creating a subtle shift of content.

I'll do it when I
have time

Here the stress shifts to 'I', the content becomes more emphatic, personal, and consequently more dramatic.

I'll do it when I have
time.

Here the stress's shift to 'have' increases the dramatic content and suggests more passion.

I'll
do it
when I
have time.

The increase to four primary stresses creates less distinction between syllables, a quieter, more personal tone and slows down the rhythm.

I'll do it when I have time.

In open verse such a line asks the reader to observe no terminals within the line and to observe the single primary stress on 'time'. Because of the rapidity with which this line would have to be spoken to avoid an additional terminal, this would be an energetic line, possibly an angry one (although a reader might well 'read in' one or more terminals unindicated by the writer, particularly if generalizing from traditional verse forms in which the line often contained unmarked terminals.) If indeed the writer had wished this line to contain a terminal other than the concluding one, he has not signalled so to the reader.

The convention here is that all terminals (with the exception of 'optional' terminals many poets create to enrich a line with deliberate ambiguity) must be indicated by some form of punctuation, either traditional or spatial.¹ Within the above line a terminal could be indicated as follows:

I'll do it when I have time
(Earle Birney commonly uses this notation.)
or
I'll do it, when I have time.
or
I'll do it – when I have time.
or
I'll do 'it' when I have time.

in which the specifying of *it* by single quotation marks both locates the primary stress and signals a terminal immediately after. (Fred Wah uses this notation.) I'll do *it* when I have time.

Italics can serve the same function as the specifying quotation marks (in

typewriter notation this is achieved by underlining).

I'll do it
when I have time.
(George Bowering commonly uses this notation.)

This sixth punctuation differs from the first five in signalling not only a level terminal but also a distinct drop in pitch – a lowering of voice. In the first version 'I'll' and 'when' have essentially the same pitch, but a longer pause is notated between the two phonological phrases than in version two, even longer than if the line were divided into two separate lines beginning on the same margin. The spatial punctuation of the first and sixth versions allow considerable flexibility in that the space between the phrases can be varied in visually measurable units in order to signal pauses of varying durations. Both Birney and Marlatt use such a notation, usually increasing or decreasing the space geometrically – e.g. from 6 typewriter-spaces to 9 or 3. Although each reader will experience these pauses differently, the notation still allows the writer to indicate relative lengths of pause, and thereby to have more control over the rhythm and pacing of the poem than would be possible through conventional punctuation.

It is precisely by delaying the terminals, or increasing their frequency that the number and location of primary stresses is determined and complexity in rhythm is achieved.² Long lines can alternate with short ones and rhythmic patterns can be established.

Each relocation of a terminal relocates a primary stress; each introduction of an additional terminal creates an additional primary stress. The primary stress communicates meaning through emphasis, so that differently stressed but identically worded units can 'mean' quite different things. By accurate location of terminals, a writer can enforce a specific meaning by enforcing a specific location of primary stress.

Thus Keats' famous line in this notation,

When I have fears that I
may cease to be

because of the primary stress on the second 'I', signals much more self-concern than

When I have fears
that I may cease to be.

with its primary stresses on 'fears' and 'be'. (In Keats' own notational system, of course, such considerations of stress, pitch, and terminal were indicated only by occasional punctuation marks, and usually left to semantic interpretation.)

One last fact about the line in this notation is that long lines composed of only one or two phonological phrases indicate a very rapidly paced poem; short lines indicate a relatively slow pace. This phenomenon is related to George Trager and Henry Lee Smith's discovery that the primary stresses in English speech tend to be 'isochronous', to occur at regular intervals of time, and that phonological phrases, no matter how many syllables they contain, in a given passage of speech all occupy roughly the same amount of time. A long phonological phrase – 'I'll do it I'll do it I'll do it I'll do it I'll do it' – (properly read with no internal terminals and a primary stress on the final 'do') could leave the unsilent reader quite breathless.

