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Considerations on the immediacy of poetic thought

Abstract:

Why does poetic verse generate such a heightened sense of immediacy? Aristotle's discussion of *energeia* ('vividness') in his *Rhetoric* suggests the effect is attributable to poetry's reliance upon inherently incomplete devices – metaphor is a prime example – which seduce the reader into participating in the generation of the work. The poem's vividness and sense of real-time unfolding are on this account due to the reader's misrecognition of their own sense of embodied temporality, as they creatively raise the work from the page. What this traditional explanation ignores is the possibility that there is something more immediate about the act of writing in lines than in prose in the first place. The paper turns to certain non-Chomskyan linguists who have argued that when speaking we generate our utterance in sub-sentential chunks, and that these typically clausal chunkings are reflective of our extremely narrow window of conscious attention. We simply cannot hold all we would like to say in mind and cannot even grasp quite what verbal form it will take until we actually say it. Revealingly, these linguists tend to lineate their transcripts. Their work suggests that lines of verse bring us closer to an embodied sense of the cognitive constraints contouring real-time utterance than do the multiple recalibrated and revised sentences of prose writers.

Biographical note:

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“You have to sort your way quite consciously back to the starting point”

This paper considers the sense of immediacy critics so often associate with favoured poems and offers two explanations for it. The first explanation is ancient, traceable back to Aristotle, and has to do with how certain types of language work to elicit a sense of vividness and real-time unfolding from us when we encounter them in print. The second explanation is much more recent, dating from the second half of the 20th century, and comes as a consequence of broad shifts in linguists’ understanding of the differences between spoken and written language. That second explanation holds that composing in lines is more immediate than composing in prose sentences due to the closeness the line bears to the nascently rhythmic, typically clausal chunks in which we speak.

My last sentence may raise some hackles. The suggestion that speaking is ‘more immediate’ than prose writing will seem to ignore Jacques Derrida’s epochal critique of distinctions between the two, a critique with profound impacts on New Humanities disciplines like creative writing studies, and a matter worth addressing from the outset. The first thing to say is that there were good reasons for Derrida’s critique. In undermining any strict distinction between speaking and writing – on the Saussurean but also post-Saussurean grounds that both materialise in signifiers (the sound in the air, the mark on the page), the identity of which can only ever be differential – Derrida rightly undercut certain hegemonic claims as to the pre-eminence of one over the other, whether these were in service of the European invader’s purportedly civilising mission, or in celebration of the spontaneity of the unlettered, those supposedly closer to nature. Derrida effected this by proposing a far more inclusive concept of writing, one coextensive with the signifier itself: “we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice” (1976, p. 9).

This approach did not stop Derrida from making subtle and revealing distinctions about the workings of sound and meaning in literary texts (1984). But in the context of the global uptake of post-structuralism, the massification of Derrida’s already huge metaphor of writing (in the continuation of the above quotation, he suggests it might comprehend cinematography, dance, painting, sculpture, political or military action and even athletics) has had some unfortunate consequences. High among them has been the way it has acted to forestall thinking in the humanities on the profound differences in grammar, rhythm, word choice, and even the size of the ideational units that we employ when we are speaking compared to when we are producing prose writings like this one. Ironically, Derrida’s writing metaphor rose to prominence in the humanities just as these broad differences were becoming apparent, following the invention and, from the mid-1950s on, swift scholarly uptake of the tape recorder (Bonelli, 2010). Linguists Michael Halliday and Christian Matthiessen state that the corpora of “naturally occurring” speech that have since arisen have been “fundamental to the enterprise of theorizing language. Until now, linguistics has been like physics before 1600: having little reliable data, and no clear sense of the relationship between observation and theory” (2014, p. 51).

This is for a simple, far-reaching reason: “What people actually say is very different from what they think they say” (2014, p. 49). Fellow linguist Wallace Chafe strikes a similar note: “Technology has put us now, for the first time in human history, in a position to understand what spoken language is really like, though for various reasons we have not taken full advantage of this” (1994, p. 50).

In context, Chafe is clearly pointing to Noam Chomsky’s universal grammar program here, with its minimisation of surface phenomena in favour of postulated deep structures – but he might have had the post-structuralist themes rehearsed above in mind as well.

Pertinently, humanities scholars’ commitment to an all-embracing metaphor of writing did not stop them attending conferences. Evidently writing – in the specific sense of pen, typewriter or keyboard – does import some difference to the workings of our language and its interface with creative thought, to the point that one might want to eschew writing for conversation at times. But to unpack just what those differences are, in all their fine gradations, we need to reopen distinctions between writing and speaking – without abandoning the concept of the signifier, or post-structuralist approaches to history and discourse more generally. The benefit of doing so will be to open some new lines of inquiry in creative writing studies, particularly in the study of poetic composition, some (though of course not all) salient aspects of which can be clarified by the new understandings that Halliday and Chafe refer to.

The digression I have just made on the ironies of the post-structuralist use of the word *writing*, and the need to revise it, should make clear that the *immediacy* I am referring to in my title has nothing to do with the fantasy of a kind of art that transcends cultural mediation. The issues concern closeness and time. Critics regularly point to a sense of vividness, energy and real-time unfolding in the poems they single out for praise. Where does it come from?

