

Open Form – An Overview of Open Form

“Open Form” is a more accurate term for what is usually called “free verse,” the dominant type of poetry being written today. One could even say it was one of the two fundamental, logically possible subdivisions of poetry- the open (non-metrical) and the fixed (metrical). For historical reasons open form poetry is usually defined by what it is not: metrical or formal. This means it lacks both a rhythmical strategy to its lines (one of the many that have been devised) and a stanzaic pattern. Looking at the matter more closely, we can see that what is meant is that open form poems lack a *set, consistent* strategy or pattern. If one rule governs every line and stanza in a poem, or sections of a poem all obey a single prosodic idea, such as the English-standard iambic pentameter, then that poem is formal and/or metrical. If a poem has no single consistent rule, and poetic effects and devices are applied as needed for specific effects, that is open form- open to *variation within its organizational principles*.

If open form has no set rules to govern the shaping of the poem, what does it have? Is it disorganized and chaotic? Not if it’s any good. You will frequently hear “All poetry has form!” and “no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job.” Ezra Pound, responsible for much of the early development of open form, remarked about laxity of the new style, “vers libre has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. . . . The actual language and phrasing is often as bad as that of our elders without even the excuse that the words are shoveled in to fill a metric pattern or to complete the noise of a rhyme-sound.” Open form *must*, then, have a set of rules to avoid flaccidity. In fact, open form has access to any and every poetic technique *except* that which defines the razor edge of difference between the forms: *a regular, repeating, comprehensive meter*. It may even include instances of proper metrical lines, when such are needed to convey a rhythmic effect, as long as that pattern does not govern the whole poem. In fact, because of the nature of English, many lines in an open form poem may happen to scan more or less as iambic pentameter, without the poet’s intention.

To quote one of the best theorists of open form, Charles O. Hartman, “the prosody of free verse is rhythmic organization by other than numerical modes.” By “numerical” he means the counting of syllables and stresses common in traditional English prosody and the recurrence of certain numbers of the same. Those *other modes* are the concern of this essay and this column. We are left with a grab bag of devices and no two open form poets use the same ones- “open form” is in fact a catch-all term for a decentralized poetics. However, a few similarities inevitably emerge, as poets are finite even if their Muses are not. Most open form poems take as their fundamental unit, their closest equivalent to the metrical foot, *the line*. Lineation is the process of deciding where to break the line and continue the poem on the next line when you don’t have a syllable count to tell you to stop. Lines are broken for a number of reasons: emphasizing a word, the visual effect, to create slant rhymes, for syntactical reasons, to create tension and expectation, to violate expectations, to juxtapose unlikely elements, etc. No rule governs how long a line must be or that a break in a given place is necessary to fulfill a pattern. The decision is made by the poet on a case-by-case basis, controlled by what he wants to say and how he wants

to say it.

A famous example:

From “Danse Russe,” by William Carlos Williams

If when my wife is *sleeping*
and the baby and Kathleen
are *sleeping*
and the sun is *a flame-white disc*
in *silken mists*
above *shining trees*,-
if I in my north room
dance naked, *grotesquely*
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am *lonely, lonely*,
I was born to be *lonely*,
I am best so!"

On Poets.org:

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15539>

Here Williams wants our attention on the “sleeping,” to emphasize the speaker’s solitude. He wants the “flame-white disc” to burn in our mind’s eye, and the “shining trees” to shine. “grotesquely” is a description of the speaker Williams wants us to contemplate-after beauty of the surroundings is this one lonely man really grotesque? And the three times “lonely” is the force of the speaker’s focus on this moment. Note also the ghost of rhyme between “disc” and “mists.” Here we see line breaks determined by the poet’s objectives at each point in a poem, as opposed to a strict lingual rule.

This characteristic leads to open form poems being saddled with such chafing terms as “flowing,” “organic,” “breath-based” and so on, when in fact the poet could be in the grips of quite a specific, limited idea at that point in the poem.

What has been covered so far makes it sound like open form poems must rarely have any resemblance between their beginnings and ends, what with all that shifting of the organizing principle with the poet’s intent. What gives open form poems unity and coherence? When you do away with the backbeat rhythm of meter, *image and metaphor*, always important to poetry, come to the fore and serve as crucial structural devices for poems. Poems are often based on a sparse, clear presentation of an image, or on the development of a metaphor. This can happen in fixed form as well, but in open form it becomes the whole point. The image in particular becomes as concrete and specific as possible, unmediated (as much as anything can be) by the poet’s mind. Perception is king

in open form, or rather the feeling created by the poet's perceptions.

Example:

From "White Apples," by Donald Hall

when my father had been dead a week
I woke
with his voice in my ear
I sat up in bed
and held my breath
and stared at the pale closed door

white apples and the taste of stone

On Poets.org:

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19212>

The last line quoted here is immediate, vivid, invokes two senses, and is clean of commentary- it strikes us and the speaker moves on to action, without telling us what he made of the vision or what we should make of it. It is held up for our inspection and contemplation, the reason for the poem.

Balancing such external, bare effects is the use of metaphor (including simile) to deepen the reader's inward grasp of objects and connections. Again, none of this is foreign to fixed form, but in open form the effect is held up to close scrutiny. Yet again, an example:

From "My Mother Would Be a Falconress," by Robert Duncan

*My mother would be a falconress,
And I, her gay falcon treading her wrist,
would fly to bring back
from the blue of the sky to her, bleeding, a prize,
where I dream in my little hood with many bells
jangling when I'd turn my head.*

*My mother would be a falconress,
and she sends me as far as her will goes.
She lets me ride to the end of her curb*

*where I fall back in anguish.
I dread that she will cast me away,
for I fall, I mis-take, I fail in her mission.*

On Poets.org:

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15709>

Here the poem unfolds as a development of this comparison between his mother and a falconess and himself and a falcon. Later in the poem the obedient falcon or son has violently broken from the falconess or mother, and states boldly his desire for freedom:

I would be a falcon and go free.
I tread her wrist and wear the hood,
talking to myself, and would draw blood.

This comparison carries the weight of the poem and gives it its unity and structure.

From these basics of line, image and metaphor, open form craft branches out into dozens of separate techniques and concerns, including repetition (often with variation), approximations of metrical patterns, alliteration, internal rhyme, slant rhyme, patterns of assonance, consonantal clustering, anaphora, chiasmus and a multitude of other features never or rarely used in prose. Negatively construed, it is the avoidance of meter, positively put is the *lack of need for meter*, due to emphasis on a multitude of other poetic effects. This column will closely examine many of these and others, our aim being to direct the “flow” of open form into a pool of effective verse.