3. *Between the Lines*

Space in such notation represents time, as when a line break indicates a terminal or when varying amounts of space within a line indicate terminals of varying duration. Consequently the increasing of blank space between lines – double spacing, triple spacing – is used by writers to indicate even larger amounts of time without words. Some will re-inforce the largest units of such time with printer's devices or asterisks that insist on a complete stop in the rhythm of the poem. Sometimes, for a yet more insistent pause, the writer will direct his text from an unfilled page to a new page (as in the original edition of Dudek's *En Mexico*), or for an even greater degree of temporal separation between the lines allow a blank page or pages to intervene (Phyllis Webb approaches this in *Naked Poems*).

4. *Pages*

The one weakness of the above spatial conventions is the 'enjambéd' page break that occurs where the page cannot contain the sheer number of lines in a poem. How can a writer signify that no stanza break, no extended terminal, is intended by the shift to the new page, that this shift is merely an accident of book design? '[no stanza break]' types the writer at the end of each page of his typescript, before sending it off for publication. Clearly any instruction such as this interferes with smooth transition rather than facilitating it. It seems to us that what the notation requires here is a typographic convention. Perhaps there could be an 'agreement' to treat the page break as in prose – i.e. ignore it; printers would then have to avoid the coinciding of page breaks with significant space between lines or stanzas. This is probably the best approach since it fits the reader's preconceptions of the reading act. However, it can lead to an awkward arrangement of lines near the page break. An alternative would be to create an agreed-upon typographic signal that would indicate the presence or absence of a stanza-break at the page juncture. Since open verse notation is still evolving, it is possible that some solution to this problem will eventually emerge.

5. Multiple Margins

The left margin (or 'base margin') of the poem and each consecutive line that returns to that margin begins on the same pitch – i.e. if the first three lines of the poem are all aligned on the left, then what you have is a continuous pitch-rime running through that margin. This pitch does not change unless the writer relocates the margin. The most common way of changing pitch³ is the drop-line, which we described earlier.

I'll do it
when I have time.

This drop denotes a drop in pitch, but does not signal how far, or to what point the pitch falls, merely that it does fall. When one returns to the base margin from the end of the drop-line, one does not necessarily return to the opening pitch of the poem but merely to a higher pitch than that which began the drop-line.

A common way of signalling a definite change of pitch in the base margin is the insertion of several blank lines, or even printer's ornaments, between stanzas. Here the opening pitch of the second stanza can be higher, the same, or lower than that of the first, since the passage of time insisted upon by the spacing allows the new stanza to occur as a fresh beginning. Some writers use, instead of radical spacing, italicized stanzas to indicate this kind of pitch change. Others will create alternate margins for lines or entire stanzas, margins that indicate returns to pitch-levels different from that of the base margin. Robert Kroetsch does this in *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue*. A poet can also allow the base margin to float from line to line, or stanza to stanza, in order to suggest a wider range of pitches than is normally used in daily speech. This is what George Bowering does to the margin in *Allophanes*.

The multiple margin is unfortunately one of the most misunderstood features of open verse, often used to denote nothing more than a desire for 'variety' in the visual effect of the page.

6. Spelling

Some writers, in their desire to have the printed form of the poem signal as accurately as possible the poem's spoken form, will alter the spelling of words to enforce specific pronunciations. Robert Duncan and George Bowering both spell the unvoiced final consonant of the past participial as 't' rather than 'ed' – 'reacht' rather than 'reached', 'lookt' rather than 'looked'. Bowering also deletes the apostrophe in contractions such as 'don't' or 'can't' because it has no phonological significance. Paradoxically, he retains the apostrophe of the possessive case, although it also has no phonological value and no ambiguity would be created by its deletion. bpNichol removes the silent letters from words like 'thought' ('thot') or 'through' ('thru'). The effect of such variant

spellings is to emphasize the poet's concern for the oral dimension of the poem, and to a lesser extent to argue for spelling reform. Nevertheless, the fact that such spelling changes are applied inconsistently suggests that they are above all a matter of individual preference and controlled by subjective factors. They have not become a standard signal of open verse notation.

The one writer whom we know of who attempts to apply a system of phonetic or 'aural' spelling consistently is Bill Bissett. In his case, these spelling changes are one of several indicators of Bissett's disdain for arbitrary convention and his preference for the 'natural'. In Bissett 'the' is rendered 'th', 'come' is rendered 'cum', 'you' is rendered 'yu'. Here the oral form takes total precedence over the print form and the grammatical and orthographic conventions that have grown around it. Once again, although Bissett has influenced one or two writers to change the spelling of selected words, he has not altered the general practice of open verse notation.