I have in mind comments like the following. Robert Hass tells us in his discussion of ‘The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket’ that Robert Lowell’s sentences are “headlong, furious and casual” (1984, p. 8). “Throughout the poem, it is characteristic that the important associations occur in subordinate clauses or in compounds so breathless that you have to sort your way quite consciously back to the starting point” (p. 10). “In the speed of the writing, the syntax comes apart” (p. 10). For Hass, it is Lowell’s “absolute attention to feeling at that moment in the poem’s process” that is most striking (p. 16). Consider, too, how Helen Vendler praises Pope’s *An Essay on Man* in the course of her 2001 Clark Lectures, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (2004). For Vendler, Pope’s poem demonstrates “the mobility of a mind as it operates at full tilt” (p. 28). Her Clark lectures as a whole combat the scholarly tendency to calculate the intellectual value of such poems in terms of the adequacy of the propositions they contain. For Vendler, *An Essay on Man* should not be read for its ideas but for the “ceaselessly energetic” way the poet performs them (p. 36). Pope’s poetry bears the impression of “living thought” (p. 27).

Such critical appraisals are all the more curious given the ample documentation showing that both Lowell’s ‘Quaker Graveyard’ and Pope’s *An Essay on Man* had much more temporally-

dispersed geneses than reference to what is “headlong, furious and casual”, “ceaselessly energetic” or “at full tilt” will allow (see Milburn, 1997 on Lowell’s drafting process; Vendler, 2004, p. 126 on Pope’s). So why do critics keep writing this way?

Aristotle on *energeia*

To bring Aristotle’s ideas to the table, we can start by noting that it is not at all obvious why the sorts of poems just mentioned should convey a sense of vividness or real-time unfolding. One might have expected the opposite. Consider Sharon Cameron’s argument that lyric poetry “lies furthest of all the mimetic arts from the way we really talk” (1979, p. 19 & p. 207). For Cameron, the issue is that the poems we canonise speak in impossibly multiple ways:

Could our thoughts be pitched as the lyric’s, we might in fact shatter time with the determined voice of our musings. But we speak in a single voice whose pitch the lyric always rises above or drops below. The lyric’s collective voice, or more accurately the voice of its collective moments, bound together as one, is not equal to a human voice. (p. 208)

I am citing from Cameron’s book *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*, which focuses on the work of Emily Dickinson, but does so in the belief that Dickinson’s lines are symptomatic of a contradiction besetting the tradition as a whole. The following quatrain is one instance:

The Mind is smooth – no Motion –
Contented as the eye
Upon the Forehead of a Bust –
That knows – it cannot see – (Dickinson 1999, p. 260)

These lines seem to represent the thoughts of a present-tense speaker. Yet such dense, scarcely reconcilable thoughts could only, Cameron argues, visit a real, historical speaker if their genesis were spread over time. To put Cameron’s stance in terms of discussions prominent in creative writing studies, one might say that lines of this complexity could not have been achieved without considerable revision. Yet the paradoxical effect of any such process – in fact, Dickinson wrote with extraordinary rapidity, producing 295 poems in 1863 alone (1999, p. 637) – is the vividness with which a person named Emily Dickinson seems to emerge from these seemingly impossible lines all the same. After consuming the full three volumes of the first critically established edition of Dickinson’s poems, Randall Jarrell (1980) reported feeling “all the absolutes and intensives and eccentricities of an absolutely intense eccentric” had passed over him “like a train of avalanches” (p. 244).

Shouldn’t Jarrell have been reeling from the impossibility of finding any temporally coherent person there at all? Why, if lyric speech is so counter-factual, so “not equal to a human voice” (Cameron, 1979, p. 208), did Jarrell get such a strong sense of Dickinson from the experience of those three volumes, to the point that he proceeded to describe her in that same 1955 review

(1980) as “one of the most individual writers who have ever lived”, adding, “You live with the poems – or rather with the poet – in an almost intolerable intimacy” (p. 244)?

Aristotle’s work on public speaking, the *Rhetoric*, is useful to cite at this point, because it suggests that the amplified immediacy of such verse is a function of the very impossibilities Cameron charts. Such is the upshot of Aristotle’s theory of how one brings ἐνέργεια (*energeia*) to a speech. The word is variously translated as “vividness” or “liveliness”. Far from dating over the millennia since the lecture notes we have come to know as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* were compiled, this concept of *energeia* can help us to grasp how Dickinson’s lines might give readers such a strong sense of her personal presence as they read her. That presence is their own.

Aristotle’s discussion begins with the seeming truism that an orator achieves an effect of *energeia* by “setting things before the eyes” of their audience (Moran, 1996, p. 392). Strategies for this include personifying the things that one describes, choosing processual over stative verb forms, and more generally “using expressions that represent things as in a state of activity” (Aristotle, 1984, p. 2252). Aristotle cites a line from Book XII of *The Iliad* in illustration:

Curved waves, crested with white, some in front, others behind. [1]

Aristotle comments that in this line, the poet “represents everything as moving and living. For liveliness is movement” (1984, p. 2253). But it is crucial to realise that for Aristotle, achieving an effect of vividness is not simply a matter of representing subjects in motion and/or piling up processual verb forms. What is just as important is to convey a gap. This is particularly true of metaphor: “Metaphors must be drawn ... from things that are related to the original thing, and yet not so obviously related” (p.2253). A gap of this order is called for because, as in philosophy, so here, “an acute mind will perceive resemblances even in things far apart” (p. 2253). This will sound like a comment on the authoring of such metaphors, but Aristotle’s observations actually apply more broadly:

Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor, and by the further power of surprising the hearer; because the hearer expected something different, his acquisition of the new idea impresses him all the more. His mind seems to say, ‘Yes, to be sure; I never thought of that.’ (p. 2253)

As Richard Moran (1996) points out in his illuminating gloss on this passage, we cannot understand what Aristotle means by “setting things before the eyes” of one’s audience until we grasp that the “requirement of activity” is incumbent not only “on the part of the metaphorical subject”, but “on the part of the responses of the audience as well” (p. 393). In other words, the feeling of liveliness you gain from a striking metaphor is as much as anything a function of the life you yourself put into it, in bringing its seemingly discordant parts together.

Aristotle’s subject is public speaking, but we can see here something of the strategies to which Peter Shillingsburg (1991) alludes in suggesting that it takes “experienced writers” to

compensate for the stark distinction between communicating in a specific speech situation and communicating in the comparatively context-free space of writing, given, for instance, that punctuation is such a “coarse substitute for intonation and gesture” (p. 61). It is a matter of tapping into the reader’s pleasure in filling in what’s missing. To bring this back to Lowell, Pope and Dickinson would be to claim that the extraordinary energy and vividness of their writing is as much our own – dealing with the lacunae they present us – as theirs. In other words, I am claiming that Aristotle’s analysis of metaphor’s role in importing “liveliness” can be applied well beyond the use of metaphor in speech-making, and even well beyond metaphor itself, to inform our understanding of what happens when we encounter the kinds of features that Cameron (1979) detects in Dickinson’s work and sees as representative of lyric in general: “Fragmentary lines, the refusal of syntax and diction to subordinate themselves to each other, the subsequent absence of context and progression, the resulting ambiguity and tension” (p. 19).

In sum, not even the polyvocal, tonally discrepant and/or temporally mind-boggling aspects of lyric utterance – provided they be wielded by writers as skilled as those we are considering – seem to escape the kinds of effects Hass and Vendler mention. To the contrary, much of our striving when reading such poetry seems to be to find and perform that impossible confluence of speaking positions as we read it. The fact that it initially boggles us becomes inspiration to go back, read and re-read until the poem somehow clicks into place, a place proliferating with possibility. *One might have all this in one’s head*. To be sure, such a performative uptake is bounded, as Wolfgang Iser (1964) notes, by the risk of “overstrain” in the face of those texts we decide to label “difficult” (p. 275). The book gets closed. But when Cameron writes that “all poetry is characterised by problems” (1979, p. 18), she is pointing to the fact that its readers self-select on the grounds of their willingness to go there; to go there and find a speaking position that might give embodied coherence to the impossible all the same. All of which is to say that those poets who successfully demand more readerly work than others by the same token feel much more intimately present to us. For Randall Jarrell (1980), as we have seen, Dickinson comes across as “one of the most individual writers who have ever lived” (p. 244). It is because she makes us feel that way reading her.

As the speech-making context of Aristotle’s analysis makes clear, none of this is specific to verse. James Joyce and Rachel Cusk are just two prose writers who come to mind for the immediacy-inducing effect of their confounding styles – one confounding in its density, the other in its lucidity. But poetry as a literary genre does seem to have developed specific renown for visiting such challenges upon the reader. One might go further and add that the widespread illusion that leads us to imagine that poem and poet are speaking to us in the very moments in which we read them, regardless of how multiply and slowly constructed their work in fact was and even regardless of how long it takes us to find a way of *getting the poem*, is akin to a sort of heroism. So we come to the figure of the poet as subject of a preternatural brilliance and sensibility – the sort of characters we line up for Nobel Prizes. After all, none of this ended with Byron at Missolonghi. Nietzsche refers to the *Übermensch*. Are there not echoes in that notion of the immediacy, emotional insight and power we attribute to the authors of our

favourite (and in fact most gap-ridden) works, regardless of how they actually wrote them? Their voices feel lively. Even though they are dead.

Speaking in lines

I turn to the second consideration flagged above, which will address our question about the immediacy of poetic thought in terms of certain developments in post-war, non-Chomskyan linguistics, and in the process come to some quite different conclusions to those I have just sketched via Aristotle. It will be worth underlining that this second consideration on verse poetry's immediacy effect is exploratory and about venturing new lines of inquiry for creative writing studies. It will certainly not amount to a total theory of poetry, as if that were even possible. The point is rather to open up one particular aspect of poetic production and enjoyment that the field has not really thought through. The results will be rough and ready, but I expect the discussion will spark some curious thoughts as well, and perhaps even generate future lines of inquiry.

I will begin on a personal note. I have conducted 30 research interviews with celebrated Anglophone poets over the past 16 years, during an ongoing investigation into the nature of poetic composition. I have also interviewed three scholars in recent years, asking them a similar set of questions about their prose [2]. Obviously what poets and prose writers have to say about their compositional practices will have relevance to the question about immediacy that this article addresses. The issue I want to raise now does not, however, concern the contents of these 33 interviews, but rather the process of preparing them for citation, and the disquiet that can sometimes occasion in the interviewer. I am referring to the fact that any such interview text is necessarily *brushed up* by the interviewer to ensure the kinds of fluency we expect in print. The texts that result from that editing should certainly reflect the substance, and almost all the words of each of the interviewee's utterances (and the subject, needless to say, has to approve the finalised words as their own, prior to any public use). But those brushed-up texts are still a far cry from what was actually said. For we do not speak in prose, however much we might try to approximate it, and the verbatim texts that come back from the transcription service are a vivid demonstration of that. Of course, the import is all in the interviewee's responses. But it is hard for an interviewer, all the same, not to feel a certain narcissistic shock on seeing how their *own* utterances appear, when transcribed verbatim on the page:

INTERVIEWER

Well it's probably a question there whether poetics is a constantly shifting thing for it to be real, or if it's possible to have a single poetics, a consistent poetics, would that be a contradiction in terms perhaps?