7. *Embedding other Notational Systems*

Special effects are often achieved in open verse poems by including within them passages written in other notational systems. Such alternate systems include 'concrete' or visual notation, paragraphs of prose, the written form of the play, any of the traditional closed verse forms, various found elements, the interview format, or that of the personal or business letter. Examples of these abound in contemporary Canadian poems: Kroetsch's use of found materials in *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalog*, Ondaatje's use of the interview in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Nichol's use of the prose paragraph and the play format in *The Martyrology*, Webb's use of 'concrete' notation at the beginning of *Naked Poems*, Stuart McKinnon's use of the personal letter in *The Intervals*. In all these examples, since the majority of other notations signal their own structures clearly, their introduction allows the writer to take advantage of both the historical connotations and special sound qualities they possess. Each thereby becomes yet another element in open verse notation.

8. *Other Punctuation*

Certain particular uses of common punctuation signs are found in a great deal of contemporary open form poetry.

a. The Oblique (/)

This is commonly used to denote a pause shorter than a comma but longer than the normal pause between words in a continuous flow of speech or, in linguistic terms, the shortest possible level terminal. To many readers ears, this pause will not register but it does exist.

A second use of the oblique is to set up two words or concepts side by side that the writer wishes to occur almost simultaneously in the reader's mind –

e.g. 'his/her', 'she walks/he holds' (both examples taken from Fred Wah's poetry).

b. The Unclosed Parenthesis (

This is commonly used to indicate an interpolated comment that becomes the main text.

c. *Italics*

As well as their use to indicate a change in pitch (see section 5 above), or their standard use for emphasis, italics are often used by poets like Gwendolyn MacEwen to indicate direct quotation or dialogue. Since in such cases a change of pitch also occurs, the italics serve as a double signal.

d. The period.

There is a particular use of the period that one sometimes encounters in open verse notation – e.g.:

the star . our bodies

Here the writer (Victor Coleman) signals a longer than normal pause followed by a full stop followed by another longer than normal pause. Whereas the pitch normally falls at the end of a sentence, here the delay of the period allows the pitch of 'star' to be level, and the fall in pitch at the period to be unvoiced.

e. CAPITALIZATION

One of the most distinctive features of open form poetry for most readers is the lack of capital letters, particularly at the beginnings of lines. Most writers of open form poetry have chosen to work within the logic of the sentence, and therefore only capitalize at the beginning of complete sentences. Some – Bill Bissett for one – have taken this further, and reserve the use of capitals for emphasis, usually of loudly voiced utterances. The lack of capitalization, particularly of the pronoun 'i', sometimes signals certain underlying political and religious beliefs. Such use would normally be identifiable through the presence of related thematic statement.

We have tried in this essay to describe the current practice in open form poetry, to be descriptive as opposed to prescriptive. Open verse notation is still evolving; problems, some of which we have tried to indicate, remain to be solved. Throughout we have avoided the term 'free verse', believing it to be both denotatively misleading and weighted with unfortunate historical connotations.

NOTES

- 1 Writers sometimes, at their discretion, do not notate every terminal in a line, precisely because they want the terminal to 'float', to occur at the reader's 'option'. This is not mere sloppiness, but a deliberate notational choice to create a rhythmic ambiguity that will allow part of the line to be formed in the reader's imagination. In fact, this choice demands that the writer control the rhythm of the immediately adjacent lines in such a way that they can accommodate any reading of the ambiguous line.
- 2 The other factor here is, of course, rime. Skillful use of both endrime and rime within the lines of a poem allows particular primary stresses to be grouped together to create counter rhythms on top of both other groups of rimes and the basic rhythms of the poem. It should be noted that rimes are most audible in syllables which receive primary stress, and inaudible in syllables which receive weak stress.
- 3 At the level of content, a change of pitch is normally experienced as a change in voice – e.g. from didactic to reflective, from public to private, from confident to unconfident, etc.