Do I really speak in such a rambling manner?

At such moments, I take heart from linguists Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik's suggestion (2002) that any transcript of naturally occurring speech will look "less rambling" (p. 22) if

broken into the chunks in which it was actually uttered. For that, they point out, is how it was actually generated and heard at the time, as a series of relatively discrete verbal bursts, along the lines of:

Well it's probably a question there
 whether poetics is a constantly shifting thing
 for it to be real
 or if it's possible to have a single poetics
 a consistent poetics
 would that be a contradiction in terms perhaps?

That we do speak in bursts of this order is a relatively recent realisation for linguists themselves and followed closely upon the broad diffusion and swift scholarly uptake of tape-recording in the mid-1950s, as noted previously. It was also noted that reflection on the matter had been somewhat forestalled by prevailing intellectual currents. The foremost among these, for linguists themselves, has been the contemporaneous and massive success of Noam Chomsky's universal grammar program, which diminished the evidence of performance in favour of whatever underlying competencies might be said to generate it. But for those linguists who *have* focused on the steadily mounting corpora of actual spoken language, one of the prime things that it has brought to light is that our speech manifests as a series of short, prosodically detectable spurts – Chafe calls them “intonation units” (1994, pp. 120-21) – and that the syntactic connections between these typically clause-length chunks are often rather loose.

To illustrate these contentions by way of an actual linguist's transcript, consider the following interview excerpt, lineated by Chafe to indicate the spurts (again, “intonation units”) in which it was actually generated. The interviewee is recollecting a short, silent film involving a boy falling off a bicycle and thereby dropping his load – a bunch of pears.

- (a) A—and and you look at them,
 - (b) and and they see him,
 - (c) and they come up,
 - (d) a—and without saying anything,
 - (e) there's no speech in the whole movie.
 - (f) Without saying anything,
 - (g) they ... um ... help him ... put the pears back in the basket.
- (Speaker 1, qtd in Chafe, 1980, p. 35 [*modified by author*]).

Note the characteristically conversational strategy of initiating so many of these unfolding utterances – four of the seven – with an *and*. Note too that the *and*'s in question do not simply serve their supposedly primary function of coordinating items on the same syntactic level (for example, *healthy, wealthy and wise*, all adjectives). One can see something of that coordinating function here, in that the *and*'s are joining up four indicative verbs in the historic present; but those *and*'s also have something of a *continuative* function. That is, they serve to indicate that what follows is the next thing one has to say in the sequence of one's discourse (Bakker, 1997,

pp. 61–70) – or perhaps even more accurately, they serve to flag the next thing that comes to mind (p. 68). Note how often the speaker dwells on, and in one case even repeats the *and*, while waiting for the exact next expression to arrive. We use this second, continuative type of *and* with great frequency when telling stories in conversation, as close listening makes clear:

- (a) A—nd and you look at them,
 - (b) and and they see him,
 - (c) and they come up,
- (Speaker 1, qtd in Chafe, 1980, p. 35 [*modified by author*])

As for the spurts of utterance such an *and* so often initiates, the boundaries between them are detectable from the presence of grammatical features like the continuative *and* but also, and even more palpably, from a set of variously present prosodic features including “pauses or breaks in timing, acceleration and deceleration, changes in overall pitch level, terminal pitch contours and changes in voice quality” (Chafe, 1994, p. 69). Our speech is composed as a sequence of so many spurts. Chafe, as noted above, calls them “intonation units”. Michael A.K. Halliday (1985) calls the equivalent unit in his studies the “tone group”, and adds that each such burst of utterance represents “one quantum of the message ... the way the speaker is organising it as he [*sic*] goes along” (p. 53). This echoes David Crystal’s (1975) earlier identification of the “tone unit”, which he further qualifies as “the fundamental unit of neural encoding” (p. 15). Leech and Svartvik use the term “tone unit” as well (2002, p. 22). These linguists are all referring to the same basic phenomenon, the very thing that helped restore some respectability to the rambling text of my verbatim speech above. It constitutes the basal unit of speaking, in any language, and as such provides a disquieting reminder that we do not have quite the same relation to syntax – or, for that matter, the present moment – as the subjects implied by our prose.

That is not to say that sentences cease to exist when we are speaking. The two full stops in the linguistic transcript above serve to mark them, though it is important to add that in such a context the stops do not represent any judgement on the part of the linguist as to whether the speaker has achieved a so-called *full* or *grammatically correct* sentence or not. The stops simply represent the linguist’s having registered, from the prosody of the subject’s utterance, a descending pitch contour, the standard way by which we indicate the completion of a thought when speaking English, as in so many other languages (Bolinger, 1989). The commas, on the other hand, stand for an ascending (or maintained) pitch contour, which we use to indicate that more is to come (for the full transcription conventions, see Chafe, 1980, p. xv; p. 301). To listen to people reciting items in a list provides a vivid demonstration of the second contour, and indeed of the intonation unit itself. As for the descending pitch contour that stands almost universally for the completion of a thought, the key and challenging point here is that that descent in pitch often serves retrospectively to attribute completion and, with that, integrity to a set of units that might when initially uttered have led to a very different sentence, or even just trailed off. In a funny way the sentence did not even really exist *as a sentence* until the moment of that final shift in pitch. Take another verbatim utterance from my corpus of research interviews as illustration of this phenomenon:

INTERVIEWER

So it needs to be a kind of a social or a, how do we put this, sensibility's the word you used before, which I think ... gets into something that's shared.

It is clear that the decision to round off the thought with the exact words "something that's shared" simply was not there at the start, or even by the middle of this sentence. It is rather that the speaker (me) felt, having landed on this phrase, that enough on the matter had thus been said. "Evidently," Chafe writes in relation to a similar set of recorded utterances, "*sentences* do not represent stable units in the mind. They are constructed creatively on the run, with varying degrees of functional, prosodic and syntactic coherence" (1994, p. 144). In other words, and yet again, it is clear that when speaking we do not quite think in the globally mastered way we pretend to in our prose. Our spoken logic is much more local, as the act of lineating it at the intonational boundaries once more makes clear:

So it needs to be a kind of a social
or a
how do we put this
sensibility's the word you used before
which I think gets into ...
something that's shared.

Chafe is the linguist who has pushed the theoretical implications of the intonational chunking of our speech furthest, to the point that his work amounts to an argument for the radically segmented nature of consciousness itself (1994; 2018). As he rather starkly puts it:

We are ... physically designed to deal with only a very small amount of information at one time, the amount that can be comprehended in one focus of active consciousness. In the meantime, in concert with the remarkable growth of the human cortex, the capacity of our minds to store and manipulate ideas has greatly increased. Our powers of remembering and imagining have far out-stripped those of other creatures. But this development has failed to include any increase in the capacity of active consciousness, which presumably remains as limited today as it was before the brain evolved to its present state. (p. 140)

The intonation unit constitutes the linguistic evidence for this state of affairs.

I hasten to add that Chafe's insistence upon our drastically limited window of focal attention is somewhat ameliorated by his corollary thesis that much of our thinking at any given moment exists in a hazy state of "semi-active consciousness". Whatever topic we bring to mind, a vague web of memories, emotions and opinions will feel present, just out of reach as it were, prior to their spurt by spurt activation into speech or thought (1994, pp. 108–120). The idea of a semi-active consciousness helps to elucidate a number of phenomena. Consider, for instance, the poet Heinrich von Kleist's 1806 observation that he regularly learns just what he has to say by

saying it. Himself trying to make sense of such *thinking by speaking*, Kleist notes, in a manner very much consonant with Chafe's theory, that at such times,

because I do have some dim conception at the outset, one distantly related to what I am looking for, if I boldly make a start with that, my mind, even as my speech proceeds, under the necessity of finding an end for that beginning, will shape my first confused idea into complete clarity so that, to my amazement, understanding is arrived at as the sentence ends. I put in a few unarticulated sounds, dwell lengthily on the conjunctions, perhaps make use of apposition where it is not necessary, and have recourse to other tricks which will spin out my speech, all to gain time for the fabrication of my idea in the workshop of the mind. (2004, p. 406)

“For it is not,” Kleist adds, “we who know things but pre-eminently a certain *condition* of ours which knows” (p. 408). One might hear echoes of William Wordsworth's characterisation of composition as “spontaneous overflow” here too (see Magee, 2021).

Poetry has started to come into the picture. Chafe, as it happens, has very little to say about the matter. Egbert Bakker, on the other hand, is a Homerist who has pioneered the application of Chafe's ideas to orally composed verse. Bakker's close philological readings of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (1997; 2005) demonstrate the ease with which Homer's supposedly “naïve” syntax (Parry, 1971, p. 251) segments into the locally organised spurts of ideation/utterance that we have been tracking just now. This leads Bakker to the extraordinary conclusion that “the written form in which it [*Homeric verse*] has come down to us is closer to a transcript such as Chafe's rendering of his taped discourses than it is to a written text as we conceive of it” (2005, p. 292). One can read this assertion in reverse as well: when we engage in everyday conversation and storytelling, our compositional units are formally akin to those generated by ancient Greek oral poets improvising yet another rendition of the Trojan stories. Note, relatedly, linguist Deborah Tannen's strategy (1999) of breaking transcripts of recorded speech into lines “to reflect the rhythmic chunking that is created in speaking by intonation and prosody” (p. 635). Ethnographer Dennis Tedlock likewise uses the lineation conventions “found in our drama and poetry” in both his transcriptions and his translations of Native American Zuni narratives (1983, p.46). For his part, Tedlock insists that such oral narratives, however conversational, are “better understood (and translated) as dramatic poetry than as an oral equivalent of written prose” (1983, p. 114). In our daily verbal interactions – storytelling makes this most apparent – we actually speak in something like lines.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) accordingly suggest that “the ‘line’, in verse, evolved as the metrical analogue of the tone group [*intonation unit*]: one line of verse corresponded to one tone group of natural speech” (p. 16). Bakker (1997) makes a similar claim: that meter arises as a formalisation of our natural tendency to produce speech in two- to three-second (roughly four or five words, as far as English is concerned) bursts. Bakker comments that the “coincidence of intonation with metrical units is a universal characteristic of performed poetry in oral traditions” (p. 50). He adds that the Homeric hexameter invariably comprises two such units. A similar comment could be made of the English pentameter, with its customary caesura.

Bakker also points to how the line might emerge as a more integral component than the intonation units that make it up:

The rhythmical, prosodic features of intonation units may become regularised to the point that they become metrical. So meter emerges from discourse ... but at some point it becomes so rigid as to constitute a structure in itself, regulating the flow of speech. (p. 184)

Bakker describes this as a “shift from meter as nascent and emergent to meter as a structure in its own right” (p. 184).

A sense of formality seems to arise in the process, helping to give verse that public quality (Attridge, 1995, p. 12) that sits so curiously with its tendency to showcase “*movement*, the flow of ideas through consciousness” (Bakker, 2005, p. 298). Pinsky (2005) suggests something of poetry’s often oblique but also powerfully liberatory politics might lie in this convergence of public and personal (and even inner) utterance, as well.

In sum, there are numerous sources in post-war, if not quite mainstream, linguistics to suggest that the formal properties of the verse line are such as to lend it a genuine affinity to the types of immediacy (again, the issue is not what is culturally unmediated – nothing we can know is – but simply what comes to us in the moment) that we experience when conversing. It is just possible that that is how many such lines are first composed as well, in something like the intensely localised, graduated series of verbal arrivals we have seen Chafe tabulate and theorise, and can of course hear for ourselves, any time we open our mouths to speak. The prose sentence is far less given to this kind of compositional immediacy – as we shall now see.

‘Once I am inside the sentence’

I spoke to Alison Croggon in Port Melbourne in 2006:

INTERVIEWER

So when you’re in the process of composition, do the words come to you as single word units, as phrases, or as whole lines?

CROGGON

It always comes to me in lines. Does it come to you in lines?

INTERVIEWER

Yes. Lines and words.

CROGGON

Very seldom words on their own, for me. Usually a line will come, and then another, and another, and another. The lines float up – you’re always reduced to speaking quite vaguely about these things because it is a bit mysterious. You’re not sure where they

come from. But they occur. For me, they're usually triggered by some kind of rhythm. I mean something that I hear innerly.

INTERVIEWER

Does it ever feel like someone else is doing the writing?

CROGGON

It always feels like I'm doing it. But it feels like I'm listening to some other part of me, that's not always available. I almost feel like there's a door in there. If I could open it up all the time, I would write every thought.

Note, as foreshadowed in the previous section, that I have *brushed up* the syntactic chaos of this interview text to provide Croggon's and my words the appearance of having been said in prose. Not to do so would be unethical, given how idealised our image of spoken grammar is. We all too readily read linguistic impoverishment into everyday speech patterns – or rather, into patterns that are everyday anywhere other than in the novels, films, plays, newspapers and television shows we also consume daily. The disadvantage of that *brushing up* is that readers do not get to see how close conversational speech already is to those blessed moments Croggon describes at the end of the quotation above, times when line and thought and audible utterance converge to provide an image of thought in motion. Lineate it into intonation units and speech will indeed very rapidly take on that appearance, albeit rarely achieving the aesthetic levels of Croggon's own lines.

As for Croggon's description of composing in lines, I could cite numerous similar comments from the 30 interviews I have conducted with contemporary poets during the research projects alluded to above. It will probably be more useful, however, to show in contrast how three celebrated U.K. scholars describe their own point of immediate focus when composing intellectual prose. To put this in context, I interviewed these scholars in the course of an ongoing project on the relationship between academic writing and discovery. My colleague Lucy Neave and I aim to test whether the act of composing research reports might function for scholars and scientists as a mode of investigation in its own right, just as composing literary texts (however one does compose them) clearly does for poets and novelists. To bring such parallels out, we are asking those academics many of the same questions I and my colleagues, Kevin Brophy and Jen Webb, put to poets like Croggon.

TEXT readers will likely know Derek Attridge as author of *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and be familiar with his status as a prosodist who has made pathbreaking discoveries about the nature of metre. We spoke in March 2018. Asked whether he feels he is the same person in the act of composing his scholarly articles and monographs as he is at other times, Attridge replied that he does not feel like "a different person" when he writes. "But I feel less present as a person, in a way, because of the feeling of giving myself over to the writing and the thinking". This observation led to the following exchange:

INTERVIEWER

Could that be because one has to become so supple to the material, to allow it to speak?

ATTRIDGE

I don't know.

I think, for me, it is bound up with getting the style right. Which is odd. It's not just the ideas. It is actually the language. Once I am inside the sentence, the rest of the world ceases to exist. I am in there. I am trying to make it work the way it wants to work. I was going to say 'the way I want it to work'. But it's not even like that. It is not me wanting it to – it is that the sentence is developing itself, and I want to make sure it gets exactly what it wants. It's a strange thing.

The centrality of the sentence to Attridge's compositional thinking is explicit in the comment above and it is also clear in his description elsewhere in the interview of how he embraced the technology of the word-processor when it started to spread in the 80s, because of the way it allows you to reformulate things "at a sentence-by-sentence level".

This echoed comments by my two other scholarly interviewees. Hannah Sullivan is a literary scholar whose book *The Work of Revision* (2013) provides a sorely needed historicisation of a compositional practice generally assumed to work in the same way at all points in time. Here is Sullivan's response to a question as to the pleasure she takes in scholarly writing:

I think it's the pleasure of making things clear to yourself that have previously been murky, things which seem important. There is also the pleasure of finding moderately elegant sentences to express those things.

I underline the significance of sentence-writing in this formulation. I will come to my third interviewee, linguist Michael Hoey's comments on sentences shortly, but first will note – in contrast to Attridge and Sullivan – that Croggon, the Australian poet I cited immediately above, did not use the words *sentence*, *sentences*, *sentence's* and so forth (I will use the lemma to stand for any of its forms henceforth) once in the hour-length discussion I recorded with her. The word she used was "line" (ditto, cited here as lemma), doing so six times in all. True, in Croggon's case, three of those six times were in response to an initial question containing the word (as in the excerpt above). But I hasten to add that the word *line* is approximately six times more common than *sentence* in the 30 research interviews I have conducted with Australian, Irish and North American poets since 2007, and that its frequency remains little short of that even after we exclude all cases where the usage came in response to a question containing the word *line*.

What is more, when poets do use *sentence* in that corpus, it is usually because the conversation has strayed onto prose. So Californian poet Rae Armantrout, whom I interviewed in San Diego in November 2014, used *sentence* four times. Two of those times were in relation to prose poetry, her own and that of others. The other two instances came in response to an explicit

question I had asked her on the topic. It was Armantrout's ultra-short lines that had me intrigued:

INTERVIEWER

I am intrigued by the role of sentences in your compositions. I am wondering if you would always in one sitting get the full movement of the sentence? Would you ever stop halfway?

ARMANTROUT

I probably would get at least a sentence. I might want to go back and revise it later. But I do not picture stopping in the middle of a sentence.

Armantrout laughed as she said this, I assume because the thought struck her as unlikely. But I also want to note that my conversation with Armantrout on sentences ended there. There just did not seem to be all that much more to explore. This is in contrast to the word *line*, which Armantrout used seven times in discussing her writing and editing, none of these times in response to questions containing the word. A rare exception to these trends was when Australian poet Brook Emery used *sentence* in quoting Marianne Moore: "In a poem the excitement has to maintain itself. I am governed by the pull of the sentence as the pull of a fabric is governed by gravity" (1961, p. 262). North American poet G.C. Waldrep referenced the same quotation. My reading of these emphases is that the model of completed thought we associate with the sentence might well function as a kind of compositional forcefield for the poetic line, somewhat as Marianne Moore describes it. But it is the line itself that is uppermost in the compositional moment.

This analysis is merely suggestive, of course. But it adds detail to the picture that is starting to emerge here: verse composition is focused on something much closer to the bursts of ideation in which we actually speak (and, it would seem, think) than is prose writing.

Both practices might involve an advance into the unknown. Michael Hoey is a linguist whose 2005 work, *Lexical Priming*, launched a new and highly influential theory of language, replacing the typical distinctions of grammar and lexis in favour of an analysis based around the kinds of expressions that appear "natural" or "nativelike", compared to those that do not. Hoey's book is based on painstaking study of the statistical patterns revealed by massive linguistic corpora. But he had not necessarily worked out all the arguments – or even evidence – it contains prior to writing them down. As Hoey told me,

sometimes I will write something and think, 'Yes, that seems true. Do I have the evidence to support it?' I will then go away and perform an analysis of some data, to see whether I'm right... Quite often, it will be that an analogy strikes me. I will use that analogy, and the more I explore it, the more it will open insights for me, which I then incorporate.

Hoey is, of course, touching upon a profound poetic theme. It may be that artists are not the only ones who write to find out what it is they have to say (see further Magee, 2019, Neave 2021). But it is equally important to note that there was nothing in these three scholars' accounts of their sentence-focused prose composition that equates to what Noelle Kocot told me in Pennsylvania in 2013: "Usually, I'll be going through the day, carrying a little notebook, and a line will come into my head". Nor did I hear anything like Claire Gaskin's comment, six years earlier in Richmond, Melbourne, on how she "catches" occasional "dream-lines". At such times, "you wake up with a line, a dream-line, that's fully composed". Sentences, that is to say, do not seem to arrive whole. What is more, they are often composed at a remove from the thoughts driving them. This was apparent from Hoey's reference in the interview to the fact that he would generally have the sequence of propositions structuring any of his oral presentations clearly worked out before hand: "But I never know the sentence structure I am going to use, or anything of that order". Likewise, having said that "I quite often write things in my head before I write them down", Hoey clarified, "I am not talking about the sentences. But I will have each of the propositions in my head and know the way in which they are going to fit together".

The three interviews I have just cited provide suggestive material towards a theory of the prose sentence's function as the site for multiple elaborations of shorter units towards a finished product; elaborations which take place in the writer's head in the very moments of first draft composition and therefore leave little trace in manuscripts. You cannot see it on the page, but the process has been shown in empirical studies using "think aloud" protocols with subjects tasked with essay composition. This is what one subject, thinking aloud, uttered:

ok ... the summer after tenth grade ... I and oh ... I and ... no ... twenty seven students ... and I ... from my school district ... that sounds kinds of awkward . . . would it be twenty seven students from my school district and I ... but then I was part of the school ... oh but if I said from my school district ... the summer after tenth grade ... twenty seven students from my school district ... and I ... went to France ... for two weeks.

Here is the sentence that the subject ended up writing down:

The summer after tenth grade, 27 students from my school district and I went to France for two weeks.

(anon., transcribed by David S. Kaufer, John R. Hayes and Linda S. Flower, qtd in Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001, p. 82)

Such materials help to explain why prose writers like Michael Hoey, Hannah Sullivan and Derek Attridge will describe the sentence not as their unit of epiphany, memory or even fore-planning ("I never know the sentence structure I am going to use") but rather as something they aim towards in the active elaborations they perform upon their ideas within the very moments of writing ("Once I am inside the sentence, the rest of the world ceases to exist. I am in there. I am trying to make it work the way it wants to work").

I have, in contrast, repeatedly heard poets refer to having an idea and finding the words for it as one and the same act. Actually, this is very much what my second scholarly interviewee, Hannah Sullivan described when our conversation strayed to the composition of her own poems – Sullivan is a celebrated poet in her own right, having received the T.S. Eliot Prize for her book *Three Poems* (Sullivan, 2018a) in 2019. Here is her description of how the last of those poems began:

I didn't have a third poem. So I tried to write one. I frequently lost whole days trying to, but everything I was writing was terrible. That went on for months. Then ... I came up with the first line. I was sitting downstairs in the kitchen. Suddenly I'd written the whole first section. It was to do with a kind of voice, a choppiness. The first line is *Things happened in the wrong order, out of nature*. There was something about the sound of that, the choppiness, that allowed me to continue to write. (Sullivan, 2018b)

Note that even though that first line *is* a sentence, that is not how Sullivan seems to think of it.

To draw this essay to a close, I will add that the three interviews with prose writers that I have just cited were all *brushed up* for publication. They are as “*brushed up*” as the interview with Croggon – and just as necessarily so. Not to have revised these academics’ interview texts in that fashion would have raised a whole host of unfair questions about the speakers’ linguistic competence. Curiously, it may have lain them open to some strange analogies as well. As we have seen Bakker (2005) so estrangingly remark in relation to Homer’s allegedly “primitive” syntax – where “the successive ideas join on to one another in the order that they occur to the mind” (Parry, 1971, p. 251) – actually, “Such properties will appear in some form in any spoken discourse, including that of the highly literate scholar when he or she speaks and does not write” (p. 288).

Homer’s syntax certainly appears, from Bakker’s analysis, much closer to conversational transcripts than any of the literary poems cited or named in this paper. But to say so is to admit an important qualification upon the argument advanced to this point: literary verse, in contrast to the texts of oral poems like Homer’s, cannot simply be equated with *speech written down*.

In my book *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought* (2022), I argue that literary verse does approximate to *speech written down* all the same. There I elaborate on a theory of writing as dictation to self, albeit with the rider that the diction for such activities draws on literary convention and the expanded time writing affords the composer to depart from typical spoken grammar and diction – though that departure is much more necessarily present in the case of prose sentence-writing for the reasons that have started to emerge above. One says those however literary words to oneself in one’s head as one’s very means of composing them. Further, one must necessarily do so recursively, in the manner of the transcript just cited from Chenoweth and Hayes, to generate most all species of prose. But verse could well be an exception in this latter regard. I am suggesting, in sum, that the immediacy effect that critics attribute to the verse they most value might be due to factors other than our characteristic ways

of reading such poems. It might be that lines come to poets, when they do come, rather more swiftly – with far less conscious elaboration at the point of first drafting – than sentences come to prose writers.

There would be no logical difficulty in that being the case, even though we cannot help being deluded into feeling on some level that *it is the case* as we take verse in, due to the factors we explored in the first consideration above. Some illusions are true, by dint of causes separate to those that produce the illusion. The contents of one’s utterance will be shot through with foreign signification in any case, as Derrida points out in his critique of the typical distinctions we make between speech and writing (1991). But that does not cancel out the possibility that one type of writing might comprise “a more direct window on the mind in action” (Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987, p. 19) than another, at least as far as our conscious engagements with the immediate moment are concerned. As for revision, one might perform ample revisions – the evidence of my interviews is that nearly all poets do – but to revise a poem that has the kind of immediacy I have been charting here would seem a rather more desperate matter than common wisdom would have it. After all, we cannot plan our thoughts. I return to Croggon’s description of a convergence of line, thought and audible utterance in her reference to “listening to some other part of me ... If I could open it up all the time, I would write every thought.” Inasmuch as poet and poem go there, the instruction to recast a line and get it right is rather like insisting one think a powerful thought, right now, in public.

Notes

[1] My translation of the Greek text at Aristotle, 1959, para 1412a (internet).

[2] The interviews referred to in this article were generated through three separate research projects: *The Idea of Poetic Research* ran over the years 2007–2008, was funded through a University of Canberra Early Career Researcher Grant and generated an archive of 14 interviews with Australian Anglophone poets, including the Alison Croggon interview cited at length here. Michael A.R. Biggs, Kevin Brophy, Jen Webb and my Australian Research Council-funded discovery project, *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case Study in Poetry* (DP130100402), ran from 2013 to 2016 and generated an archive of 75 hour-long interviews with Anglophone poets. Finally, the three interviews with scholarly writers were conducted in 2018, with funding from a University of Exeter Visiting International Academic Fellowship.

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